

# Abraham the Man, the Myth, and the Mystery

## (With an Overview of Israel)

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Over half the people in the world claim the biblical Abraham as their covenant patriarch and the founder of their faith. With that kind of validation, it seems strange that few Christians, Muslims, or Jews really know much about Abraham.

Most of the world is acquainted with Abraham from the stories found in Genesis (the first book of the Bible) and through other references scattered throughout the Old Testament. Stories, references, quotations, and other details on Abraham are also contained in the Talmud (Judaic scriptural laws), the New Testament of the Bible, (the primary text of Christianity), the Qur'an (the Holy Scriptures of Islam), and at least 200 other ancient manuscripts that are not part of the modern Bible.<sup>1</sup>

### The Manuscripts

Surprised? Yes, it's true. There are at least 200 very old, nonbiblical manuscripts that discuss the Patriarch Abraham.<sup>2</sup> Some few of these are written in the first person. The vast majority of these texts are new to the Western world, and most are not a part of any particular Faith's traditional scriptures. The exception in the Western Hemisphere is the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, ("the Mormons"), which are fortunate to have a short book entitled "The Book of Abraham."<sup>3</sup> This thoroughly engaging work comes from ancient Egyptian papyrus and provides insight on Abraham that is not included in the Bible. It is a remarkable work and a miracle that it exists.

This paper is not designed as a commentary on the biblical Abraham, his experiences, accomplishments, and covenants. Rather, it is intended to provide new information from ancient sources that are *NOT* found in the Bible. If the reader is unfamiliar with the biblical Abraham, the majority of this information is contained in Genesis 11:24 through Genesis 23.

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<sup>1</sup> There are also large numbers of modern commentaries on Abraham.

<sup>2</sup> Hugh Nibley infers there are many more ancient manuscripts when he writes specifically about Abrahamic traditions, "...why do *thousands* of texts from many lands and many centuries, instead of bursting with infinite variety of invention and imagination, persist in nothing more than telling the same stories over and over again?"

<sup>3</sup> In 1835 members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints purchased several Egyptian mummies and discovered within a sarcophagus, ancient writings on papyrus from which the Book of Abraham resulted. The original papyrus was thought to have been destroyed in the great fire of Chicago in 1871, but in 1967 eleven fragments of original papyri were re-discovered in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City interleaved between the pages of large old books after having been glued to backing pages. These scraps of papyri are the earliest example of ancient Egyptian religious writings known as the Book of Breathing. A year following the discovery, the museum gifted the remaining fragments to Brigham Young University, where they reside today for all to see.

At present there are at least 119 of the 200 aforementioned manuscripts that are now available in English. The translation of these texts have come to us via Egyptian Coptic,<sup>4</sup> Demotic,<sup>5</sup> Greek, Latin, Old Slavonic,<sup>6</sup> Persian, Ge'ez,<sup>7</sup> Syriac,<sup>8</sup> Arabic, Hebrew, Old Turkish, and others. This count of early singular manuscripts does not include books contained in the Bible, the Quran, the Dead Sea Scrolls,<sup>9</sup> the Nag Hammadi transcripts,<sup>10</sup> or the Book of Mormon, all of which include Abrahamic information.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Coptic was the written text of Egypt after its conquest by Alexander the Great in 332 BC. Coptic was the Egyptian language written in the Greek alphabet. Coptic flourished for about eight hundred years and is now considered a dead language although there are some scholars of the Christian Coptic church that have endeavored to re-establish its use in church ceremony.

<sup>5</sup> Demotic was the written language of the common scholar of Egypt prior to the introduction of Coptic.

<sup>6</sup> In an earlier age, Old Slavonic was the common language of the Slavic tribes. Some refer to it as the Old Bulgarian language. The Apostles of the Slavs introduced old Slavonic into the Byzantine liturgy. Initially Old Slavonic was written with the Glagolitic alphabet but later it was replaced by the Cyrillic alphabet. Only in Croatia is the local variant of Glagolitic alphabet preserved.

<sup>7</sup> Ge'ez is the precursor of Ethiopia's three major Semitic languages. South Arabian immigrants carried the Sabeian language to Ethiopia sometime early in the first millennium BC. Ge'ez took 24 symbols from the Sabeian writing system and applied it to the indigenous Ethiopian tongue.

