

NELSON'S *New Illustrated*
BIBLE MANNERS
and **CUSTOMS**



HOW *the* PEOPLE *of the* BIBLE REALLY LIVED



HOWARD F. VOS

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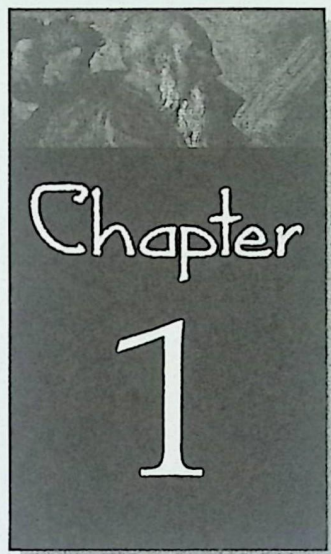
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DISCOVERING HOW BIBLE PEOPLES REALLY LIVED

Stories of Bible people are part of the heritage of most Americans. We have heard stories of Joseph and his "Technicolor Dreamcoat" and his rule over Egypt during a great famine. Of Moses who grew up in Pharaoh's court and led his people out of Egypt in the great Exodus. Of David the shepherd boy who became a king and built an empire. Of Solomon and his glorious reign. Of Esther who saved her people from destruction in the days of King Xerxes of Persia. Of Jesus who came to show the world a new and better way to relate to God. Of the apostle Paul who charged across the Roman world with a message of good news, but endured beatings, stoning, and a shipwreck along the way. And stories of Noah and Daniel and more.

We have heard of all this even if we didn't grow up in Sunday school or never darkened the door of a church or a synagogue. Films, videos, musicals, novels, dramas, and art images have told us the stories—either in fictionalized or faithful accounts.

And now we wonder how much of these stories may be true or plausible. Or what life was like in Bible times. Or how Bible people really lived. How did they dress? What did they eat? What kinds of houses did they live in? How did they make a living? What was their family life like? Can we discover anything about their government? Or their religion? These and many other questions may fill our minds.

In an effort to answer these questions, numerous books on Bible customs have been written. But they have tended to deal with life in Old or New Testament times in a general way, without noting differences in time and place. And they often have proceeded on the assumption that the customs of a rural Egypt, Palestine, Jordan, or Iraq in modern times will provide clues to what life was like in Bible times. The result has been a very limited idea of ancient life and sometimes a very wrong idea of what actually happened.

We have to come to grips with the fact that life differed greatly in the various Bible lands—in Mesopotamia, Palestine, Egypt, Phoenicia, Syria, Iran, Cyprus, Asia Minor, Greece, Malta, and Italy. And we need to recognize that life changed considerably with the passage of time. So it seemed to me that the only way to deal adequately and accurately with the whole subject of Bible customs was to slice the biblical narrative into twenty segments and look at the customs during each time period and in each of the Bible lands involved.

The Goal of This Book

This book, then, will tell the story of God's people from Abraham (about 2000 B.C.) to the end of the New Testament (about A.D. 100) in twenty historical segments. But it is not a history book. There is a historical thread,

but the emphasis is on the lives and customs of the people: their environment (the places they lived), government, religion, warfare, houses and furniture, diet and foodstuffs (agriculture), clothing, family relationships and daily life (including education), their work, travel and commerce, and more. These topics appear in the same order in each of the chapters. That makes it easy to trace a specific topic through the whole sweep of Bible times.

Too often accounts of the past have centered on the rulers, on the powerful and the wealthy. Our effort here is to describe what it was like for the various peoples of the Bible to live all of life. In short, the goal is to make the Bible come alive again as we watch individuals, great and small, meet their individual and corporate challenges.

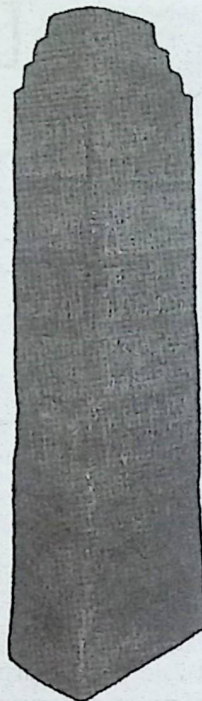
How We Know About the Lives of the Biblical Peoples

Explorers and archaeologists have been poking around in the dust heaps of the Bible lands for some 200 years. These mounds we now usually call by their Arabic names—tells. And in time investigators discovered that they encased “layer cake” civilizations. That is, they revealed layers of occupation, cities built one on top of another. But more of that later.

The early explorers were treasure hunters who looked for museum pieces and art objects to fill private and museum collections. As they burrowed into the tells, often wreaking terrible destruction, they did make some wonderful discoveries. For example, they found the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III (ruler of Assyria 859–825 B.C.). This black limestone pillar has pictures around its four sides with descriptive captions. One of them shows King Jehu of Israel (841–814) paying tribute to Shalmaneser. Jehu’s claim to fame was that he put an end to the wicked reign of Ahab and Jezebel.

Then the Monolith Inscription of Shalmaneser tells of that Assyrian king’s fight with a coalition of kings which included Ahab of Israel, who furnished 10,000 men and 2,000 chariots for the contest.

Another important discovery was the Cyrus Cylinder found at Babylon. The



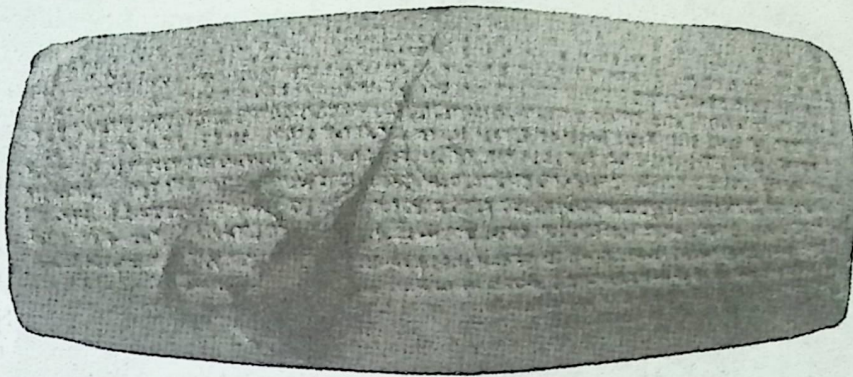
The Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser
In the second register King Jehu bows before
Shalmaneser and brings tribute.

(Photo by Gustav Jeeninga)

inscription on this clay cylinder tells us that King Cyrus of Persia permitted various peoples to go back to their homes and rebuild their temples after he took Babylon in the days of Belshazzar (Daniel 5). Here we have the Persian version of the Hebrew record of their return from captivity (Ezra 1).

Thousands of other objects came to light in this way—some with a direct biblical connection and others providing information about life in Bible times. But many of these had a limited value because they were torn out of the context in which they belonged. Often we haven’t known what they were used for or when they should be dated.

Gradually archaeology has become a science. Now we strip away the soil of the tells layer by layer or stratum by stratum in what is called stratigraphic excavation. As the name implies (literally meaning writing or recording of the strata or layers), we seek to record carefully every aspect of our finds. The work is meticulous, involving larger or smaller picks and hoes, brushes of various kinds, baskets, and wheelbarrows. Underwater excavation follows procedures just as exacting as those



The Cyrus Cylinder, in which King Cyrus gives the order permitting captive peoples to return home
(British Museum)

used on land. No longer is it a hunt for buried treasure or specialized antiques.

Not only is archaeology a science in its own right today, but it also gets help from other sciences, and so it is proper to call it a composite science. It draws on the expertise of anthropologists, sociologists, geologists, zoologists, engineers, linguists, climatologists, computer programmers, statisticians. The list goes on. Emerging technologies also help archaeologists do their work: ground-penetrating radar, infrared aerial photography, sonar, underwater exploration techniques, and computer reconstruction of everything from tiny figurines to entire cities.

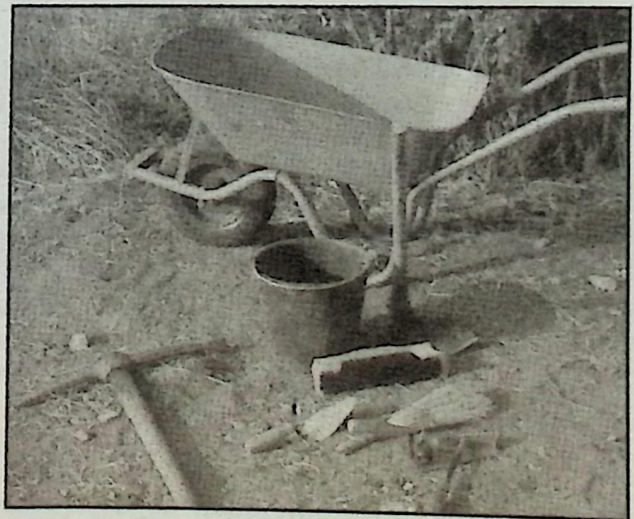
Of course the material remains of the world of the Bible would be of only limited value to us if we couldn't read the inscriptions accompanying them or the literature those peoples produced. Fortunately, ancient Egyptian, Persian, Assyro-Babylonian, Hittite, and other languages have been deciphered. And whole libraries have been found, such as the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Assyrian library of Ashurbanipal (668–627 B.C.), Hittite palace archives, and caches of records in private homes. It is now possible to get a Ph.D. in Egyptian, Hittite, Assyro-Babylonian (Akkadian), and most other ancient Near Eastern languages.

Nor would all this archaeological work be very useful if there were no way of dating it effectively. Fairly exact chronologies now exist for ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, Palestine, Turkey, Greece, Rome, and other Mediterranean lands.

In this flurry of exploration and excavation, we have uncovered a wealth of knowl-

edge from the ruins of cities throughout the Middle East: Jericho, Jerusalem, Babylon, Corinth, Ephesus, Athens, Caesarea, Nineveh, Ur, Pergamum, Sardis, among dozens of others.

Archaeologists have made numerous exciting discoveries at some of these biblical cities. They have found the walls that Nehemiah built at Jerusalem (Nehemiah 6), the temple of Diana at Ephesus (Acts 19), an inscription mentioning Pontius Pilate in the theater at Caesarea, the throne room of Nebuchadnezzar at Babylon, remains of the synagogue of Jesus' day at Capernaum, the judgment seat or administrative podium at Corinth where Paul stood before the Roman governor Gallio (Acts 18:12–16), and the palace of the Assyrian king



Tools used for excavation—brushes, trowels, picks, oversized hoe, rubber buckets, and wheelbarrow



Walls that Nehemiah built in Jerusalem

Sennacherib (704–681 B.C.). On a couple of walls the king pictured his destruction of Lachish just prior to the attack on Jerusalem in 701 B.C. (see Isaiah 36–37). Then there is the ongoing excavation of Pompeii, which shows what life was like in a Roman town of New Testament times.

