



CHAPTER 9

The Book of Abraham in the Ancient World

THE BOOK OF ABRAHAM WAS PRODUCED by Abraham, an ancient, historical person who lived in a particular time and in particular places. The events it narrates took place in a particular historical context. While it teaches eternal truths, it also mentions things that were particular to Abraham's day, since he was, after all, a prophet for his own day.

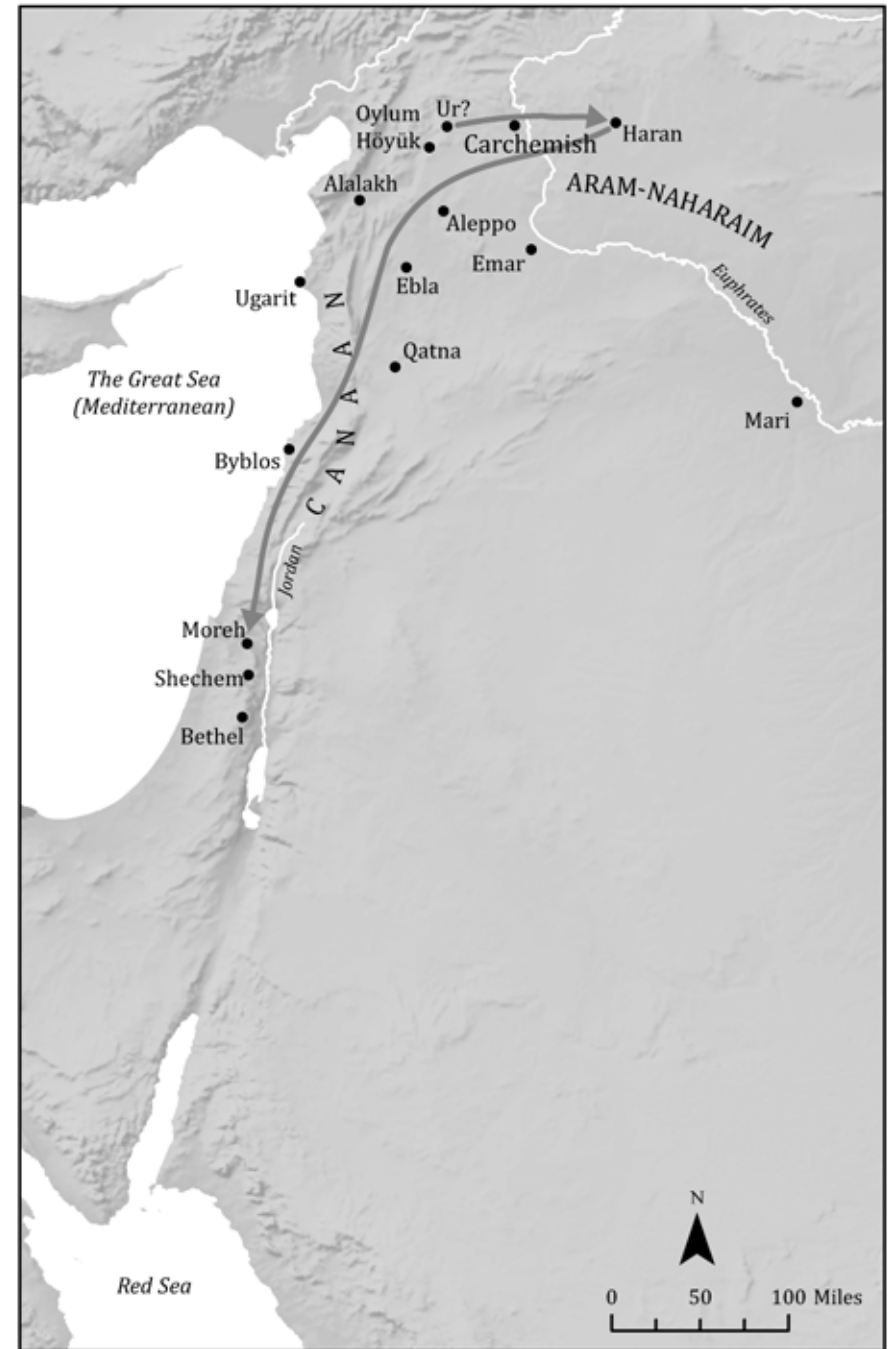
The Book of Abraham begins much like other autobiographies from Abraham's time and place. It begins with a statement indicating that the author wrote it, who he wrote it for, where he lived, that he was a member of his father's household, and what prompted him to leave his residence for another place. Additional details similar to those found in other autobiographies of Abraham's time and place include the emphasis on divine inspiration prompting the departure for a new residence, the promises made to ancestors known from records available to the ancient authors, the practice of worshipping