<sup>8</sup> The ancient written script for the extensive literature of the Christian church throughout Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq

<sup>9</sup> In the spring of 1947 shepherds searching for a stray goat in the Judean Desert along the northwestern end of the Dead Sea, came upon a long-untouched cave and found jars filled with ancient manuscripts. The term "Dead Sea Scrolls" became the standard designation for the documents found in this area whether complete or in fragmentary form. The initial discovery yielded only seven scrolls but it launched a search that lasts until the present day. Further discoveries produced thousands of scroll fragments from fourteen caves and 825 to 870 separate scrolls.

The Dead Sea manuscripts contain previously unknown stories about biblical figures such as Enoch, Abraham, and Noah. The story of Abraham includes an explanation as to why God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. Never before seen psalms attributed to King David and Joshua have been found and prophecies by Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and Daniel not included in the Bible are written here. Every book of the Old Testament except Esther, plus many other books treated with equal reverence, combine to comprise this incredible ancient library.

The Dead Sea Scrolls are older than any other surviving manuscripts of the Hebrew Scriptures by almost one thousand years. About two thousand years elapsed between the time the scrolls were deposited in the caves of the inhospitable hills surrounding the Dead Sea and their discovery. The fact that they survived for twenty centuries, that they were found accidentally by Bedouin shepherds, that they are the largest and oldest body of manuscripts relating to the Bible, make them a truly remarkable archaeological find.

<sup>10</sup> In December of 1945, near the town of Nag Hammadi on the upper Nile valley, an Arab peasant digging in search of fertilizer on the east bluff discovered a large red urn. Smashing the jar open with his pick he discovered a thousand pages of ancient papyrus manuscripts bound into thirteen soft leather books. The texts were translations from Greek originals into Egyptian Coptic. The entire library had been carefully sealed in a large jar and hidden among the rocks, where it remained undetected for almost 1600 years. These papyri are now preserved in the library of the Coptic Museum at Old Cairo. Thirty years after their discovery they were to translate into English at Claremont College in California and are now known as The Nag Hammadi Library, sometimes referred to as the "Gnostic Gospels."

<sup>11</sup> By the author's count there are currently 119 English translations of old manuscripts dealing with the Patriarch Abraham IN ADDITION to standard Biblical texts and other commentaries found in such monumental discoveries as the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Nag Hammadi transcripts and the Book of Mormon.

## The Patriarchs

When one stops and reflects for a moment, it is simply incredible that all of Christendom, Islam, and Judaism, claim Abraham as their covenant ancestor.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps almost as curious is that many Israelis, Arabs, Palestinians, and large numbers of Muslims, believe they are directly descended from Abraham, which amazingly may be the case.<sup>13</sup> More astonishing yet, it is primarily the direct Abrahamic descendants that represent the volatile center of Middle Eastern strife. The conflict between Muslim, Jew, and Christian-Gentile, is an old one. At its core it begins as something akin to a family feud.

Most of us have some familiarity with the biblical patriarchs. They begin with Adam and progress on to Noah. The genealogies appear in both biblical and nonbiblical texts, with only slight variations. At the time of Noah, a devastating flood era commonly appears in the lore of the earliest cultures. Flood mythologies, each with their own Noah-like hero, span the globe and are as diverse as Sumer-Babylon, Egypt, and the lands of the Maya. In both biblical and nonbiblical records, the great hero-patriarchs are set forth as descending from Noah through Shem to Enoch, and on to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

The three early heroes that stand out from the biblical milieu are Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Many will know that Jacob was the son of Isaac, who was the son of Abraham, in other words these three great spiritual leaders of the Bible were family: grandfather, father, and son. Curiously, these names, or their translated equivalent, are also widely known in the ancient world and they continue to crop up in old documents from geographic areas previously thought to have had absolutely no contact with one another.<sup>14</sup>

One might reasonably ask, if Abraham is so important, why is he not better known? The answer is complex and probably has more to do with power, politics, and institutional integrity, but rather than wax philosophical on this point we shall narrow our focus on

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The Nag Hammadi discovery is the source of the Gnostic Gospels, which have received much media attention since the publication of Dan Brown's novel "The Da Vinci Code."

<sup>12</sup> The United Nations reports the world population at six billion. Christianity claims 2.2 billion adherents, Islam 1.4 billion, world Judaism 17 million.

<sup>13</sup> DNA studies have confirmed that both Jews and Palestinians are descended from a common father of not more than a few thousand years of age. A 2005 Times-Discovery Channel program on DNA research demonstrates that all of modern humankind has descended from a single male parent that lived on the earth less than 60,000 years ago. These groundbreaking studies go on to point out that despite common teaching to the contrary, that recent DNA studies conclusively demonstrate that no human has descended from any prehistoric species.