And the day of diminishing returns has not yet set in. In 1993 a stone engraved with the words "The House of David" and "King of Israel" was excavated in northern Israel. Dating to the days of David some 3,000 years ago, this find helps to confirm the existence of this bigger-than-life Hebrew hero.

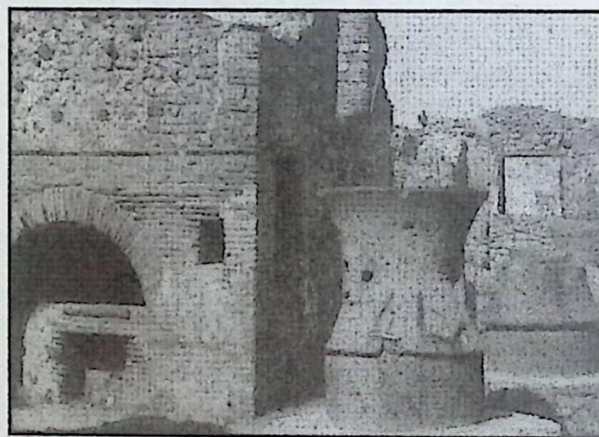
Important new discoveries connect with Jesus' ministry too. Excavations at Sepphoris, the Roman capital of Galilee during part of Jesus' lifetime, tell us of a bustling pagan city of some 30,000, located only an hour by foot from Nazareth. Possibly Jesus' "city set on a hill" (Matthew 5:14), it shows that Jesus was not just a small town boy who grew up in a provincial Jewish context.

Then there is the discovery of a fishing boat under the waters of the Sea of Galilee (1986). Dating to New Testament times, it has now been raised, reconditioned, and put on display for tourists. About 26 feet long, it could have been sailed or rowed by a crew consisting of four oarsmen and a helmsman. We can imagine some of Jesus' disciples caught in a storm while rowing across the sea in a boat like this (Mark 6:48).

In 1990 a limestone burial box was found in a previously unknown burial cave beneath Jerusalem. Ornately sculpted, it was engraved with the name of Caiaphas, the Jewish high priest who tried Jesus. With

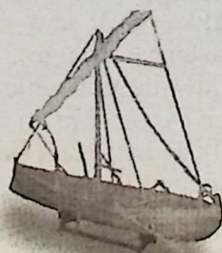
it were found eleven other burial boxes. This is now commonly believed to be the family tomb of the Caiaphas.

As a result of all this research and discovery, books, journal articles, and monographs on every conceivable aspect of life in the lands of the Bible appear in increasing and almost bewildering volume. I have sought to use this incredible richness of information, plus endless study of material remains in the museums of the Middle East, Europe, and America and on-the-spot observations at almost all the biblical sites, to paint in these pages a picture of life as the people of Bible times lived it.

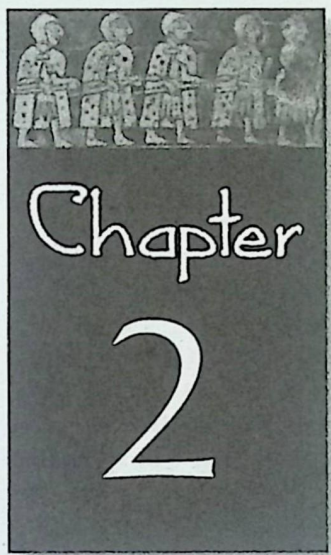


A first-century bakery at Pompeii, showing an oven (left) and mills for grinding wheat into flour (right)

Thousands of books, magazine articles, and encyclopedia articles have been used in writing this book. Brief, fairly specialized bibliographies appear at the end of each chapter. Then at the end of the book appear lists of general works (encyclopedias, atlases, journals) and books that relate to several of the chapters of the book. Extended indexes also will point the reader to other subjects of interest.



Model of a first century fishing boat found in the Sea of Galilee (Photo by Frederick C. Veit)



LIFE IN ABRAHAM'S HOMETOWN UR OF MESOPOTAMIA (Genesis 11–12)

"The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Haran [while in Ur, Genesis 11:31], and said to him, 'Get out of your country and from your relatives, and come to a land that I will show you.'"
(Acts 7:2–3 NKJV)

The apostle Paul mentions him in the New Testament as an exemplary man of faith, but how much do you really know about Abraham? Almost everyone in Western civilization and the Middle East knows *something* about him. He is revered as the ancestor of the Jews and Arabs alike. His traditional tomb at Hebron in Palestine is a flash point of controversy between the two peoples. Sometimes on the evening news, scenes of demonstrations there erupt before our eyes. For their part, Christians look upon Abraham as the ancestor of Jesus Christ and as the father of the faithful. So he is held in high esteem by followers of all three great monotheistic religions. Throughout much of our classical and even popular literature, art, and music we find references to him.

Yet most people know only sketchy details about him. If we are to gain an understanding of this remarkable and pivotal Old Testament figure, we must dig rather deeply into his background, his culture, and his actions. What shaped this man before he responded to God's call, before he risked all to travel to an unknown country? At least a partial answer comes to us from an analysis of the first 75 years of his life.

The drama of the people descended from Abraham began in a remarkable period of history. As we try to understand that history we shall begin to appreciate the special way God called Abraham and led him from Ur to start a new life of following God by faith (Genesis 11:31; 12; Acts 7:2–3).

Abraham embarked on a truly unusual move when he left Ur of the Chaldees for a territory known variously as Canaan, Palestine and, later on, as Israel. Consider that God commanded it in a personal appearance to Abraham in a pagan society where people worshiped many gods. Then, too, God didn't tell Abraham where He was sending him or what he should do when he got there. We make adequate and sometimes elaborate preparations when we move. We have chosen a town, bought or rented a house, landed a job, and arranged for a moving van. Not Abraham—he had no idea where God would take him when he pulled up stakes and left Ur.

Further, this move was important because eventually Abraham and his descendants (the Israelites) would be given the land where he would settle—the land of Canaan (Genesis 13:14–17).

Finally, for his faithfulness in making this move Abraham was to become the father of a great nation—the Jewish people (Genesis 12:2–3). And through him, in God's time, all the peoples of the earth would be blessed (Genesis 12:3b). The blessing ultimately would come through his descendant Jesus Christ. We should also not forget that in a moment of weakness Abraham became the ancestor of the Arabs through his slave girl Hagar. All this was connected with the culture he came from before the great move!

Ancient Sumerian Ur: Important and Prosperous

So what is the significance of the move, you ask. For us today, Ur is not an important place, nor is it located in one of the more progressive regions on earth. Conditions were quite different then, however. Instead of being situated in a cultural and political backwater, Ur was at the forefront of developments. If we have our chronology straight (see later discussion) Ur controlled a powerful empire and was perhaps the greatest city-state in the world at the time. The only possible exception was the Harappan culture of the Indus Valley, to be seen at such cities as Harappa and Mohenjodaro. Those cities were on the wane by 2000 B.C., however, and seem never to have been as advanced as the Mesopotamian cities.

Not only was Ur an important and prosperous place in Abraham's day, but it also stood in the general area where civilization began. The usual view is that civilization involves such developments as writing, the wheel—for pottery making and transportation—monumental architecture, the decorative arts, and metallurgy. All of these things appeared first in southern Mesopotamia, and the people who get credit for those many achievements were the Sumerians, who lived at the northern end of the Persian Gulf and who controlled Ur in Abraham's day.

The earliest monumental architecture (three large temples) was found at Obeid (4 miles northwest of Ur) dating from about 4000 B.C. At Uruk (biblical Erech,

Genesis 10:10), another 35 miles up the Euphrates from Obeid, civilization really began. Pottery was produced on a spinning potter's wheel and four-wheeled chariots with solid wheels were built by 3500 B.C. Soon after 3500 the inhabitants were writing on clay tablets in crude pictograms and by 3000 were using wedge-shaped cuneiform. We might well imagine Abraham learning to write on a clay tablet.

At Uruk, too, archaeologists uncovered monumental architecture in the form of large temples, the first ziggurat or stage-tower, and city walls. Fairly sophisticated artistic production appeared in the decoration of the temples and the cylinder seals of the period. Cylinder seals were small stone cylinders one to three inches long and incised with artwork. These could be rolled across wet clay and serve as a signet or evidence of ownership. An irrigation system was also developed in the Uruk period. If Ur was the leading city of the world in Abraham's day, and if it was located in an area that stood at the forefront of cultural advancement, Abraham's decision to leave Ur and follow God's call takes on new significance.

The Land of Mesopotamia

Mesopotamia is roughly 600 miles long (northwest to southeast) and 300 miles wide at its greatest extent in the north and some 100–150 miles wide in the south. To give some idea of distances, Ur is about 150 miles north of the head of the Persian Gulf and 220 miles south of modern Baghdad.

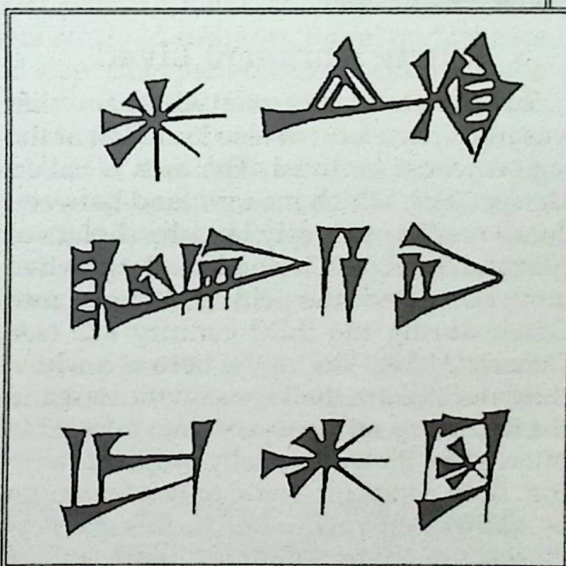
Northern Mesopotamia was known generally in ancient times as Assyria and southern Mesopotamia as Babylonia. Babylonia was subdivided into Sumer (in the south next to the Persian Gulf) and Akkad (in the north where the two rivers come closest together). In Abraham's day, rulers of Ur called themselves kings of Sumer and Akkad.

