

# Abraham — the Wandering Star

*“Truth is a pathless land, and you cannot approach it by any path whatsoever, by any religion, by any sect.”*

Jiddu Krishnamurti

**O**ur quest to uncover what’s hidden beneath the mantle of religious history must start with one man. The Jewish and Christian Bibles and the history of Islam, all take us back to the time of Abraham.

When we read the story of Abraham, the characterisation, plot and exploits seem familiar and we start to recognise the ingredients of a modern day pot-boiler. Our hero is a simple man, with humble beginnings and grand ambitions, who strives to create a family dynasty. The plot overflows with jealousy, lust, ambitions, intrigue and brotherly rivalry, that in their turn fuel the dynastic progress. No one tires of the tales that built a nation’s self-confidence and sense of belonging, evoking stirring tales of its people’s hard struggles and ultimate success.

Create a local hero, recount his daily hardships and familial infighting: have him fight political bigwigs and win, and see him rise to power and influence over his family and friends and former enemies too. The recipe works for TV soaps today and Abraham repeats have been running for synagogue audiences for the last 2,500 years. If pride in their ancestors’ achievements fails to impress us, then we have the pointed reminders that Abraham’s descendants have been singled out for special treatment; for all time; by no other than God himself. Those Bible scriptwriters crafted a history that the Jewish people would all want to hear about, talk about and would love to retell.

As popular fiction, the story of Abraham might make the best sellers and even a box office hit, but as a historical document, it is badly flawed. The authors, Judean scribes, who started writing in the 7th century BCE, had no inkling of life a thousand years previously, yet they tried to write a book

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giving the history of their tribe. The scribes had an additional problem — during their exile in Babylon, they had to protect important information about their religion, but disguise its origins from their captors.

The first historical anomaly relates to where Abraham came from. This chapter reveals the real relevance of Abraham's homeland and explains how misunderstanding arose about its location.

The Bible story records that Abram — his original name — lived in Ur of the Chaldees and there is a common assumption that this is the prosperous Mesopotamian city on the Euphrates River — near Basra in southern Iraq — that flourished for 2000 years before Christ. Many reference books confirm this; adults remember that trick question they were asked as a child, “Where did Abraham come from?” When they answered “Err...” they were told “That’s right,” and so Ur maintains its status in common belief.

The renowned American scholar, Professor W F Albright,<sup>1</sup> claims this assumption is incorrect. Ur on the Euphrates is not the home of Abraham. Albright points out that in the Greek translations of the Bible, Ur is never mentioned alone. In the Greek translations it says ‘Ur of the Chaldees’ which means Ur *in the land of the Chaldeans*. So Abraham's birthplace was changed to ‘Ur’ and ‘in the land of the Chaldeans omitted after the Bible was translated from Greek to Latin not when the story was first documented, but six hundred years later, in the fourth century CE.

More evidence that Ur was a careless misrepresentation comes when Genesis indicates that Abraham's original homeland was much further north. In Genesis 24, Abraham sends his servant from Canaan to Nahor to find a wife for his son Isaac. The Bible calls *Nahor* “Abraham's country, his father's house and the land of my kindred”: Nahor lies in the *northwest* of Mesopotamia, near Haran. The city of Ur, on the other hand, is in the south.

In Joshua 24, we get another clue to the true geographical location. Joshua says, “Your fathers dwelt on the other side of the flood in old time, even Terah, the father of Abraham and the father of Nahor”. Mesopotamian Ur stands on the side of the Euphrates nearer to Canaan, whereas Nahor is on the *other* side, on the *other side of the flood*, which is the biblical term for the River Euphrates. The Bible stories seem to negate the southern city of Ur, but by shining some new light onto some old archaeological evidence, an even more significant detail begins to emerge.