<sup>14</sup> A record written by Mayan nobles known as the "Title of the Lords of Totonicapan" contains these words: "The wise men...and leaders of three great peoples...extending their sight over...the world...came from where the sun rises. Together these tribes came from the other part of the sea, from the East... These, then, were the three nations of Quiches, and they came from where the sun rises, descendants of Israel, of the same language and same customs as Israel. .... When they left.... the great Father (God) gave them a present called Giron-Gagal (sacred director or compass) .... When they arrived at the edge of the sea Balam-Quitze (the name of their prophet-leader) touched it, (the sacred director) and at once a passage opened.... for thus the great God wished it to be done, because they were the sons of *Abraham and Jacob.*"

the insights to be gained from the host of ancient manuscripts now available in English.<sup>15</sup>

Some of the extra-biblical manuscripts now available were written prior to the amalgamation of prophetic and religious writings compiled in 325 AD (the Common Era) for Emperor Constantine, the dictator of Rome. The reproduction of this compilation of ancient manuscripts, with some changes over the years, is today universally known as the Bible.<sup>16</sup> It is from the Bible that we first learn of Abraham.

### **When**

The best dates available tend to project Abraham onto the world scene just about four thousand years ago. His is a bold story, and one, as we shall see, that has taken on both legendary and mythological characteristics. Abraham's life and saga are summarized in twelve chapters of Genesis and even though more biblical space is allocated to Abraham's narrative than anyone that came before him, the Bible simply does not tell us enough about this great hero-patriarch.

Research has revealed that the pre-Christian world was undeniably familiar with the Abraham motif and that many different cultures retained stories about his life. This is probably due to annual dramas that were commonly designed to celebrate important historical events in order to keep them in the minds of the people. Based on the wealth of information now available, it appears that only some of Abraham's activities made their way into Genesis, the first book of Moses, the first book of the Bible.

Why doesn't the Bible have it all? The traditional view is that Moses lived around six hundred years after Abraham, and that he was personally responsible for condensing records gathered from previous times in order to create the backdrop against which the exodus of the "Children of Israel" from Egypt would be understood.<sup>17</sup> Assuming this is correct, it is perfectly logical why many details of Abraham's life might not be included in the Bible.

At least three Abrahamic stories presented in the Bible are confusing to our western cultural viewpoint. These same stories take on new meaning when examined in their genuine historical setting. Thus, the legendary tales of Abraham emerge from the mist of folklore and pastoral mythology and become real stories about real people in real

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<sup>15</sup> The most significant English resource for the vast majority of Abrahamic texts comes from a compilation prepared by John A Tvedtnes, Brian M Hauglid and John Gee, entitled "Traditions About the Early Life of Abraham."

<sup>16</sup> It is sobering to note that the production of the Bible combined with the military and political power of Rome, literally changed the course of human events and has impacted much or even most of human history for the past two thousand years.

<sup>17</sup> The first five books of the Christian Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy) are considered to be the five books of Moses. These same five books constitute the Torah (meaning "the law") for the Jews. Interestingly, Muslims, Jews, and Christians, virtually all agree that Moses is the author of these first five books.

places framed within the cultural and political environment in which they actually took place.

As we shall see, there is now much more information on Abraham to help us understand his important role in ancient society. Nevertheless, the question might be legitimately posed: How do we know Abraham was such a critical leader in the ancient world? Well, to begin with, thirty-eight of the sixty-six books that constitute the modern Bible reference Abraham. (It is important to remember that the biblical texts were originally separate writings.) Abrahamic references, both direct and indirect, simply permeate scripture. It is, after all, the “God of Abraham” that the Jews, Christians and Muslims worship.

Dr. Hugh Nibley<sup>18</sup> makes this insightful observation: “The impressive traditions uniformly attesting to Abraham’s righteousness help explain what the book of Genesis does not: why this particular man was selected for his pivotal role in God’s plan for the human race. With Abraham’s entrance onto the stage of history comes an abrupt shift of focus in the Genesis story, which as scholars note, had previously concerned itself with the broad scope of mankind as a whole.”<sup>19</sup> Gerald von Rad, the author of “Genesis a Commentary,” provides this summing assessment of Abraham on the historical stage: “All at once and precipitously the universal field of vision narrows; world and humanity are submerged, and all interest is concentrated upon a single man.”<sup>20</sup>

## **Where**

Between 1964 and 1975 a large, quietly unproductive, archeological site in northern Syria was being intermittently excavated. At the end of 1975 discoveries would burst on to the world scene and the site would become known by its ancient name of Ebla. All the hoopla was because some diggers at the end of the season literally fell into a library of over fifteen thousand tablets. Further excavations revealed five thousand more. The tablets were dated from the middle of the 3rd millennium BC and were written in a formerly unknown Semitic dialect. Some records were written in Sumerian and a dictionary of sorts, matching words from the two languages, was found among the tablets, thus allowing scholars to translate the language of Ebla.