CUNEIFORM WRITING PREDATES ABRAHAM

Cuneiform [kyu NAY uh form] is a script in which numerous ancient languages were written. The term simply means "wedge-shaped." The Sumerians developed it by about 3000 B.C., gradually evolving it from pictographs. They usually wrote it on wet clay tablets with a stylus that had a triangular end and sharp edges. Thus it was possible to create combinations of wedges and tailings (as one used the end or the edge of the stylus) to represent the many syllables of ancient Mesopotamian or other Near Eastern languages. The tablets were then either sundried or baked. Cuneiform also could be chiseled in stone when public monuments or inscriptions were erected.

The Persian cuneiform was deciphered first, in the 1830s and 1840s, as a result of the work of Georg Grotefend, Edward Hincks, and Henry Rawlinson especially. Then other cuneiform languages were

deciphered—Assyro-Babylonian, Elamite, Sumerian, and Hittite, among others. Major work on Assyrian, Sumerian, and Hittite dictionaries is now in progress, with the Assyrian project at the University of Chicago largely finished.

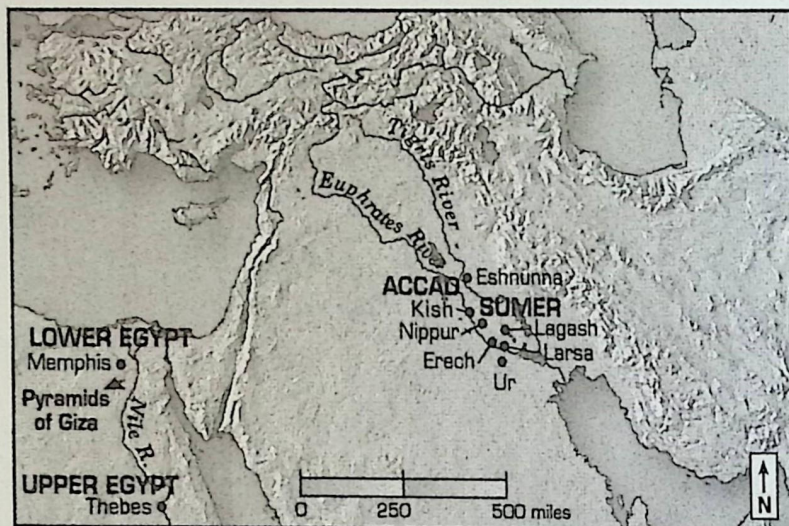


Cuneiform as it was written during the Ur III period



Ancient cuneiform characters were impressed on soft clay tablets with a pointed stylus. These tablets were then generally baked to form a piece of writing that was virtually indestructible. Sometimes tablets were merely sundried.

Languages in cuneiform are syllabic in form, so the student had to learn hundreds of signs (200 in Hammurabi's day, c. 1792-1750 B.C.) standing for individual syllables, instead of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Modern Old Testament students who struggle with their studies in Hebrew can be very glad that the Old Testament was written in alphabetic Hebrew instead of a syllabic language of the ancient Near East!



Ancient Near East

The Land

Where Abraham Lived

To get some idea of what Abraham's life was like, it is useful to also look first at the region where he lived. The area is called *Mesopotamia*, which means "land between the rivers." Apparently Jewish scholars of Alexandria, Egypt, coined the term when they translated the Old Testament into Greek during the third century B.C. (see Genesis 24:10). The rivers between which this land lies are the Tigris on the east and the Euphrates on the west—both referred to often in the Bible, especially prophetic writing. Both rivers originate only a few miles apart in the mountains of Armenia and flow closest together (c. 25 miles) in the area of modern Baghdad. Finally they join about a hundred miles north of the Persian Gulf and flow as a single stream into the Gulf. These rivers overflowed every spring while the crops were standing on the soil, requiring levees (dikes) to protect the farmland.

Mesopotamia today has little rainfall, and evidently the situation has not changed much since ancient times. The region south of Baghdad receives less than ten inches per year, sometimes as little as two inches. In the hills of Assyria the average is about twenty inches per year. Because there is so little rainfall in the south, irrigation was necessary and vast networks of irrigation canals were con-

structed. These canals required a lot of people to construct and maintain them, as well as to man the levees to protect against the annual floods. These geographical factors encouraged an urban way of life, in southern Mesopotamia at least. And urban life required governmental organization and preparation for defense and led to a division of labor and social stratification. Abraham's family may well have been active in the business and political community of that era.

The lower half of Mesopotamia, in which Ur was located, was alluvial soil, built up over the millennia by deposits from the Tigris and Euphrates—quite different from the region to which God would take Abraham. There was no stone. There were no great timbered hillsides, as in Canaan, or mineral resources. The people who lived there learned to make everything from the soil they irrigated. They grew their food on the soil and exchanged the surplus for metals, timber, and other things they could not produce. They made their clothing primarily from wool, but also from flax (linen). Though the temperature in southern Mesopotamia is excessive during the summer (sometimes over 120 in Babylon in August), wool with a coarse weave does "breathe."

They built their homes, temples, and public buildings from clay brick (baked and sundried) and fashioned their dishes from clay. When they developed their writing, they made clay tablets on which they wrote wedge-shaped characters (cuneiform) with a small wood stylus. It is not inconceivable that Abraham knew how to write in cuneiform before he left Ur.

(For more on this topic, go to p. 29.)

Government

Ur and Her Empire

As I understand the chronology, Ur was in control of an empire in the days of

Population in the Region

How many lived in this region has produced educated guesses that are quite striking. By 2000 B.C., there were fifteen to twenty cities in Sumer, with most of them having a population of perhaps 10,000–20,000. Uruk may have had 50,000 and Ur as many as 200,000. In the whole area of Sumer—cities and rural dependencies—there were probably more than half a million people.

Abraham and was enjoying one of the most brilliant periods in the history of Mesopotamia. The great Ur-Nammu, governor of Ur, had wrenched power from the hands of his overlord Utuhegal of Uruk (biblical Erech) and quickly founded the powerful and prosperous Third Dynasty of Ur. (The First Dynasty had dated about 2500 B.C. and the Second about 2300.) And this golden age lasted a little over a century.

If we accept 2166 B.C. as the date of Abraham's birth at Ur (see sidebar, "Date of Abraham"), we wonder how this squares with the political chronology of the Ur III period. The period began about 2112 according to the French scholar Georges Roux,¹ 2135 according to Carl Roebuck of Northwestern University,² or 2200 according to McGuire Gibson of the University of Chicago.³

We are not sure how old Abraham was chronologically when he left Ur for Haran; but he could have left during the Third Dynasty of Ur, at the height of her glory, whether we begin the period with the chronology of Roux, Roebuck, Gibson, or a slightly different date of another scholar. The position I am taking in this chapter is that Abraham knew Ur during her golden age and that all the following discussion about life in the city furnishes a context for the patriarch's early life. There was no earthly reason why he should have wanted to leave Ur!

The empire Ur-Nammu carved out probably roughly approximated the area of modern Iraq. At its heart was the territory of Sumer (north of the Persian Gulf) and

Akkad (area where the Tigris and Euphrates come close together). In this whole area, the former city-states (e.g., Uruk, Larsa, Kish, Eridu) were now treated as provinces. And in place of their kings, the king of Ur appointed administrators to keep order, administer justice, enforce laws, build public works, and collect taxes. Then there were the conquered territories, also divided into provinces and ruled by civilian or military governors. These included Susa and most of northern Mesopotamia. Finally, there were outlying regions, independent states, such as Elam, that were tied to Ur by marriage and other kinds of alliances. Later Abraham was to organize such alliances in Canaan for security purposes.

The provinces directly under the control of Ur were supervised by means of a network of roads with stations a day's walk apart, where officials accompanied by soldiers received supplies. Royal messengers and inspectors periodically circulated at the command of the king to make sure that local administrations worked smoothly. At the head of the whole administrative pyramid stood the king as absolute ruler, worshiped as a god during this golden age. Previously the king had commonly been viewed as merely a representative of the gods.

During the Ur III period the economic machine seemed to work smoothly. Though in earlier times the temples controlled



Tigris at Baghdad with a modern Iraqi in a boat made of reeds and covered with pitch.

much of the land, now the palace owned a much larger share. The state also operated huge factories employing hundreds or even thousands of workers producing such commodities as leather, textiles, flour, bread, or beer. The state also seems to have controlled the international trade.⁴ The majority of the so-called merchants were in fact civil servants. The records tell us in some detail about the temple and palace sectors of the economy, but we do not know as much about the private sector. There were private merchants and businessmen involved in the domestic economy, and metalwork seems to have been in the hands of private artisans.

Imagine Abraham and his extended family actively engaged in agriculture and commerce during this period. He had clearly accumulated significant economic resources, large enough to finance moving parts of his extended family from Ur to Haran.

(For more on this topic, go to p. 31.)

Religion

"And Joshua said to all the people, 'Thus says the LORD God of Israel: "Your fathers, including Terah, the father of Abraham and the father of Nahor, dwelt on the other side of the River in old times; and they served other gods."'"

(Joshua 24:2 NKJV)

We've set Abraham in his geographic, political and economic environment up to now. But what was the religious worship in his home like? Where was he spiritually when God spoke to him? Joshua gives us a clue when he addressed the Israelites at the end of his life, observing that their ancestors, notably Terah, had served "other gods" "beyond the Euphrates" (Joshua 24:2 RSV and NRSV).

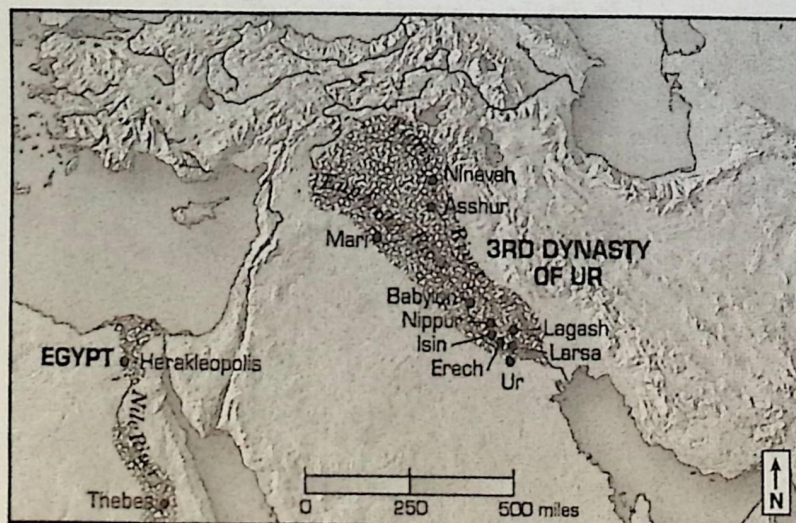
What that means may be illustrated by the sacred enclosure of the moon god Nanna, located in the northwestern part of Ur. This enclosure measured about 400 yards long and 200 yards wide. Inside this enclosure rose the great brick ziggurat or stage-tower of Nanna, measuring about 200 feet in length, 150 feet in width, and 70 feet in height. Each of the three stages of the tower was smaller than the one below, and on the topmost level stood the temple of the god. Gardens beautified the terraces.

