

THE JOURNEY OF TERAH: TO UR-KASDIM OR URKESH?

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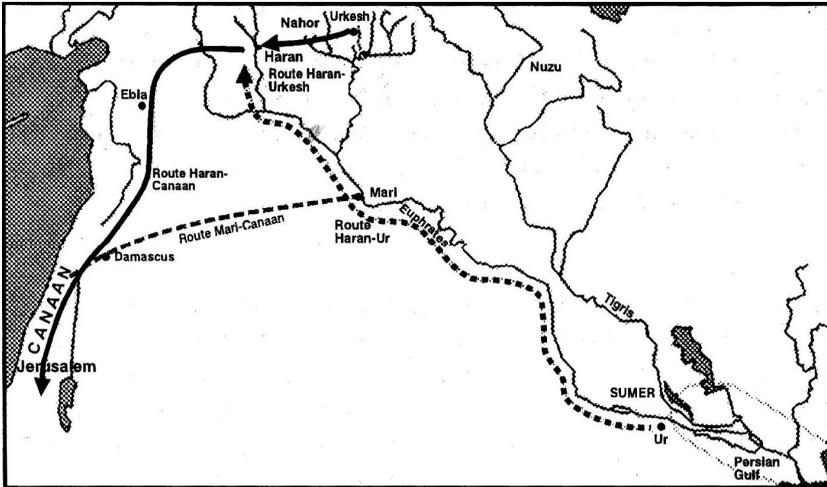
Genesis 11 records a line of descent from Shem that culminates with Terah ben-Nahor, who *begot Abram, Nahor and Haran* (11:27). Up to this point, the names are without stories, place, or period. Beginning with Terah, there are personalities with stories to be told and a geographic and societal setting within a timeframe of Middle Bronze Age I-II (circa 2000-1700 BCE).

THE HURRIAN LEDGE

The most likely place for that setting is the region known as the Hurrian Ledge. This stretch of land, well watered by rivers and rainfall, runs across the upper arch of the Fertile Crescent, near the sources of the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers, with rugged mountains to the north, east and west, and Mesopotamia to the south. Here the Hurrians established themselves, and by the third millennium they had flourishing city-state kingdoms, especially along the north-south and east-west trade routes that link Anatolia to the Persian Gulf and the Zagros Mountains to the Mediterranean coast. By the mid-second millennium their power was declining and their kingdoms eventually faded away, but Hurrians were still found in scattered areas, including Canaan where they can be identified with the Horites of the Bible.¹

The Hurrians were not Semites, but Akkadians and other Semites lived in Hurrian cities, bringing their languages and customs with them. This melding may underlie similarities between personal names in Genesis 11 and names of cities and towns of the Hurrian Ledge: Sereg (Sarugi), Terah (Turahi), Nahor (Nahor). It may also underlie the similarity between names of women of Terah's household and those of Hurrian goddesses: Sari/Sarah (Sar-natum) and Milcah (Malkatu).

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At Nuzi, a Hurrian city at the southeast of the Ledge, a trove of tablets preserves family law and customs similar to those in the lives of the Patriarchs.² In Ebla, a Semitic city-state just to the southwest of the Hurrian Ledge, the language was very close to Hebrew and the onomasticon included such familiar personal names as Ebrum (Eber), Isma-il (Ishmael), E-sa-sum (Esau), Sha-u-lum (Saul) and Da-u-dum (David).³ With such hints and clues of geographic, linguistic and social-cultural affinities, it is plausible to surmise that the roots of Terah ben-Nahor were in or close to the Hurrian Ledge. There he himself dwelt, a Semite and a Hebrew,⁴ possibly in an extended family network of the siblings and cousins cited in Genesis 11.

HARAN

One of the principal cities of the Hurrian Ledge was Haran, a name derived from an Akkadian word for a caravan post; an apt designation for a commercial crossroads at the intersection of several major international routes. That Terah was a denizen of Haran is attested by his son. When Abram ben-Terah had long sojourned in the land of Canaan, and his name had been changed to Abraham, he sent a trusty servant to find an appropriate bride for Isaac.⁵ His instructions were: *'You shall go to my land and my birthplace, and take a wife for my son'* (24:2). The servant later quoted the precise directive: *'Now, my master made me swear, saying, "You shall not get a wife for my son from*

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the daughters of the Canaanites in whose land I dwell, but you shall go to my father's house, to my kindred, and get a wife for my son'" (24:36).