When the 4,000-year-old Mesopotamian city of Mari was unearthed in the 1930s, archaeologists discovered many thousands of clay tablets. The records preserved on those clay tablets gave the names of towns that lay

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<sup>1</sup> Albright, W F *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel*

within the domain of this city–state. To Biblical scholars, these names will be familiar: Haran, Nahor, Peleg, Serug, Terah. All these places lie within the area bounded by the Euphrates and Tigris rivers on the northern plain called Aram. Mari, with its biblically linked towns, lies roughly halfway up the Euphrates, whilst Ur lies in the far south by the Persian Gulf delta.

As the tablets were deciphered, Christian theologians were overcome with joy, for here at last was proof that the Old Testament stories were based upon historical fact. In Genesis 11, we read, “These are the generations of Shem” and the verse goes on to name Peleg who begat Reu, who begat Serug, who begat Nahor, who begat Terah, who begat Abram, Nahor and Haran. Astonishingly, the clay tablets, unearthed in Mari, have the names of Abraham’s ancestors on them. However, what appears to be conclusive evidence of his forebears’ existence is not quite as it seems.

To any rational person, it should seem extremely odd that the names of Abraham’s forefathers are identical to the names of the towns in the north–western region of the kingdom of Mari. Is it also coincidental that the name, Abram is very similar to the name of the area, Aram? A character out of legend having the same name as a historical town can indeed occur: the Ptolemaic Greeks named Herakleopolis after one of their gods, Herakles (the Roman Hercules). But a town name cannot be used as proof that a character of the same name actually existed. One can prove that a town was named after a known historical person: Byzantium was renamed Constantinople when it became the seat of the Emperor Constantine and history proves many such examples. When there is no evidence whatsoever that any of the Biblical forefathers of Abraham, nor even the man himself, ever lived, it is impossible to argue that the towns were named after the men.

For argument’s sake, we cannot say we have evidence that they didn’t exist, but we are able to ask which might have come first, town or man. The answer to this question lies in the name Haran. Haran, we are told, is the name given to Terah’s third son, but the story also states that Terah moves *his family* to the *town* of Haran. In this particular case, the town was already called Haran, before the son was named, so clearly the town did not derive its name from the Biblical character, but Haran was given his from it. The same is almost certainly true for the other sons, for it is totally unknown for one single family–line, particularly one with no regal or political connections, to give its names to a group of towns.

To understand if the town’s name might also be a Jewish given name, we need to look at how Jewish families describe themselves. For thousands of years, the practice among Jews has been to use *ben*, the Hebrew word for son, followed by the given name of the father, to indicate the family. So Terah’s sons would be known as Abram ben Terah, Nahor ben Terah and

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Haran ben Terah. The names only reflect the child's given name and who his father was, Jewish names unlike Arab ones, do not use a place to denote the person.

The *son of* naming system was common amongst Jews until the sixteenth century, when the more affluent Jews, who settled in Gentile lands, adopted a fixed family name. By the end of the eighteenth century, when registration of town dwellers for tax purposes became common, the practice of using a family name was established in Central and Eastern Europe. Family names were usually derived from the traditional one, but changed to reflect the local language, so we get variations with Jacob *Ben David* changing to Jakob Davidovitch or Jacob Davidson, depending on where Jacob eventually lives.

The traditional form of naming, as son-of-the-father, continued until very recently amongst some groups of Jews. Only when they migrated to Israel, in the 1980s and 1990s, did the Jews of Ethiopia adopt a fixed family name. So we can reasonably assume that it would have been much the same at the time of Abraham — the son is named from the father — unless external influences forced a change and in no case have we found a Jewish name derived from a town.

Let's now consider what likelihood there is that the place name was added on in those days — a practice now common amongst modern day Arabs. Could these people have been named after their place of origin, as for example a name like the King of Jordan's, Abdullah *ibn* Hussein *al* Amman, Abdullah son of Hussein from Amman? To add in 'from the town' is possible, but then if that might be the case, it explains any *fixed family name*, but not what a particular *given name* is. With the Abrahamic dynasty, we have a Bible that uses a single given name for each person and archaeological evidence of a coincident place name and therefore historians have assumed that the latter confirms the actual existence of the former. This is, to say the least, very peculiar and in the extreme, vague and anonymous.