HEAD OF A SPHINX STATUE OF SESOSTRIS III, PERHAPS THE FIRST PHARAOH TO INVADE THE NORTHERN LEVANT. BY EINSAMER SCHÜTZ (OWN WORK), MUNICH MUSEUM, VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

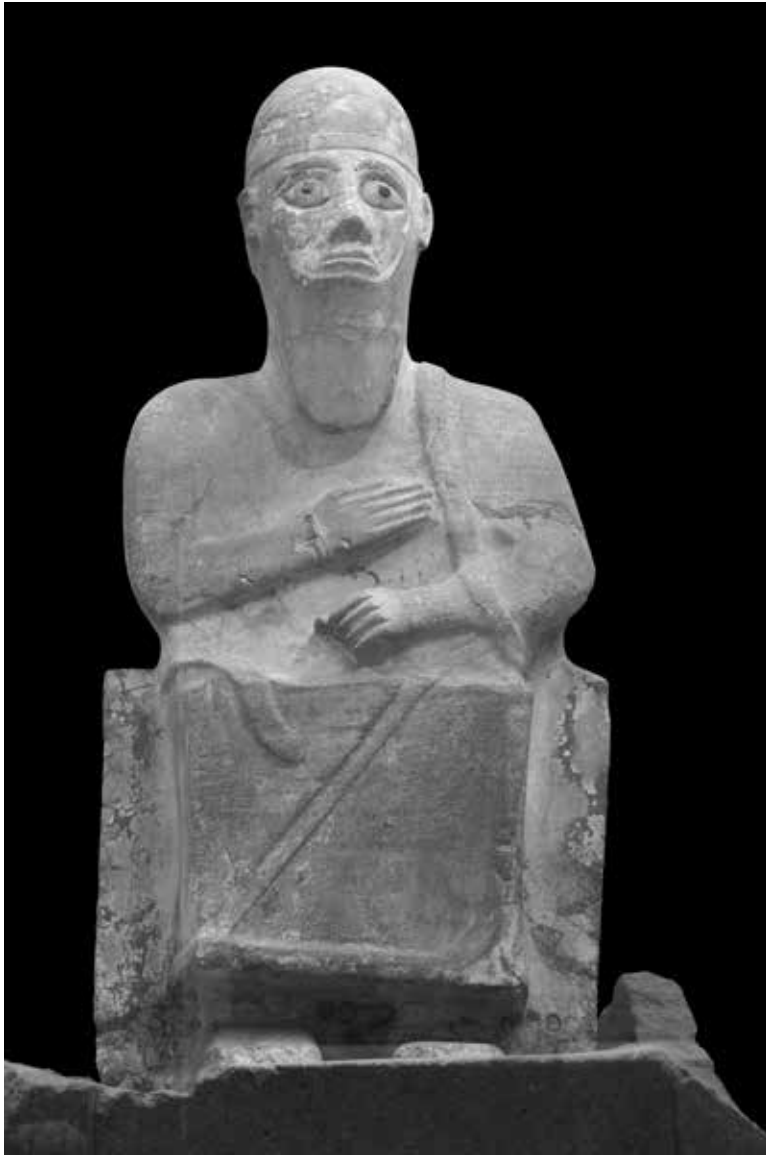
the way their ancestors did, and the practice of making covenants. One difference is that autobiographies of Abraham’s contemporaries discuss worshipping the way their parents did, but Abraham specifies that his father did not worship correctly. As a result, he explains that he worshipped the way that his more distant ancestors did.