The Ebla tablets, thus far retrieved and translated, are almost exclusively about economic matters and they demonstrate clearly that this city was a major commercial center. In fact, as historians were soon to find out, Ebla’s influence rivaled that of both Egypt and Mesopotamia! The kingdom of Ebla (Syria and its territories) extended from the Mesopotamia highlands to the borders of Egypt and included all the geography in

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<sup>18</sup> Dr Nibley is one of the greatest scholars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Hugh Nibley read, wrote, and spoke, 26 languages, 10 of which have long been considered dead. Nibley was famous for impromptu readings of numerous ancient materials directly from the originals in front of college classes and groups of renowned scholars. At a Greek symposium he was once asked to read something spontaneously from an original work after which the Master of Ceremony muttered out loud, “It is insane that anyone could know so much.”

<sup>19</sup> Hugh Nibley, “Abraham in Egypt” (Deseret Book Company 2000) xxv

<sup>20</sup> Gerhard von Rad, “Genesis: A Commentary” (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 154

between. Since its discovery, Elba has emerged as the capital of an empire that administered trade amongst at least seventeen city-states. Its earliest known dynasty ruled for about 150 years from 2400 B.C. to 2250 B.C., after which it seems to have lost trading influence for a time and then again flourished as a major, perhaps THE major, world trade center for another two hundred years, from about 2000–1800 B.C.

The Ebla tablets contain the earliest known reference to Jerusalem. They also name the five biblical cities of the plain on their tax roles as Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboim, and Bela, just as they are named in Genesis.<sup>21</sup> This was all a bit frustrating for the many agnostic scholars that had claimed these places were simply biblical myths. Today, the language of Ebla is used as a linguistic tool in studying the Bible to help understand some of the more difficult Hebrew readings. After learning of Ebla's existence and its remarkable influence and dramatic importance on the primeval world stage, one scholar summed it all up by saying it was comparable to "being schooled in history and never having heard of Rome."

As it turns out, the kingdom of Ebla forms almost exactly the route of Abraham's famous migration from "Ur of the Chaldees"<sup>22</sup> (ancient Babylonia) to Haran in Mesopotamia, thence through Syria-Canaan, and eventually down through lower Canaan (modern day Israel) to Egypt.<sup>23</sup> Not only does the migration of Abraham, as reported in both biblical and nonbiblical sources, exactly fit the geographical model, but the traditional time in ancient history for Abraham's epic journey fits as well. Even more curious is that Ebla's most important vizier<sup>24</sup> was a man named Abraham;<sup>25</sup> and his son was to become the next vizier, almost as if the position was hereditary. Is this our Abraham, and possibly Isaac? We simply do not know, but in the reflective words of Alice in Wonderland, things are getting "curiouser and curiouser."

The Roman archaeologist Giovanni Pettinato, the man who discovered the tablets of "Canaanite Ebla," was also the first to break the language code. Pettinato claims that Ebla had a founding king named "Eber." The term "Hebrew," he translates as meaning "descendants of Eber." Pettinato also concludes that Ebla's kings were "anointed," that their governors were called "judges," and that they had prophets to their gods Ya and

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<sup>21</sup> This claim has recently been contested, particularly by the country of Syria, which stopped any further excavation of the site based on political ideology and for fear that further discoveries might provide Israel with some form of ancient claim to the area.

<sup>22</sup> Ur of the Chaldees means "Fire of the Chaldees." Most nonbiblical texts dealing with this period of Abraham's life report he was escaping the sacrificial fire, which directly relates to the translation of the term.

<sup>23</sup> Genesis 11:31, 12:4-10

<sup>24</sup> The head of government, the chief manager in charge, the equivalent of a Prime Minister but generally one with more direct power.

<sup>25</sup> Translated from one of the Arabic spellings: Ibrum.