The servant complied by traveling northeastward *until the city of Nahor*. That could be the city where Nahor ben-Terah had established his household – that may well be Haran, where his son Bethuel and his grandson Laban dwelt – or the Hurrian town of Nahor not far from Haran. This is the region that Abraham recalled as '*my land and my birthplace*' and where his brother Nahor was probably born.⁶ The servant chose Nahor's granddaughter Rebekah to be Isaac's wife. A generation later, Jacob arrived in Haran and wed Leah and Rachel, Nahor's great-granddaughters (28:10, 29:4).

Abraham was urgently insistent that his son must never go to Haran (24:6) but also determined that his daughter-in-law should come from a Hurrian background, preferably from among his own kin. He explicitly spurned the girls of the Canaanite society around him, and so, too, did Isaac and Rebekah after him (28:1-2, 6-9).

In these passages, the *city of Nahor* is said to be in Aram-Naharaim [Aram of the Two Rivers] (10:11) or Paddan-Aram [Field of Aram] (28:10, 23:4), and both Bethuel ben-Nahor and Laban ben-Bethuel are identified as Arameans (25:20). The Arameans did not settle there until the 13th century, but by the time the text took its present written form these were the familiar names for the area and its inhabitants.

THE JOURNEYS OF TERAH

Before his third son was born, Terah had moved to city of Ur-Kasdim: *Terah begot Abram, Nahor, and Haran, and Haran begot Lot. Haran died before his father Terah in the land of his birth, Ur-Kasdim (11:27-28)*. In English transliteration, Terah seems to have called his son after the town he had left behind him. But the city is "חַרְרַן" and the son is "חַרְרָן"; if it is correct to interpret this name as based on "har" [mountain], then it may mean "mountaineer." Haran begot not only Lot, but also two daughters: Milcah, who became the wife of Nahor (mother of Bethuel, the father of Rebekah), and Iscah. So Terah remained in Ur-Kasdim long enough for a son born there to grow up and have three children of his own; a score of years at the very least and perhaps many more.

At some time after the demise of Haran, Terah took up his travels again:

Terah took his son Abram, Lot the son of his son Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and they set out together from Ur-Kasdim for the land of Canaan. But when they came as far as Haran, they settled there. The days of Terah came to 205 years, and Terah died in Haran (11:31).

Nahor was not one of this party, so either he did not go with his father and brother Abram to Ur-Kasdim, or else he returned to Haran ahead of them. There he presumably remained. Though he and Milcah never entered Canaan, their granddaughter and two great-granddaughters were among the Matriarchs of Israel.

When Terah left Ur-Kasdim his ultimate destination was Canaan, but first he returned to Haran. Perhaps he went to visit his son Nahor and other kin, or to deal with property or business, or both. Be that as it may, he went no farther. As long as his father lived, Abram too remained in Haran, where he amassed abundant wealth and attracted many adherents to his faith (12:5). Only when Terah was gone, did Abram obey the command '*Go forth from your native land and your father's house, to the land that I will show you*' (12:1). Here, again, it is Haran and not Ur-Kasdim that is defined as Abram's "native land."

With his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, and the band of which he was now chieftain, he at last set out for Canaan. Whatever his vocation and domicile hitherto, he was from this time forth a semi-nomad pastoralist, moving his clan, his tents and his flocks and herds from place to place.

In that journey, laden with destiny, he made the crossing of the Euphrates River recalled by Joshua:

'In olden times your forefathers – Terah, father of Abraham and father of Nahor – lived beyond the Euphrates and worshipped other gods. But I took your father Abraham from beyond the Euphrates and led him through the whole land of Canaan' (Josh. 24:2).

Though Abram at last entered the Promised Land from Haran, the starting point of his mission is defined as Ur-Kasdim, as it is stated: "*I am the Lord who brought you out from Ur-Kasdim to assign this land to you as a possession*" (Gen. 15:7). '*You are the Lord God, who chose Abram who brought him out of Ur-Kasdim and changed his name to Abraham*' (Neh. 9:7).