The ziggurat at Ur was only one of several that Ur-Nammu built in the cities of Sumer. Whether he was particularly devout, or a good politician who sought to placate the priesthood for royal infringement on their power and landholding, must remain an open question.

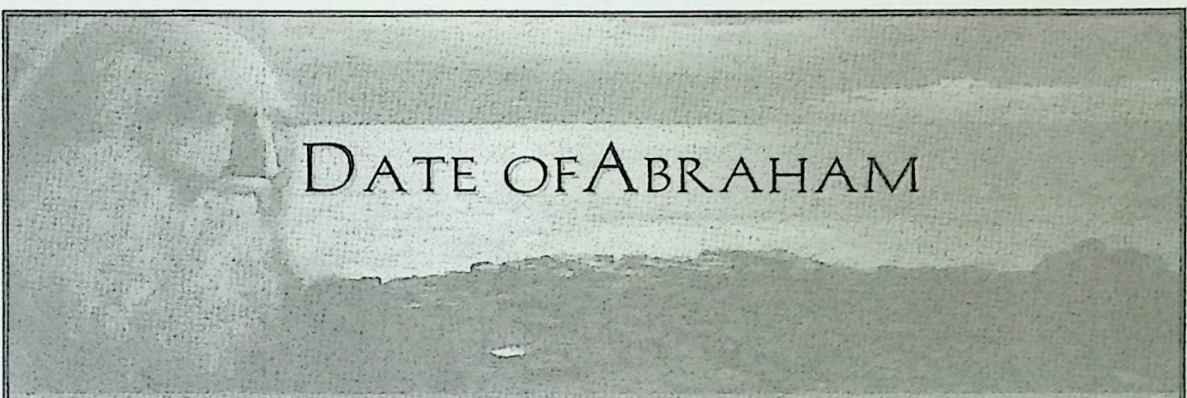
Nanna's special functions were to light up the night, to measure time (Sumer observed a lunar calendar), and to provide fertility. Nanna was expected to give general prosperity: fish in rivers, plants on land, long life in the palace, abundance of cattle and dairy

products to cow herders, as well as human fertility. We know that in some places and at some times in Mesopotamian history, fertility rites involved the "sacred marriage," in which the king slept with the high priestess of Nanna. But how often they took place, whether they were annual or took place after his coronation or on some special occasion, we cannot tell. We simply do not have any records that reveal the details of some of the customs of the Ur III period.

In line with the phases of the moon, festivals were



The Empire of Ur during the Ur III period



DATE OF ABRAHAM

If we follow the chronological references in the Old Testament literally, we can arrive at a specific date for Abraham. Of course it is necessary to work backward. A good place to begin is with the dedication of the temple. First Kings 6:1 puts that event in the fourth year of Solomon's reign (966) and says that the Exodus took place 480 years earlier. Thus we arrive at a date of about 1446 for the Exodus. (Discussion of the date of the Exodus appears in chapter 4.) Then Exodus 12:40-41 puts the entrance of Jacob and his sons into Egypt 430 years earlier, and we are now back to about 1876.

Next we look at the specifics of the patriarchal period. From Genesis 12:4; 21:5; 25:26; and 47:9 we learn that Abraham entered Canaan when he was 75 and was 100 when Isaac was born. Isaac was 60 at Jacob's birth, and Jacob was 130 when he stood before Pharaoh at the time of the Hebrew migration to Egypt. If we add 25, 60, and 130 we arrive at 215 for the total time that the patriarchs lived in Canaan. If we add 215 to 1876, we arrive at the date of 2091 for Abraham's entrance into Canaan. Since he was 75 at the time, we add 75 to 2091 and arrive at 2166 for the date of his birth in Ur.

celebrated on the first, seventh and fifteenth days of the month during the Third Dynasty of Ur. On the day the moon was invisible and thought to be dead, special offerings were made; these seem to have been in charge of the reigning queen. The people believed that on that day Nanna went to the underworld to judge and make administrative decisions. That done, the god reappeared in the night skies as the new moon.

During the festivals people must have come from considerable distances, and there must have been feasts, processions or parades, music and dance events, and markets or fairs. But we do not have detailed statements from scribes describing such events.

In addition to the state cult or the city cult, the populace worshiped personal gods. In some of the houses rooms were set aside as shrines; often reception rooms doubled as shrines. Commonly these shrines had an altar in the corner, standing about waist high. Here one might worship a family or a personal god, but nothing is

known of beliefs or practices of private cults of that sort. Passing references to personal deities do appear in letters of citizens of Ur found on clay tablets dating to the period.

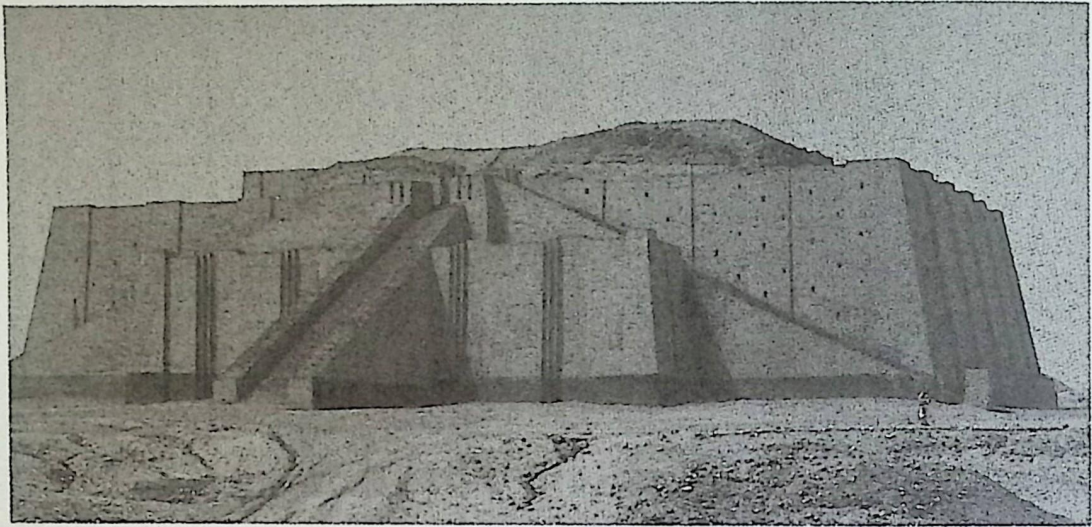
That was the religious environment in which Abraham grew up and did his business. Joshua makes it clear that Abraham's father at least worshiped idols—and Abraham may have done so as well for many years.

(For more on this topic, go to p. 31.)

Warfare

Warfare in the Golden Age

By force of arms, Ur-Nammu quickly brought all of Mesopotamia under his control. The military machine by which he achieved this is not described in detail in the archaeological sources, but they provide some educated observations or suppositions. The infantry wore metal helmets, even

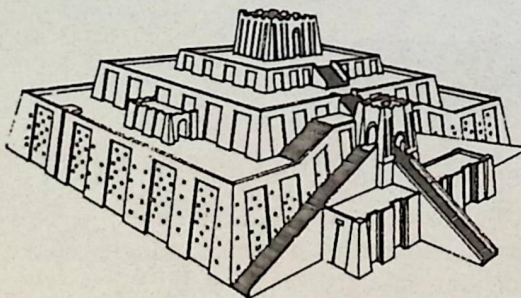


The ziggurat of Ur as partially restored

(Photo by Gustav Jeeninga)

though all metal had to be imported. At least some of the soldiers wore heavy cloaks, possibly leather and metal-studded for body protection.

The front ranks of infantry apparently were protected by large rectangular shields, but judging from pictorial representations of the period, most of the soldiers do not seem to have carried shields. Rather, they wielded a spear in one hand for thrusting and a battle-ax in the other for slashing and probably had a dagger at their waists for protection if they lost one of the other weapons. A shield would have reduced their offensive capability. Though they used the sling and bow and arrow, those do not seem to have figured prominently in the pitched battles commonly fought by heavy infantry. Archers served as support troops and officers rode in clumsy four-wheeled battle wagons.⁵



Artist's depiction of the ziggurat at Ur

In Genesis 14 we read of an attack on Sodom and Gomorrah that involved the capture of Lot and his family and their removal as captives—and Abraham's quick strike response force that recaptured Lot and his family. Where did he learn the tactics of warfare? Probably while still living in Ur of Chaldees.

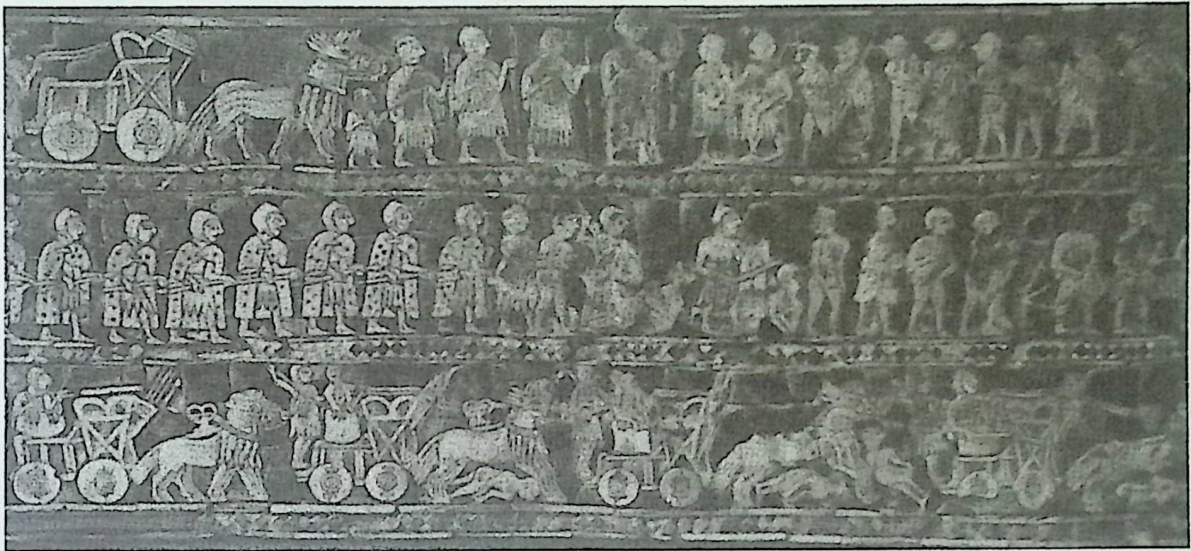
(For more on this topic, go to p. 32.)