We are left to conclude that the names used in the Bible were, for some reason, deliberately meant to be impersonal. Perhaps the reason was much more esoteric and it was always the intention, that the geographical nature of the names be covert arcane guides for 'those with the eyes to see' who were 'seeking the truth'. The only rational conclusion we can reach at this stage is to recognise that even if the Bible scribes did not appreciate the fundamental significance behind the ancient Abraham legends, the original author, or authors, whoever they were, had a connection with this area and chose to give the characters names which had important links to it. Their reasons may be obscured at present, but will become clearer as the book moves on.

Many Biblical scholars currently believe that the early stories were actually a conglomeration of separate localised tribal myths and legends. When the Hebrew Bible was being compiled in written form, the authors realised the political advantage of combining all the disparate, unrelated tribal tales into one cohesive and linear story that would bind together the fractious Israelite tribes into a people with a shared written history. The story of Abraham is one of these localised legends, but it is one whose great significance is little known. If the compilers of the Hebrew Bible had understood this significance, they would certainly have concealed it and there is some indication that this in fact may have happened.

But what *is* the undeclared significance of Haran and of the puzzling Ur? The answer lies in their connection with Egypt. This claim may appear both surprising and unlikely, but over the course of this book, the reader will discover that Egypt underpins the core of the Bible. It is important here to look at the history of these towns and their origins, but first of all we need to look at that place called Ur from another point of view.

Islamic sources have long held that Abraham was born in a town called Ur that was near to Haran. The Qur'an states that he was born in the kingdom of Namrood, the Nimrod of Genesis. These days, most academics and theologians agree with them and believe that the Biblical *Ur of the Chaldees*, is the Turkish town of Urfa, which stands on a tributary of the northern Euphrates, just a few miles northwest of Haran.

Originally, Urfa's name was *Urhay*, town of the Chaldees. According to legend, the Biblical character, King Nimrod built the town of Urfa: Nimrod is described as, 'a mighty hunter before the Lord'<sup>2</sup> and later in the book, I show the significance of this designation. A story told to the modern day tourists in Anatolia, tells of Nimrod casting Abraham off a cliff into a water pool: Urfa is renowned for its natural spring that feeds the pools. Though clearly a fictional fantasy, this legend has an arcane astronomical message, which is discussed in Chapter 3.

Urfa, according to Greek sources, was ancient before Alexander the Great invaded the region in the third century BCE. The Greeks renamed this strategically important town Edessa. As a heavily fortified citadel-town, Edessa expanded and prospered under the Greeks and Romans, then finally the Byzantines. During the Christian period, Edessa became an important theological centre with churches said to rival those of Constantinople. Likewise, its great libraries rivalled those of Athens, for the town was strategically placed to become the melting-pot for the exchange of ideas and philosophies between east and west, not only amongst the various

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis 10:9

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Christian sects, especially the Gnostics, but also numerous eastern belief systems such as Zoroastrianism, Hinduism and Buddhism.

There was another religious doctrine with a base in Edessa that had its origins in Egypt. Academics believe that the essence of the archaic Mystery religion of the Ancient Egyptians, was translated into the Greek language and written down in Alexandria; this possibly occurred around the end of the first century BCE and into the early years of the first century CE.<sup>4</sup> These profound works became known as the Hermetica — they were attributed to the Egyptian god Thoth, whose Greek counterpart is Hermes. The hidden philosophy of the Hermetica is widely held to be just the mere kernel of the Egyptians' religion; the real meanings had inevitably been lost in translation. Many Egyptian words have a variety of meanings and as was common practice in sacred texts, these had been employed deliberately, in order to disguise the true sense and importance of the scripts. This deliberate disguise would never be a problem as long as there were initiated masters of the philosophy, who could interpret the teachings for new acolytes.