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This may mean that Terah and Abram were in Ur-Kasdim when they first resolved to migrate to Canaan. The first mention of Canaan (11:31) gives no reason why Terah meant to take his family there. The Divine command and the Divine promise are explicit only when Abram, then in Haran, heard the imperative "*Lekh lekha!*" (12:1-3).

UR

The direction and the distance of travel from Haran to Ur-Kasdim and back to Haran depend on the location of Ur-Kasdim [𒌦𒍪𒍪 𒊕𒊕 – Ur of the Chaldeans]. It is traditionally identified as the very ancient Sumerian city of Ur on the west bank of the Euphrates River near the point where it empties into the Persian Gulf. The Chaldeans did not settle there before the 10th century, and only thereafter did it come to be known as Ur of the Chaldeans. If the name was simply "Ur" in the earliest sources for the patriarchal narratives, then it was in time adjusted to the later common usage.

Estimating distance not as the crow flies but as the ass plods along winding roads, a journey from Haran to Ur would be about 700 miles. Ur was even then an ancient city, on a site inhabited even before the Sumerians established themselves there before the end of the fourth millennium. In the latter third millennium it flourished as the capital of Sumer, a regional power, a center of religion, commerce, wealth, and the arts. Even after it came under the political domination of the Semitic Babylonians it still held its place as a crossroads for international trade.⁷

Ur had a special affinity with Haran, in that both had from remote antiquity been cult-centers for the worship of a pagan moon-god. The coincidence of two out of three consonants in common between "Terah [𐤠𐤓𐤕]" and "moon [𐤠𐤓 – *yareah*]" has stirred speculation that he held a position in that cult's hierarchy, that brought him from one shrine to another. But the Hebrews were independent of the religious as well as the political structure of the day, and unlikely to officiate in either Hurrian or Sumerian temples.⁸

When he took the road again, he meant to proceed to Canaan, then a land of numerous small city-states. The Canaanites were so involved in production and trade of goods that their very name came to denote "merchant," and it is known that its textiles were exported to Hurrian customers. Terah and his family could have reached central Canaan, a distance of roughly 950 miles, if

they followed the Euphrates north to Mari and then turned west across the regular caravan route. To make a stop at Haran would impose a lengthy detour on the travelers. First they would have to reverse the earlier trek and return from Ur to Haran, then double back about 550 miles southwest from Haran to central Canaan. That two-stage itinerary comes to a trudge of approximately 1250 miles.

URKESH

People do often move far from their birthplaces and milieu, yet there is some unease at placing Terah and Abram at the southern end of Mesopotamia when all their connections and affinities and way of life point so much farther to the north. (Even the story of the Flood preserved in Genesis 6-8 has more in common with the northern Hurrian and Hittite traditions than the southern Sumerian and Akkadian ones.) This unease can inspire a quest for some other city bearing the name Ur, in a site that better fits the patriarchal background. There is a possible candidate for such a city, even though its name was not Ur but Urkesh.

Hurrian and Hittite texts speak of a seemingly revered city called Urkesh, but for long scholars could not determine whether it was real or mythical. Then, in recent years, archaeologists uncovered a very ancient Hurrian city that stood on the uppermost arch of the Fertile Crescent, within 100 miles east/northeast of Haran. It was unusually large and populous for its time, and the site has yielded epigraphic evidence that this was indeed the fabled Urkesh.⁹

This city-state kingdom reached the height of its power and prosperity by the mid-third millennium. By the early second millennium it went into decline and became a vassal of Mari, but even then it was still busy and affluent. By the mid-second millennium it dwindled and finally disappeared.

As in Haran, the population was not exclusively Hurrian, and the appearance there of Semitic Akkadian names, even for persons in high positions, suggests diversity of language and culture. Among the later rulers was a king called Te'iru, a name whose resemblance to Terah recalls other similarities between Hurrian names and those in Genesis 11.

It is not known how Urkesh was spelled in the earliest Northwest Semitic script of written Hebrew. If the orthography was "אכרש," then it was iden-

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tical to the first five letters of "אֵרַח כַּשְׂדִּים." Urkesh was well-known in the days of Terah and Abram, but a redactor or scribe in later days who came upon the consonantal text "*u-r-k-s*" and did not recognize it as the name of a vanished and forgotten city might "correct" it to the familiar "*u-r-k-s-d-m*." That would be the accepted and unquestioned form by the time Nehemiah so cited it in the sixth century.