Housing and Furniture

Plan of the City

The city-state of Ur was a prosperous industrial, commercial, and agricultural center with a population of some 360,000, according to estimates of the excavator, C. Leonard Woolley,⁶ though some scholars would now reduce the figure to about 200,000. The city center was enclosed by a wall about two and one-half miles in circumference and seventy-seven feet thick. The thickness of the wall was not so much an indication of the need for formidable fortifications as a reminder that the area had no stone so it was necessary to erect an earthen rampart or embankment. Inside the wall lived about 25,000 people.

Dominating the northwest part of Ur stood the sacred enclosure of the moon god Nanna (discussed earlier). There were north and west harbors, where riverboats



A war scene on the so-called "Standard of Ur" shows clumsy battle wagons of the period 2500 B.C.

and ocean-going vessels could dock. Apparently the open waters of the Persian Gulf were more accessible about 2000 B.C. than they are now; the silting action of the rivers had not yet created the solid landfill visible in the area today.

Streets of the City

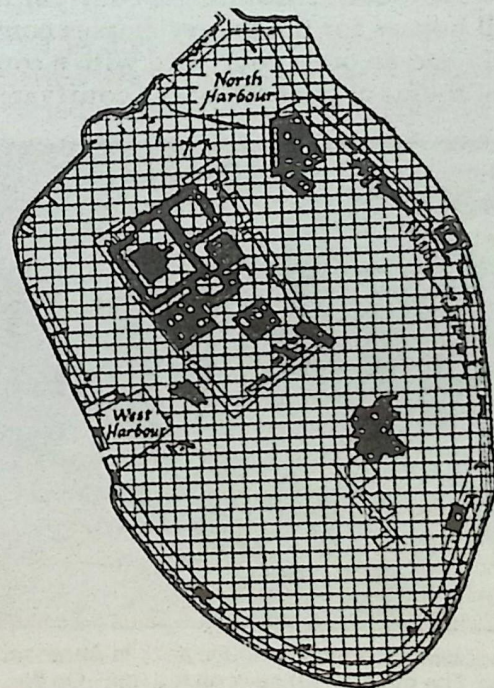
Now let's walk the streets of Ur during the time of Abraham and stop at a few houses. The streets are winding and narrow. In fact, we can frequently touch the buildings on either side with outstretched arms. Under such circumstances wheeled vehicles are prohibited from operating in town. It is a tight squeeze when two individuals pass carrying large bundles or when a loaded donkey and a pedestrian meet. To prevent people from getting hurt on sharp edges, sharp corners of buildings are rounded off at intersections. There are no yards with grass and no trees anywhere in sight.

The streets are windowless. Only doors open into houses that are constructed around a central courtyard open to the sky. At least the lower courses of exterior walls are of burnt brick. At the doorways there are often brick sills or thresholds to keep rain water from draining into the house. Because garbage is thrown into the street, the street level constantly rises and gradually becomes higher than that of the house floor. Sometimes a brick stair leads from the street down into the house. Eventually it

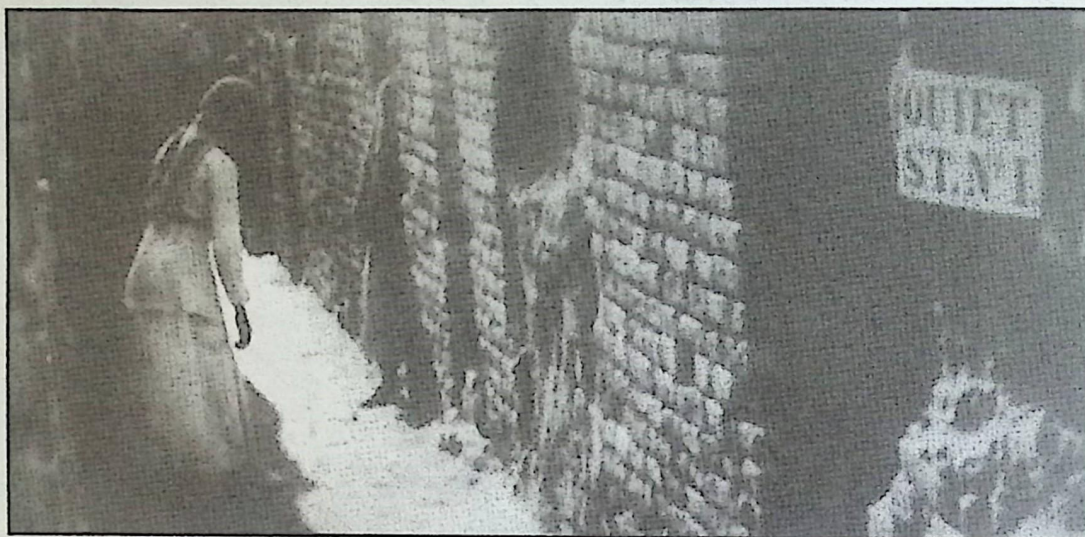
may be necessary to rebuild the house at a higher level.

Houses and Furniture

The houses of the middle class commonly measured forty by fifty feet or more and had ten to twenty rooms. They were normally two stories during the Third Dynasty of Ur, demonstrating a

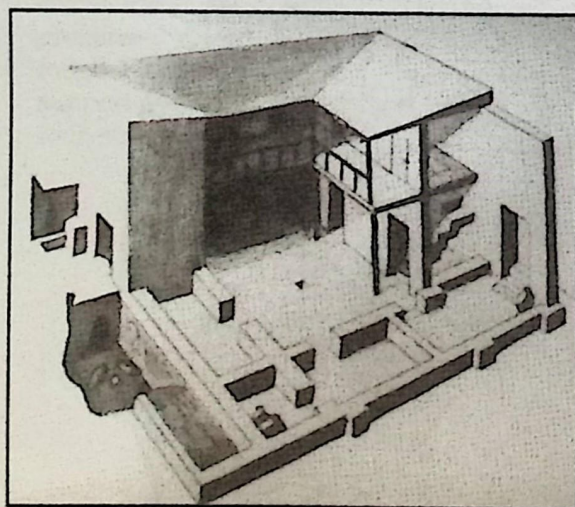


Plan of Ur



A street scene in Ur with house walls dating to Abraham's time. The presence of Iraqi workers shows how narrow the streets were.

greater sophistication than the one-story houses of earlier periods or later construction in Babylonian times. On the first floor they had a kitchen for cooking, an eating area, guest room, lavatory, servants' quarters and storage; on the second floor family bedrooms were located. These were reached by means of a brick stairway that led up to a wooden balcony about three feet wide that ran around the courtyard.⁷ Small houses for the poorer classes commonly had an open courtyard with a couple of rooms at the back of the courtyard.



Half-section of a private house at Ur in Abraham's day. The main entrance is on the right. On the extreme left, the domestic chapel and family burial ground.

Cooking or baking of bread took place in the courtyard.

How many individuals may have lived in these houses is still debated. Essentially, though, they were one-family dwellings. Sons and daughters lived there until they established homes of their own, and aged parents may have lived with the family. But homes for an extended family were not common in the city. Since houses were already stacked one against another, there was little if any room for additions to an existing structure if family units were added. The situation was different in the countryside, where there was opportunity to add to houses and where there are some indications in existing records of joint ownership and joint working of land.

Furniture was sparse, as in many places in the Orient today. People might simply sit on a rug or a small cushion on the floor. There were some folding chairs (generally without a back) and tables. Oil lamps, saucers with a flax wick stuck in the oil, provided light at night. In the bedroom or guest room one might simply unfold a bedroll and sleep on the floor. But there were some brick benches on which mattresses could be unrolled; during the day such benches could serve as "sofas." Some rooms had alcoves in which bedrolls were piled. Wood and wicker chests provided storage. Imagine Sarah keeping house in

such an environment before Abraham took her on her first journey to Haran.

(For more on this topic, go to p. 33.)

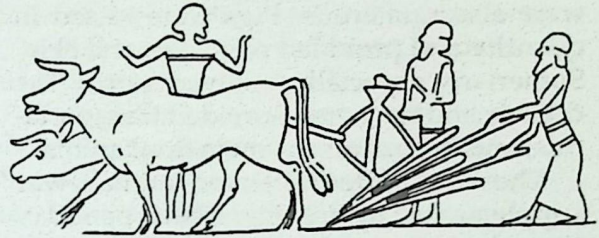
Diet and Foodstuffs

Agriculture

So what did Sarah serve Abraham for dinner while they were still living in Ur? We can make an educated guess from what was produced on farms outside the city, where there lay vast tracts of farmland and small agricultural villages. One could walk down a relatively straight road with fields carefully marked out on both sides by means of fairly accurate surveying techniques. Farmers were using stone or copper hoes and wooden plows drawn by oxen and cultivating barley, wheat, and vegetables. Sheep and cattle grazed here and there and groves of date palms and fruit trees studded the landscape.

Here and there irrigation canals appeared. At first irrigation canals were simple ditches and levees were simple dikes. And some parts of the system were always that. But by Abraham's day, when kings ruled city-states, they dug and regularly dredged canals that provided both for irrigation and transport. So produce could be shipped to the town markets on these canals from one part of the state to another. Boats with sails could be seen plying the canals of the irrigation system.

Though fairly primitive tools and back-breaking toil pervaded the atmosphere, there was one invention that made the Sumerian agricultural program look quite modern: the seeder or machine planter. The way this machine worked is clearly illustrated in the accompanying illustration from about 1500 B.C. A yoke of oxen draw a seeder, with their driver beside them. Behind the seeder follows a farmer holding it by two handles. The pointed instrument makes a shallow trench in the soil. Rising from the frame of the seeder is a tube, on the top of which is a funnel. A third man walks beside the seeder and drops grain into this funnel with one hand, while holding a sack of grain over his shoulder with the other. The grain



A plow with a seeder attachment, from a Kassite seal, second millennium B.C. A man drives the team of oxen while a farmer holds the plow and opens a furrow. An attendant drops seed into the funnel, through which it drops into the ground.

drops through the tube and falls into the trench made by the seeder.⁸ Seeders are known in ancient Mesopotamia before 2500 B.C. and were still in use after 1500 B.C.⁹ The only known parallel to this apparatus comes from the Far East.¹⁰

Bible students generally think of the sower scattering seed by hand in Bible times (e.g., Matthew 13), and moderns credit Jethro Tull with invention of the seed drill in 1701 in England, but Mesopotamians in Abraham's day had roughly the equivalent of Tull's ingenious machine.