In the third century CE, Clement of Alexandria, whilst head of the Christian Church, wrote about the works of Hermes and in particular the importance of cosmology and measurement.<sup>5</sup> Although this might seem like an odd subject for a *literalist* orthodox Christian and forerunner of the Roman Popes to discuss, it would be entirely understandable if Clement had been a Gnostic Christian, as his writings have led many academics to believe. Unfortunately, by the next century, another Bishop of Alexandria, Theophilus, in 391 CE, arranged the destruction of all pagan temples as well as the great Library of Alexandria. With that, thousands of crucially important books were lost forever. This barbaric act was typical of the atrocities perpetrated against civilisation and humanity as the rampaging literalist Christians of the Church of Rome suppressed any opposition. Reputedly, a few works escaped the holocaust and were safely hidden away, including copies of the original Hermetic works, preserved and guarded in places such as Haran and Edessa.

Edessa was the home of the world-renowned School of Persians. The most famous were, of course, the astronomer wise-men known as the Magi. A star-worshipping sect, known as the Sabians, became guardians of the Hermetica in Edessa. The name Sabian derives, according to some linguists, from the Egyptian word, S'ba, meaning star.

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<sup>3</sup> Brandon, S G F *Religion in Ancient History*,

<sup>4</sup> Grimal, N A *History of Ancient Egypt*

<sup>5</sup> Richardson, A and Bowden, J eds *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*

Egyptologist Selim Hassan thought that inscriptions on numerous votive stelae show that during the Hyksos occupation of Egypt circa 1730–1575 BCE, Semitic-speaking people from Haran founded a new town named Haran near Giza.<sup>6</sup> It would be reasonably safe to assume that when they left the Great Pyramids, the descendants of these people from Haran, were those same people known in Edessa as the Sabians. After the Hyksos expulsion from Egypt, records show that the Sabians made regular pilgrimages to the Great Pyramids and, according to Arab Historian Yaqut al Hamawi, were doing so as late as the eleventh century CE.<sup>7</sup>

The Sabians and their philosophical teachings later exerted great influence on Muslim mystical sects, such as the Sufis. In the same manner, the Sufis' influence extended to the south of France and further on in this book, we see how they affected the beliefs of the Cathars and the Knights Templar and why this provoked such a violent reaction from the Christian Church of Rome.

The Sabian name is still found amongst the Marsh Arabs of southern Iraq. Known as the Mandaeans, they have an alternative name Sa'Ba (sometimes written Sabba) but however it is spelled, it derives from S'ba and they are sometimes referred to as the Sabian Mandaeans. The Mandaeans record that their ancestors came to Haran and after a short stay moved north east, to the Lake Van region of modern day Turkey — settling in a place they called the Mountain of the Madai — though they claim that their true ancestral home is Egypt. Indeed, within a religion which appears to be a confused mixture of Gnostic Christianity, Old Testament Judaism and Iranian dualism, the Mandaeans hold important clues to the origins of Christianity; clues that are investigated in Chapter 8.

A measure of scepticism is necessary when considering the likely veracity of any ancient account, burdened inevitably by a confusion of time and place; coloured by exaggeration and propaganda and diminished or enhanced by failed memory, depending on which facts one forgets. A significant aspect of the Mandaean legends is that they do not claim that their ancestors returned to Haran, but that they came there. These were not the Semitic people who settled in northern Egypt, at a time when its power was weak and moved back to Palestine after the Hyksos expulsion. The Mandaeans instead seem to be referring to an extremely archaic migration that occurred before the supposed rise of the middle-eastern civilisations. The telling factor is that Haran was only one step on the Mandaeans' forebears' path as they moved to dwell in the northern mountains.

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<sup>6</sup> Selim Hassan *Excavations at Giza Vol 6 Part 1*

<sup>7</sup> Yaqut, Jwaideh, Wed/tran *The Introductory Chapters of Yaqut Mu'Jam Al-Buldan*

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Whatever the cause of their journey, it is clear that in Haran there was an Egyptian connection and that some knowledge attributed to the supposed mythological god of teaching, Thoth, came to Haran from Egypt. The great Hermetic works were derived from Thoth and for a long time, pilgrims from all over the Middle East — India, Persia, and even Egypt itself — were attracted to Haran to study them.