Biblical scholars have not agreed on the time and place that Abraham lived, but the Book of Abraham provides additional information that specifies both. In the Bible, Abraham must flee his homeland (*môladâ*) in Ur of the Chaldees (Genesis 12:1). Later he sends his servant back to his homeland (*môladâ*) to find a wife for his son (Genesis 24:4, 7). The servant is sent to Aram-Naharaim in mod-



Roman Huerta, Think Spatial, BYU Geography

ABRAHAM’S EARLY TRAVELS.



The Statue of Idrimi. THE STATUE OF IDRIMI, THE RULER OF ALALAKH, WHICH IS COVERED WITH HIS AUTOBIOGRAPHY. IDRIMI LIVED ABOUT 150 YEARS AFTER ABRAHAM. THE FIRST FOUR PHRASES OF IDRIMI'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY PARALLEL THE FIRST FOUR PHRASES OF THE BOOK OF ABRAHAM. BRITISH MUSEUM, WA 130738, WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

ern-day northern Syria or southern Turkey (Genesis 24:10) and not Mesopotamia as the King James translators rendered it. This location of Aram-Naharaim must have been the location of Abraham's homeland. The Book of Abraham also indicates that Abraham's homeland was in that area. Olishem (Abraham 1:10), one of the places mentioned near Ur, appears in Mesopotamian and Egyptian inscriptions in association with Ebla, which is in northern Syria.

Abraham's homeland was incorporated as part of the Egyptian empire under the Twelfth Dynasty pharaohs Sesostri III and his son, Amenemhet III, but it was then lost to the subsequent pharaohs. This provides an historical date for the events of the first chapter of the Book of Abraham.

At that time Egypt practiced human sacrifice, as historical and archaeological evidence both attest. It was a ritual (Abraham 1:7–11, 15) directed against religious offenders (Abraham 1:5–6) that could take place either in Egypt or in areas Egypt influenced (Abraham 1:1, 10, 20). Three of the four deities mentioned, Elkenah, Libnah, and Korash, are attested for the approximate time and place of Abraham.

Because Abraham's life was in danger, he left his homeland, which was controlled by Egypt, and crossed the Euphrates to Haran, which was outside of Egyptian control (Abraham 1:1, 2:3–4). After the reign of Amenemhet III, he left Haran and went to Canaan, which was then no longer under Egypt's control (Abraham 2:6–18).

When famine set in, the closest steady supply of grain was the land of Egypt, the northern part of which was now under the management of the Fourteenth Dynasty. These pharaohs were "partaker[s] of the blood of the Canaanites by birth" (Abraham 1:21) and bore Canaanite names. Abraham seems to classify all pharaohs as Canaanite, though the Twelfth Dynasty pharaohs whose servants tried to kill him were not. Since Abraham never met the Twelfth

Dynasty pharaohs, he may have assumed that all pharaohs were like the Fourteenth Dynasty ones he did meet.

Although the dynasties in northern Egypt might have changed, pharaonic power and prerogatives had not changed. Abraham was instructed by God to refer to his wife, Sarah, as his sister (Abraham 2:22–25). This takes advantage of an ambiguity in the Egyptian language: the Egyptian word for wife (*hime*) means only *wife*, but the Egyptian word for sister (*son*) means both *sister* and *wife*. Thus, the term that Abraham used was not false, but ambiguous. It was also necessary: since numerous Egyptian texts discuss how pharaohs could take any woman that they fancied and would put the husband to death if the woman was married, this advice saved Abraham's life.

God was willing to save Abraham's life on more than one occasion. Doing so fulfilled part of the covenant that God had made with him.

FURTHER READING

ABRAHAM'S DAY

Gee, John. "Overlooked Evidence for Sesostri III's Foreign Policy." In *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 41 (2004): 23–31. This article examines the Egyptian foreign policy toward the Levant and evidence for contact between the two during the Egyptian Middle Kingdom. It argues that contact with the Levant was not constant through the entire Middle Kingdom and is largely confined to the reigns of Sesostri III and Amenemhet III.