CONCLUSION

The terse record of Terah's journeys does not tell the reason for leaving Haran. It must have been compelling, for he had to transport his family, retainers, goods, and animals on a hard trek, probably walking with possessions and provisions loaded on asses, covering perhaps 20 miles for each day on the road.

If Terah was a pastoralist, he might from time to time move with his beasts in search of water or fodder, but he would scarcely have driven them from Haran to Ur that was far away, or even to Urkesh that was closer by. If he was a merchant or a craftsman, then either one or the other of these two cities could well attract him, for both were, like Haran, entrepôts of international commerce. Ur was best placed for the export of goods coming by ship from the lands of the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean, Urkesh best placed for the export of raw materials from the Zagros Mountains and northward. Both would be markets for imports from or by way of Haran. In either Ur or Urkesh, Terah could prosper, perhaps in partnership with kinsmen or associates in Haran.

On the question "Ur-Kasdim or Urkesh," Ur-Kasdim has on its side the weight of tradition. And there is no compelling argument that it could not indeed have been the city of Terah's long sojourn.

The possibility of Urkesh as an alternative is entirely speculative, based on hints rather than evidence. Unlike Ur, it was within the Hurrian Ledge, connected to Haran by an established and comparatively short route along which families and business associates could keep in touch with one another. If Terah was in Urkesh when he set out for Canaan, he would not need a special reason or make a long detour to go first to Haran; It was directly on his path, the natural place to stop off along the way. Terah's youngest son, who lived and died in Ur-Kasdim, was called Haran. If it is correct to interpret that

name as "mountaineer," it would seem a more apt choice for a boy born in the shadow of mighty peaks than on the flat alluvial plain of Sumer.

Thus far, there can be no answer to the question posed in the title above.

NOTES

1. On the identification of Hurrians with Horites see, E.A. Speiser, "Hurrians and Hittites" in *The Dawn of Civilization: World History of the Jewish People, Vol. 1* (Tel-Aviv?: Jewish History Publications, 1961; New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1964).
2. On Nuzu in relation to the patriarchal age, see Cyrus H. Gordon, "Biblical Customs and the Nuzu Tablets," *Biblical Archaeologist*, III:1 (February 1940) pp. 1-12; E. A. Speiser, *Doubleday Anchor Bible: Genesis* (NY: Doubleday, 1964). More recent studies question some of the conclusions in these pieces.
3. On Ebla, see Paolo Matthiae, "Ebla in the Early Syrian Period: The Royal Palace and the State Archives," and Giovanni Pettinato, "The Royal Archives of Tell Mardik-Ebla," both in *Biblical Archeologist* 39:2 (May 1976).
4. Abraham defines himself as a Hebrew, as does Joseph three generations later. If it is correct to identify the biblical Hebrews with the Habiru mentioned in texts of this period, the term designates not a national or tribal identity but a social class. The Habiru were of mixed origins and wide geographical distribution, and lived outside of the regular political and religious structure of the time.
5. The servant is not named. It is commonplace but chronologically problematic to identify him with Eliezer, who had been Abraham's steward decades earlier (15:2).
6. See Schubert Spero, "Was Abraham Born in Ur of the Chaldees?" *Jewish Bible Quarterly* XXIV:3 (July 1996) pp. 156-159.
7. On Ur, see S.N. Kramer, "Sumerians" in *Dawn of Civilization*, op. cit., and *History Begins in Sumer* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959).
8. As Joshua recalled, Terah, Abram and Nahor had once worshipped idols, but Hurrian and Hittite sources knew "the gods of the Habiru" as distinct from the common pantheons. Laban knew his family had its own tutelary Deity or deities (31:53).
9. Urkesh was excavated and identified by Giorgio Buccellati and Marilyn Kelly-Buccellati. They are co-authors of the reports "Urkesh: The First Hurrian Capital," *Biblical Archeologist*, 60:3 (September 1997) and "In Search of Hurrian Urkesh," *Archaeology Odyssey* 4 (May-June 2001). For background on Urkesh and its artifacts, see www.urkesh.org.