Sumerian Diet

The diet of the Sumerians during the period when Abraham lived in Ur was quite varied. Cereals included barley—the most important—wheat, millet, and emmer (a variety of wheat). Among the vegetables grown were chick-peas, lentils and vetches (vegetables of the family of legumes—beans, peas), onions, garlic, lettuce, turnips, leeks (along with onions, a garden herb of the lily family), mustard, cabbage, radishes, and a variety of cucumbers. A large number of herbs and spices was produced as well. Mustard, cumin, and coriander, along with salt, provided flavoring for food. The most important fruits were the apple, pomegranate, and fig. The main sweetener was the date palm, from the sap of which a substance known as *lal* or honey was extracted.

Animal husbandry was also basic to the food supply and the economy. Bulls, cows, and calves were important for their meat and skin. Numerous varieties of sheep (that

cannot as yet be related to modern strains) provided meat and wool. Goats and kids were also numerous. Pigs were raised in quantity and provided meat, fat, and skin. Sumerians especially enjoyed pork. The donkey and the horse provided transportation, and the ox was the main draft animal.

The meat of domesticated animals was supplemented by hunting. At that period of time there were still plenty of deer, wild boars and gazelles in the countryside, as well as a great variety of birds. Though the varieties of fish had declined in number by the Ur III period, fishermen still caught a dozen varieties by nets, traps, and fishing lines.

(For more on this topic, go to p. 35.)

Dress

The people of Sumer in Abraham's day wore woolen clothes, which would seem to be terribly uncomfortable in the high temperatures of the region. The coarse weave of the fabric, however, probably made the experience tolerable. Moreover, garments were loose-fitting, so air could circulate around the body.

Women wore a shawl-like garment draped over one shoulder, usually the left, with the other shoulder exposed. It extended from the neck to well below the knees and sometimes to the ankles. Almost always they wore their hair long and woven into a pigtail, which they then wound around their heads.

Men frequently wore a flounced skirt or kilt and sometimes a felt cloak draped around the upper body. Alternatively, they chose a long "chiton" or shirt extending to the knees and carried a big shawl with fringed edges, draped over the left shoulder and under the right one. Normally they were bearded and wore their hair long and parted in the middle, though some were clean shaven (using copper razors). Fortunately abundant pictorial representations, supplemented by written materials of the period, enable us to know how these people dressed.

No doubt Abraham's family dressed in the style of the period.

(For more on this topic, go to p. 36.)

Beer, the Most Popular Beverage

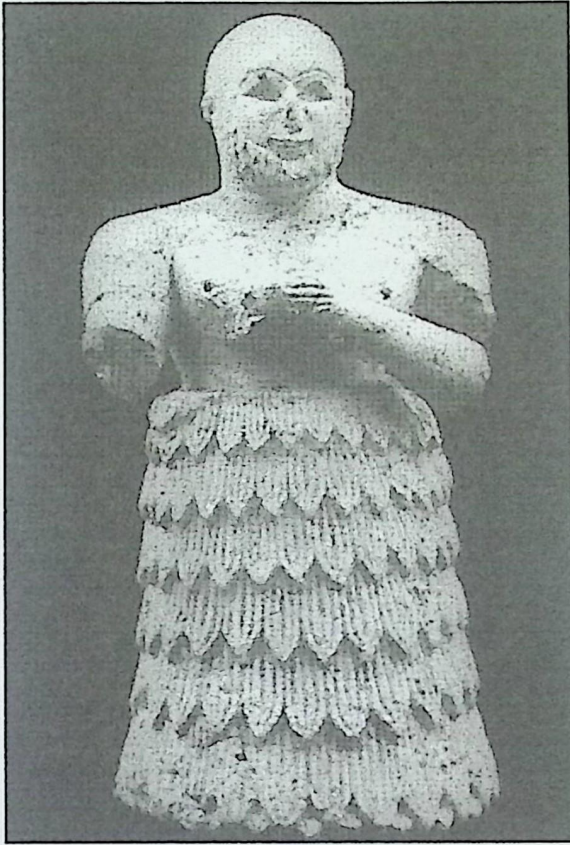
The most popular beverage was beer, made from barley. To brew it, the barley was soaked until it germinated and sprouted. Then it was spread out to dry. Next the malted grain was crushed and flavored with herbs or spices or dates and either eaten or made into cakes (beer-bread) for storage or transport. Then the beer-bread and hulled grain were mixed together and warmed in a slow oven, and the mash was spread on a large mat to cool. The next step involved addition of a sugary substance to aid fermentation and dumping of the mash with water into the brewing vat. This had a perforated base with a filter, through which the beer dripped into another vessel below.

Although we cannot be sure of the alcoholic content of the beer, we know from the contemporary drinking songs that it "makes the liver happy" and "rejoices the heart."

Family Life

We do not have as much information as we would like on family life during the golden age of Ur, so we do not know if Abraham's family was typical of that period. Certainly it was greatly affected by the virtual "state socialism" of the period. Temple and palace supervised the population and made heavy demands upon it—there was little time for rest or recreation. Only some of the upper class boys went to school. Of the other classes, most went to work on the farm or in one of the shops in town as soon as they were able.

Some of the poorest people were forced to hire out their children and sometimes their wives as servants until they were free of debt. There were few slaves, which were normally taken as prisoners of war. Interestingly, the large state factories with their thousands of workers, referred to earlier, employed a large percentage of



A Sumerian priest with a flounced skirt
(Pergamon Museum, Berlin)

women.¹¹ This means that large numbers of women were out of the house and unable to shoulder their household tasks.

Marriage was as much a link between families as between individuals. Families negotiated marriages for their children. Betrothal or the engagement was a contract normally entered into by the fathers of the prospective bride and groom. During the Ur III period this involved a legal oath taken in the name of the king and commonly included a feast. Either at this point or later the bride and groom evidently exchanged words a little like modern wedding vows. They said to each other words approximating, "You are my wife and I am your husband," and vice versa.

Betrothal was reinforced by gifts from the groom's side and a dowry provided by the bride's side. Later there was the physical move of the girl to the father-in-law's house. The marriage might be consummated at that time with co-habitation, but there are cases where the bride moved in with the future in-laws before she was old enough for mar-

riage. A father was supposed to provide each daughter with a dowry; and if he had not done so before his death, his sons were expected to set aside sufficient funds from his estate to meet this need.

Though Scripture does not say anything about the marriage of Abraham and Sarai (Sarah), it must have included all the elements we have just identified.

The special purpose of marriage was to secure sons to perpetuate the male line. In the event that the wife was barren, she could supply a slave girl to her husband to be a substitute for her and bear her children. This action is clearly reflected in Genesis 16:1-4, where barren Sarai gives a slave girl (Hagar) to Abraham to bear him a son. Interestingly, this practice seems to have been common in Mesopotamia, and it is provided for specifically in the later Code of Hammurabi (see sidebar on following page). Polygamy seems to have been uncommon during the Ur III period; but as noted, a wife might provide a concubine for her husband if she were barren. And sometimes he himself owned slave girls.

Slaves were procured by war, plunder, purchase from abroad, reduction to debt slavery, or birth in the household to slave parents. They were not numerous in most households during this period, and probate accounts normally mentioned only a couple per family. Release of slaves was common and the process is described in the laws of the period.

There are numerous texts from the Ur III period dealing with the division of estates after the death of the head of the family. Usually the eldest son received an extra portion of the estate and this commonly involved receiving the family house. The latter was probably granted in part because the family burial plot was normally under the shrine in the house (of the upper classes at least), and it was the son's responsibility to care for it and to make offerings to the family gods.¹²

Education

If you have thought of Abraham as a farmer who lived in a tent, you know by now that he quite probably started life as

an upper class family member in a reasonably spacious permanent home in town. That also means that he could well have received a good education, for education seems to have been fairly widespread at Ur during the Third Dynasty. A substantial percentage of the upper class boys went to school. The social positions of fathers of hundreds of the students are known and include governors, ambassadors, temple administrators, accountants, tax officials, and others. Students paid tuition and presumably the teachers' salary came from that source. Originally the goal of these schools was to train scribes for temple and palace and later to meet business needs. The curriculum included botanical, zoological, mineralogical, geographical and theological texts, along with Sumerian grammar and mathematics. Students were able to extract square and cube roots and to do exercises in practical geometry.¹³

The head of the Sumerian school was the professor or "school father," and the pupil was called the "school son." There was an assistant professor known as "big brother," who wrote new tablets for the pupils to copy. These included mathematical tables, mathematical problems, grammar exercises, lists of names of trees, animals, stones and minerals, villages, and cities. Then there were literary compositions, proverbs, fables and essays, to name a few. He also checked the copies made by the pupils and heard them recite. In addition, there was a man in charge of Sumerian, one in charge of drawing, and one in charge of the whip. Discipline was stern. In some instances there may have been as many as 25-30 in a classroom. Probably the number was more commonly about 15, but we don't know much about class size.

Large numbers of the tablets of Sumerian schoolboys, ranging from beginners' first attempts to copies of advanced students have been recovered from the excavations. So we know what the pupils studied and the level of their proficiency, but the "lectures" of the professors are forever lost to us. Thus we shall never know about the philosophy of education or pedagogical methods.

A Son for Abraham

"Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. . . . So Sarai said to Abram. . . . Please, go in to my maid; perhaps I shall obtain children by her."

(Genesis 16:1-2 NKJV)

Paralleling this event are laws 145 and 146 from the Code of Hammurabi: "If a man takes a [wife] and she does not present him with children and he sets his face to take a concubine, that man may take a concubine and bring her into his house. . . . If a man takes a [wife] and she gives to her husband a maidservant and she bears children, and afterward that maidservant would take rank with her mistress; because she has borne children her mistress may not sell her for money, but she may reduce her to bondage and count her among the female slaves." See development of the parallel later in Genesis 16 and in chapter 21. Abraham and Sarah were definitely children of their culture.

In the schools the boys apparently sat on brick benches and studied for many years. We know nothing about summer vacations.

(For more on this topic, go to p. 38.)