The importance of this region — the so-called Abrahamic homeland — is that it predates the rise of the accepted ancient middle-eastern civilisations. Amongst academics, this area is presently favoured as the region in which man first changed from hunter-gatherer to farmer and smith and took up the harvesting of crops, domestication of animals and metallurgy. The area, which these days extends from eastern Turkey and northern Iraq into Armenia and around the giant Lake Van, through the mountains just to the north of the Rivers Tigris and Euphrates, is commonly referred to as the ‘Cradle of Civilisation’.

In these northern lands, we find the earliest known permanent centres of habitation, established up to 5,000 years before the Sumerian cities of the Fertile Crescent of Mesopotamia emerged. These early towns were situated around the outer edges of this region: Catal Huyuk, a Neolithic town in eastern Anatolia; the enigmatic settlement at Nevali Cori, by the upper Euphrates; and much further south in Canaan, we find the renowned Jericho.

The library at Haran gives us the first Egyptian link to this area and the Mandaean legend points to the second. There is a strong argument to suggest that there was some kind of mini exodus out of Egypt and it could have taken place around 9,000 BCE to the Lake Van area — just as the Mandaean legend insists. Archaeological finds indicate that in Egypt a farming and tool-making culture existed which predated the developments around Lake Van. A full account of this theory of the flight to higher ground, during the floods at the end of the Ice Age, is contained in Andrew Collins’ works *From The Ashes Of Angels*<sup>8</sup> and *Gods Of Eden*.<sup>9</sup> Though I profess to differ in opinion over certain details, the Egyptian connection is clearly confirmed.

Drawing upon the findings of other scholars, ancient Akkadian records and old Kurdish tribal legends, Collins also promotes the claim for the mythological Garden of Eden being the memory of a real historical place inhabited by the Egyptian exiles of 11,000 years ago, a place he identifies as being Lake Van. At this stage, I do not wish to pursue the idea — its importance becomes apparent later in my proposal for the origins of

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<sup>8</sup> Collins, *A From The Ashes Of Angels*

<sup>9</sup> Collins, *A Gods Of Eden*

religious beliefs — its relevance here is solely to support the importance of this region to the ancient people of the Middle East and to show why it was essential to locate Abraham and his family there: to give him prestige and gravitas. The fictional Abraham was not just an important symbolic character, but one meant to secure the basis for the lore of the stellar religion that was covertly recorded in the Biblical texts.

The area has prominence too as the post-flood landing place for survivors of Akkadian and Babylonian legends. The Biblical Noah lands in the mountains immediately north of Lake Van, whilst in the Kurdish legend he lands south west of the lake. Regardless of whether the Noah story be fact or fiction, one can relate this landing place after a destructive catastrophe, to the site of a new beginning for mankind — a site from which man had to make a start on the road to, or possibly back to, civilisation. If there had been a historical Noah, or various individuals amalgamated into a single character, it is important to remember that he or they would not have been Hebrew. No Hebrew race existed at that early date, thus it makes no sense to attach Noah to a much later god who was exclusive to the Hebrews. Neither can one accept as truth the notion that, out of the whole world population, this god saved just Noah's family, for there are similar legends from which recount the same tale. A merciful god picks a local leader and saves just his family while the rest of the world is drowned, but it happened almost simultaneously, in dozens of places, all over the world!

So here, in the homelands of the legendary Abraham, we have groups of wise men that, right through to the eleventh century CE, sought to preserve ancient works that originated in Egypt. They also made frequent unexplained pilgrimages to their sacred place by the Nile. Was it a mere chance of fate that these ancient philosophical and scientific works should end up in Haran and Edessa/Urfa — or was there already something that linked Egypt and these two distant lands?

There was indeed something, something exceedingly ancient — but before investigating what this extraordinary link might be, it would be beneficial to consider the somewhat more mundane topic of whether a historical Abraham and his rapidly growing family migrated into Canaan.

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