Nibley, Hugh W. *Abraham in Egypt*, 2nd ed. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2000. This is Hugh Nibley's later attempt to place the Book of Abraham in its historical setting. Nibley has a tendency to use myth for history and to flatten the

chronology of sources from a variety of periods to create his historical portrait. Some of his work is important, like his comparison of the Book of Abraham with the Neferhotep inscription, which was the first comparison of the Book of Abraham with an inscription from the time of Abraham.

Nibley, Hugh W. "A New Look at the Pearl of Great Price." In *Improvement Era* 71, nos. 1–73 no. 5 (January 1968–May 1970); reprinted in Hugh W. Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Abraham*. Provo, UT: FARMS, 2009. This is an early attempt to situate the Book of Abraham in Abraham's milieu. Though the scholarship is somewhat dated, Nibley makes a number of important observations.

Peterson, Daniel C. "News from Antiquity." *Ensign* 23, no. 1 (January 1994): 16–21. This article presents an assortment of evidences pertaining to the antiquity of the Book of Abraham.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN ABRAHAM'S DAY

Gee, John. "Abraham and Idrimi." *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22, no. 1 (2013): 34–39. This essay is a comparison of the Book of Abraham with the only other autobiographical inscription to survive from the approximate time and place of Abraham.

THE EGYPTIAN PRACTICE OF TAKING WIVES

Gee, John. "The Cult of Chespsichis." In *Egypt in Transition: Social and Religious Development of Egypt in the First Millennium BCE*, edited by Ladislav Bareš, Filip Coppens, and Květa Smoláriková, 129–45. Prague: Czech Institute of Egyptology, 2010. A number of Egyptian accounts relating to Pharaoh marrying women and killing their husbands are gathered here.

HUMAN SACRIFICE IN EGYPT

Muhlestein, Kerry. *Violence in the Service of Order: The Religious Framework for Sanctioned Killing in Ancient Egypt*. Oxford: Archaeopress, 2011. This is the standard Egyptological study of ritual killing in ancient Egypt, including human sacrifice.

Muhlestein, Kerry, and John Gee. "An Egyptian Context for the Sacrifice of Abraham." In *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 20, no. 2 (2011): 70–77. This study looks at the evidence for human sacrifice in Egypt during the time of Abraham and compares it with the Book of Abraham.

UR OF THE CHALDEES

Engin, Attila. "Oylum Höyük İçin Bir Lokalizasyon Önerisi: Ulisum / Ullis / İllis." In *Armizzi: Engin Özgen'e Armağan*, 129–45. Ankara: Asitan Kitap, 2014. The author of this article, who directs the excavations at the site of Oylum Höyük, discusses why he thinks that his excavation site is ancient Ulisum and why he thinks that it is connected with the Book of Abraham's Olishem.

Gee, John. "Has Olishem been Discovered?" *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22, no. 2 (2013): 104–7. This article examines claims by Turkish archaeologists to have discovered the city of Abraham that may be the Olishem mentioned in the Book of Abraham. Although the initial work is promising, the identification is not yet certain.

Gee, John, and Stephen D. Ricks. "Historical Plausibility: The Book of Abraham as a Case Study." In *Historicity and the Latter-day Saint Scriptures*, edited by Paul Y. Hoskisson, 63–98. Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 2001. This article examines the use of historical plausibility as a method for assessing the historical authenticity of a document using the Book of Abraham as a model. The article lays out a case for situating the Book of Abraham in time (Egyptian

Middle Kingdom) and place (northern Levant) and discusses how small details, like the onomastics (use of names), fit the general time and place for the Book of Abraham.

Hoskisson, Paul Y. "Where Was Ur of the Chaldees?" In *The Pearl of Great Price: Revelations from God*, edited by H. Donl Peterson and Charles D. Tate Jr., 119–36. Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 1989. Hoskisson looks closely at the evidence for the location of Ur of the Chaldees and concludes that the arguments for the placement of Ur of the Chaldees in southern Mesopotamia fall short.

Tvedtnes, John A. "The Location of Abraham's Birthplace and the Original Homeland of the Hebrews." In *Ur of the Chaldeans: Increasing Evidence on the Birthplace of Abraham and the Original Homeland of the Hebrews*. Provo, UT: Society for Early Historic Archaeology, 1985: 8–42. This article argues that Ur of the Chaldees should be placed in the north rather than in the south.