Work, Travel, and Commerce

As we walk the streets of Ur, some doors open into houses of business. There we see piles of clay tablets that prove to be bills of lading, invoices, letters of credit, court cases, and tax records. Over in the corner an accountant is engaging in double-entry bookkeeping.¹⁴ That is, accountants did not simply make lists of sales or expenditures, but tried to balance inflow against outflow, to demonstrate profit and loss. As noted, Ur was a great commercial and industrial center with north and west harbors. And business houses of the city had their agents working all over the Euphrates and Tigris valleys to the north and along the Persian Gulf to the south.

Education Not for Women

While occasionally women did learn to read and write, they must have received private tutoring. There is no indication from existing materials (e.g., school essays, lists of names of students, and the like) that they played any role in the schools alongside "school sons," who alone are mentioned.¹⁵

Also, as noted, there were great state factories, as well as temple factories. The state maintained a network of roads to facilitate administrative and military control and the safe movement of raw materials into and manufactured goods out of the state industrial centers. The volume of agricultural production, industry, trade and administrative activity certainly indicates a high level of prosperity. Chief exports included textiles and wool, leather, sesame oil and barley, and numerous items manufactured from copper and silver, as well as jewelry. Metals, especially copper from the mineral rich hills of Oman, woods and luxury goods (e.g., fragrances) ranked high among imports.

Travel—Transportation

Travel or transport of goods commonly took place on land. Individual men using a headstrap or in pairs carrying sacks or vessels suspended from poles moved all sorts of goods from place to place. The ass was the pack animal of choice, however. It could carry a load of up to 130 pounds in two half-packs (one on each side), at a rate of about 2.5 m.p.h. for six hours (for a total of 15 miles a day). A mule on the other hand, an ass-horse hybrid, could carry a load of 160 pounds at a rate of 3 to 4 m.p.h., for a total of 20–25 miles a day.¹⁷

Scripture also mentions the use of camels in Abraham's day (Genesis 12:16) and later in Rebekah's day in northern Mesopotamia (Genesis 24:64; cf. Isaac, Genesis 24:10). Critics used to doubt the use of camels so early, especially in Egypt. But Joseph P. Free marshaled considerable evidence for their presence in Egypt and elsewhere in the East. And K. A. Kitchen has collected some of the available information on the domestication

and use of the camel in Mesopotamia and Syria during the patriarchal period.¹⁸ Thus the evidence shows the authenticity of the record concerning Abraham and the patriarchs. But some are unfamiliar with the evidence and critics are still reticent to accept any extensive use of the camel in the Near East before about 1000 B.C.

Water Transport

Bulky and heavy commodities (grain, metals, stones, timber, etc.) were in all places and at all times moved by water. Of course Mesopotamia had the Tigris and Euphrates and their tributaries and an increasing network of canals. Boats on the canals or rivers were often reed or boat rafts and sometimes canoes with upturned ends. They might float downstream with the current or be drawn along canals or rivers by animal or even human power. Commonly they were buoyed by inflated sheepskins with the necks tied with hemp or liquorice fiber. A raft with 200 skins supported five tons; one with 800 skins took a load of some 36 tons.¹⁹ Square sails were used on boats in the Persian Gulf and on some stretches of the rivers or even canals, but we don't know much about the ocean-going vessels of the time. Goods were usually packaged in leather, fabric, or wood. But large pottery jars were produced by the Ur III period.²⁰

Work—Industry

Of course we want to know what sorts of goods were transported across Mesopotamia by land or by water or were sent abroad, as



Camels in a market in Beersheba

A Better Way to Go

A one-humped camel could carry double the load of a mule at a stretch of 20-25 miles, could go ten to fourteen days without water, and move about 3 m.p.h. It could also ford rivers with relative ease.²¹ Two-humped camels had also appeared by Abraham's day.

well as what industry was capable of producing at the time. What might Abraham been involved in before he left Ur? Something has already been said about commodities traded, but now we look in a little more detail at goods produced for domestic or foreign consumption.

Agriculture

Agriculture fed the population, provided surpluses for internal exchange and long distance commerce. It was basic to the ancient Mesopotamian economy. But we now know that the commonly-held view that ancient Sumer had a temple-state economy is wrong. That is, temples did not own all the land that was worked for the god of the city-state. Rather, while temples owned large tracts of land, so did the king and the nobility. And large numbers of ordinary citizens also owned and worked small tracts of land for themselves.²²

Below them in the social stratification substantial numbers of farmers worked as "sharecroppers," giving a share of the crop for the use of the land. Slaves stood at the bottom of the social scale. Some of these were prisoners taken in war with a nearby city-state or a foreign power; others were individuals reduced to slavery for a crime committed or an unpaid debt. In the latter case, they remained in servitude only until the debt was paid.

Probably the small, private farms were engaged in subsistence agriculture. Surplus in quantity seems to have come from the large farms of temple and nobility. Wheat, barley, figs, dates, wool, and leather were the common exports provided by the farms of Sumer.

Brickmaking

Brickmaking was something that almost all farmers did when they needed a few bricks for construction. But there were men in the building trades who produced them in quantity. The preferred period for brickmaking was May-June, when after the spring rains there was water for manufacture and the summer ahead for drying. July-August was then especially a time of building. But as a matter of fact, bricks might be made any time of the year. Chopped straw or dung was commonly used as a bonding material. The bricks were made in wooden molds, open at the top and bottom, so the brickmaker could simply fill his mold, lift it, and put it down again and repeat the process. Often, as in Egypt, brickmaking took place alongside a cultivated field next to a canal or river, because there plenty of water was available.

How many bricks one made in a day is hard to estimate. But one archaeologist reported that his brickmaker could produce 3,000 a day.²³ Such a person was not ordinary, however. He was trying to make and maintain a record, and he was reasonably well-fed and well-paid. Certainly ancient workers did not often work at top speed.

Kiln-fired bricks were very expensive because fuel was costly and they were therefore not often used in public or private construction. Thresholds, door sockets, and courtyards especially required baked brick. We do not know much about the ovens used for baking bricks.

A liquid form of the same mixture used for brickmaking served for mortar and wall plaster. Decoration often consisted of colored clay cones pressed into wet plaster in such a way as to form geometric patterns. Painted plaster was more common in both public buildings and residences than is often thought. It is hard to know much about this subject because most of the wall plaster has crumbled away. In ziggurats open channels were regularly left in the core, where layers of sundried brick alternated with layers of reeds to create a ventilation system and prevent trapped humidity from destroying the structure.

Bricks of Various Sizes

The size of bricks also varied. Measurements taken in one excavation recorded bricks about 12" x 7" x 3", at another 15" x 7" x 3", at yet another about 8" x 3" x 2" and at a fourth, 23" x 10" x 3". Bricks that we use in building today commonly measure about 8" x 4" x 2".

Woodworking

Because Sumer was an area essentially without forests, it may seem strange to discuss woodworking here. Yet there were many employed in that activity during the Ur III period. Though construction was essentially in brick, wood was used for interior finishing of temples, palaces, homes of the wealthy, and even those of moderate means. Good timber (oak, pine, and other woods) was imported from the Zagros mountain areas to the east and the mountains and hills of the north. But trees were grown locally in the south. In fact, during Ur III there was planned and organized exploitation of the riverine thickets of what is now southern Iraq.²⁴ And trees regarded as foreign were successfully cultivated in groves.

Especially to be found in the south were palm, poplar, tamarisk, willow, and some fir. Palm was used for supports and roof beams; poplar for structural and roofing purposes, some furniture, and the production of charcoal; tamarisk and willow for roof structures; fir for general construction and especially for boats. In a timber and fuel starved area, nothing was wasted. Branches, foliage, and grasses were collected for roof construction (when mixed with clay) and for fuel.

Workers were engaged in felling trees, turning them into timber and simple tools, and collecting branches and foliage. They prepared logs, roof beams, pegs, rungs, posts, planks, hoes, sickle handles, plowshares, furniture, and more. Each kind of activity presented its own special challenge, with skills to be learned. Generally boys learned from their fathers, and younger workers from the more experienced—on the job.

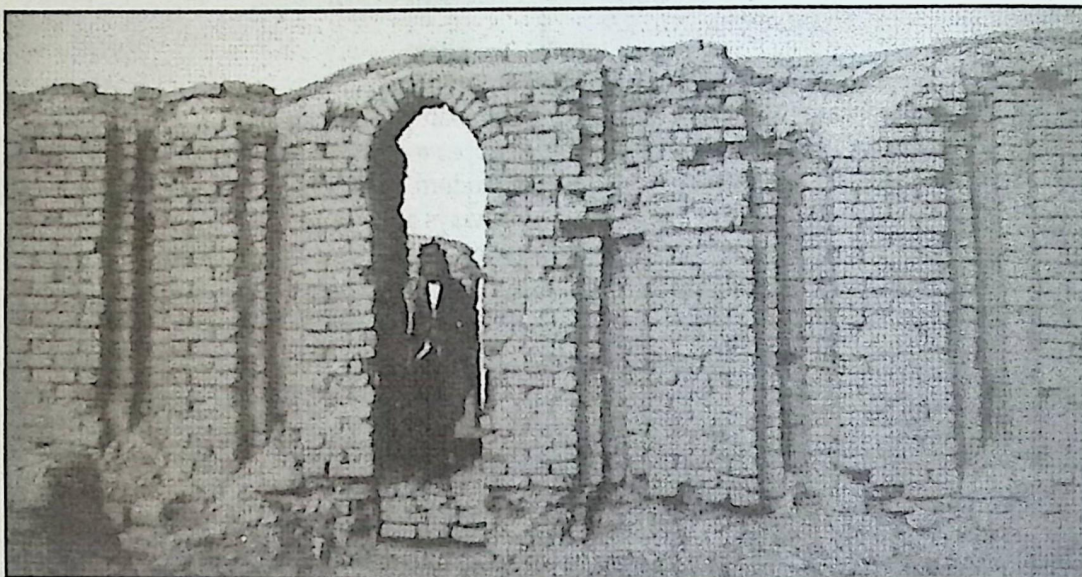
Metalworking

There were no gold deposits in Mesopotamia. Any gold circulating there probably came from western Iran and the upper reaches of the Tigris and Euphrates in modern Turkey. In its native state, gold was always alloyed with silver in what is called electrum—a mixture of gold and silver, containing anywhere from twenty to fifty percent silver. Whatever gold and silver Abraham possessed (Genesis 13:2 and 24:35) must have been obtained through commerce.

Because gold and silver were constantly recycled and constantly plundered when cities were sacked in warfare or when later political administrations took over, we do not have the number of examples of workmanship that we desire. Commonly what we do have comes from tombs, where it was buried with royalty or persons of high position. It was especially used in gold jewelry as beads, pendants, gold bands, hairpins, earrings, and gold foil for sewing on clothing. Gold objects from Ur I graves (c. 2500 B.C.) included a ceremonial helmet, daggers and vases in gold. No goldsmith's workplace has yet been discovered in Mesopotamia. Cast gold was confined to objects in royal or temple service or to small pieces of jewelry, which Abraham and Sarah may have used.

Silver was commonly found combined with gold in electrum or present in lead ores. The source of Mesopotamian silver was primarily the lead ore of Iran or Turkey, or perhaps the Indus Valley. It was used principally for bowls or dishes, for personal adornment, for plating wood, for small statues (especially of the gods), and for currency (passing by weight). Abraham paid four hundred shekels of silver for a burial cave for Sarah (see Genesis 23:15–16). Because silver was so soft, it was usually alloyed with copper to make commodities comparable to modern sterling silver.

Copper was the most widely used of metals during the third–second millennia B.C., and especially the Ur III period. The source of supply for Sumer at the time under discussion here (about 2000 B.C.) seems to have been almost exclusively Oman, at the southeast tip of the Arabian Peninsula. In the ancient Near East copper ores, the oxides,



The so-called "Treasury" of Ur was probably the Hall of Justice. The use of brick, the buttress and recess style of architecture in the facade, and the arch as a weight-carrying device are all evident here.

appeared in weathered surfaces and were identified by their greens, blues, and bluish-green outcroppings. Thus copper was relatively easy to extract; it did not have to be dug from deep in the earth.

Tin does not seem to have been naturally combined with copper in the Near East (to make bronze), nor was tin readily available there. Therefore it was necessary to bring in tin and to deliberately combine it with copper. Early on it was used as a solder for silver or copper. Where tin came from is a question not easily answered. It appears that some was found in Turkey. Some came by land through Iran, or by sea up the Gulf, most likely from Afghanistan.²⁵

Copper was partially smelted on location and then circulated as ingots (in various forms), to be finished off by local smiths. Some rings of copper, earlier identified as rings, bracelets, or armbands, are now thought to be ingots. Copper/bronze was used for metal vessels, chisels, razors, platters and spoons, spearheads, daggers or short swords, ax heads, and a variety of small tools, including agricultural tools (sickles, hoes, adzes).

of manufacture in progress are quite rare. Moreover, few pottery making installations have been discovered. Manufacture seems to have taken place in rural areas where raw materials and water were available and where kiln firing did not create a social nuisance. By the Ur III period it appears that palace and temple organized and controlled most pottery making.²⁶ Pottery was made on a potter's wheel or molded by hand and was generally undecorated or unpainted. Glazes were not applied to pottery until centuries after Abraham's day. And the accompanying craft of producing glass vessels did not come until about the middle of the second millennium B.C.²⁷ though a few glass beads were made as early as Abraham's day or before.²⁸ Until very recently archaeologists were interested almost exclusively in the finished products of ancient Mesopotamian pottery works and the dating of them, rather than in production processes. Therefore our knowledge of manufacture is extremely limited.

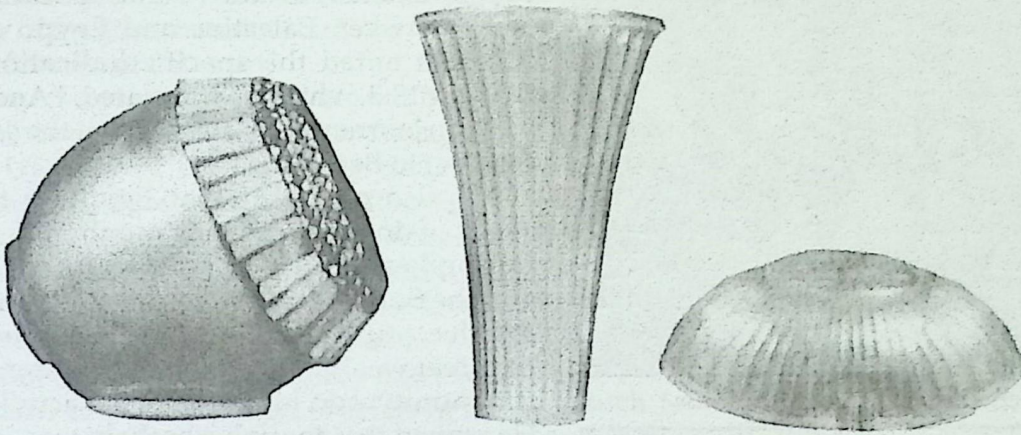
(For more on this topic, go to p. 42.)

Pottery making

Ancient contemporary comments on Mesopotamian pottery making and pictures

Who Was Abraham?

Who was Abraham? How did he fit into the commerce and industry of Ur? Or did he? I have taken the position in this chapter that



Gold bowls from Ur, dating from about 2500 B.C.

Abraham knew Ur during its golden age, the Ur III period. And we have looked at what life was like then. The city was powerful, wealthy, and sophisticated, an urban center surrounded by sedentary farmers. It was not a place where nomadic chieftains and their followers wandered about, living in tents. Certainly, too, Abraham was not an ignorant Arab sheik living in a migratory state and for whom it meant nothing to move from Ur to Haran and then on to Palestine. But then who or what was he? Several scholars, not known for an evangelical persuasion, have wrestled with this question.

Cyrus Gordon's View

Cyrus Gordon, formerly of Brandeis University, advanced the view that Abraham was not merely a powerful patriarch but a merchant prince. He came to this conclusion on the basis of his interpretation of certain textual materials discovered at Ras Shamra in Syria. He put the patriarchs in the context of the middle of the second millennium B.C. and believed that Abraham was part of the merchant movement referred to in the literature of Ras Shamra. Briefly put, Gordon became intrigued with complaints of the king of Ras Shamra to the Hittite king about activities at Ras Shamra of Hittite merchants from Ura (in Hittite territory). He identified this northern Ura as the biblical Ur and thought Abraham may have been part of the merchant group there.

He noted several biblical references that indicate that the patriarchs were merchants. First, Joseph told his brothers that if they

could prove their honest intentions, they would be permitted to trade in the land (Genesis 42:34). Second, the Shechemites gave permission to Jacob's household to "dwell and trade" and "acquire real estate" in their territory (Genesis 34:10). Third, in Genesis 23 Abraham was permitted to buy land from Ephron the Hittite for 400 shekels of silver—called "current money with the merchant" (v. 16 KJV). Moreover, besides this reference, Genesis 13:2 and 24:35 mention that Abraham was rich in gold and silver.²⁹

Gordon concluded that "the patriarchal narratives, far from reflecting Bedouin life, are highly international in their milieu, in a setting where a world order enabled men to travel far and wide for business enterprise. . . . Abraham comes from beyond the Euphrates, plies his trade in Canaan, visits Egypt, deals with Hittites, makes treaties with Philistines, forms military alliances with Amorites, fights kinglets from as far off as Elam, marries the Egyptian Hagar, etc."³⁰

While the Bible student may not be prepared to accept the idea that Abraham was part of the merchant movement described in the literature of Ras Shamra, or that Abraham lived so late, he will at least agree that Gordon has portrayed Abraham to be much more than the Bedouin nomad scholars a generation ago thought him to be.

William F. Albright's Thesis

Taking a very different approach from that of Gordon, William F. Albright, formerly professor at Johns Hopkins University, came



A contemporary desert caravan

to a similar conclusion about Abraham. Albright preferred to place Abraham in the twentieth or nineteenth century B.C. instead of the middle of the second millennium and therefore did not connect him with any Ras Shamra developments, as Gordon had. Albright pointed to the work of Nelson Glueck, Yohanan Aharoni, and Beno Rothenberg, who in the 1950s traced the twentieth-nineteenth century B.C. caravan routes through the Negev and desert of north-central Sinai.

Albright noted the discovery of literally hundreds of currently unoccupied sites along the old caravan route from Suez through the wilderness of north-central Sinai to Kadesh-Barnea and Gerar. Thence the routes made their way to Hebron, Jerusalem, Bethel, Shechem, Damascus, Aleppo, and other Syrian cities, to Mesopotamia and Asia Minor.

Then Albright noted that Abraham came from the great commercial city of Ur and lived in the important commercial center of Haran, which means "caravan city." He spent time on the main trade route in Damascus, Shechem, Bethel, Hebron, Beersheba, and Gerar, and especially between Kadesh and Shur while he was a "foreign resident" in Gerar. It is to be remembered that during the latter period (Genesis 20:1) Abraham had a very large entourage. For the battle recorded in Genesis 14 he had been able to field 318 armed "retainers," who with their families would have constituted a community of at least a thousand.

Albright argued that Abraham could not have survived in this virtually rainless desert unless he had been engaged in the

rather extensive and lucrative caravan trade between Palestine and Egypt. And Albright noted the specific indication of Genesis 13:3, which he translated: "And his caravan journeyed by stages from the south (Negev) to Bethel."

He also observed that Egyptian texts speak of donkey caravans numbering 500, 600, and even 1,000 operating in the Sinai and the Sudan during the twentieth-nineteenth centuries B.C. So Albright pointed to the great wealth of Abraham, his extensive community, and his commercial activities. He argued that though Abraham was semi-nomadic, he was not merely a nomad wandering where he wished in search of pasture and water supply.³¹ He was something of a merchant prince.

David Noel Freedman's Position

Using different data from those of Gordon or Albright, David Noel Freedman of the University of California viewed Abraham as a "warrior-chieftain" and a "merchant prince" who belonged to "urban culture and civilization." Moreover, he believed that if Abraham could not read and write, he probably made use of professional scribes available to the leaders of society in his day to help keep records of business transactions and to prepare communications. In such a way information could have survived for later generations.³²

But who was Abraham?

All of these scholars give new perspectives on Abraham, but they do not yet tell us who Abraham was. Should we classify him as a private merchant or businessman engaged primarily in domestic commerce and possibly going with Terah to Haran, another great commercial center, to pursue business interests? Or was he a civil servant engaged in international trade that seems to have been monopolized by the state?

It is to be remembered that Abraham paid silver "current with the merchant" for the burial place for Sarah at Hebron (Genesis 23:16). The French Assyriologist Roux observes that silver, "used as a standard for exchanges," was "hoarded by high officials and did not circulate unless authorized by the Palace."³³ Did Abraham get his hands

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