EI<sup>26</sup>, obvious contractions for Yahweh and Elohim.<sup>27</sup> Ebla was the ruling city of ancient Syria and the territories under its control before the city of Damascus became the capital. Damascus is routinely celebrated as the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world;<sup>28</sup> and interestingly enough the oldest reference to Damascus is in the tablets of Ebla!

According to the Bible, Abraham's wife Sarah, Isaac's wife Rebekah, and Jacob's two sister-wives' Leah and Rachel, were all Syrians, even though they lived in Haran.<sup>29</sup> Even Abraham's head of house, the most trusted administrator of his considerable wealth, is referred to as Eliezer of Damascus.<sup>30</sup>

In a discussion of the delectable correlative of Ebla and Abraham, Dr. Nibley commented: "Long ago when the Egyptian and Mesopotamian texts thrust Israel into a real world, the picture of Abraham as the simple wandering shepherd should have been erased, though artists and Sunday School teachers still cling to it."<sup>31</sup>

In addition to Abram's birth and travels from Babylonia to Mesopotamia then on to Syria (Ebla), then down through Canaan, fascinating information on Abraham's sojourn in Egypt demonstrates that it is almost surely here that Abraham reached his pinnacle of international influence.

### Traditions

Abrahamic traditions suffuse the entire Mediterranean basin including the Near East and Middle East and quite possibly even the Far East.<sup>32</sup> Accounts of Abraham show up in virtually every early Mediterranean country plus others in Africa, Eastern Europe, Russia, Mexico and Central America. Abrahamic traditions "were transmitted and

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<sup>26</sup> EI means might and strength. In Hebrew and related languages it designates "the divine being." Many biblical names employ EI with other words, such as Bethel (house of God), Eleazar (God has helped), Michael (who is like God), Daniel (a judge is God), Ezekiel (God will strengthen), and Israel (to prevail with God). Perhaps the best-known use is Elohim, a plural form signifying the almighty or omnipotent, the name commonly applied to God the Father. Source: LDS Bible Dictionary

<sup>27</sup> Yahweh is the Hebrew name for the Creator. Until recently this name was translated "Jehovah," or the "Lord." The term YHWH, (there are no vowels) has been translated approximately 6,000 times in the Scriptures as "Lord." It is the proper name of the God of the Old Testament; hence the Jews called it the name of excellence, the great name, the only name, the glorious and terrible name, the hidden and mysterious name, the name of the substance, the proper name. The Creator, was the "Son" of Elohim (God the Father.) The Yahweh of the Old Testament is the Lord Jesus Christ of the New Testament. See St John 1:1-14

<sup>28</sup> "Damascus is known to be the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world. There is firm evidence that in the third millennium BC, Damascus was a population center of a civilization that was considerably prosperous and economically influential. The earliest reference to the city was found in the archaeological site of Ebla in 1975; where the word "Damaski" was found on one of the clay tablets. Some historians believe that the city actually dates back to the seventh millennium BC." Source: Damascus On-line.

<sup>29</sup> Genesis 25:20, 27:43, 28:1, 5, 10

<sup>30</sup> Genesis 15.2

<sup>31</sup> Hugh Nibley, "Abraham in Egypt" (Deseret Book Company 2000) 86

<sup>32</sup> There are some reports that Abrahamic folklore is extant in the Far East, but this author has been unable to verify this information.

preserved across cultural, religious, and geographical boundaries over a period of more than two millennia. In addition to Jews, Christians, Muslims and related groups (Samaritans,<sup>33</sup> Falasha,<sup>34</sup> and Mandaean<sup>35</sup>), stories have also been recorded by early pagan writers. Many of the Abraham stories apparently began as oral traditions that were passed on from one generation to another. Jews and Muslims alike preserved the transmission lines along with the stories themselves, thus establishing their antiquity.”<sup>36</sup>

As an illustration of the textual migration process Moses Gaster<sup>37</sup> compares “The Apocalypse of Abraham,” with the “Testament of Abraham” thusly: “The complete Slavonic text (400 years older) is distinguished from our present one only by some unimportant features and therefore points to a common and more ancient source.” Nibley adds to Gaster’s comment by saying: “Here is a Falasha text of the “Testament of Abraham” probably derived from a Christian-Ethiopic text, which in turn was taken from an Arabic version, which in turn had been translated from the Coptic, taken from a Greek version that in the fourth century belonged in a collection, “The Treasury of Knowledge,” kept at Alexandria by the famous Athanasius, the Greek version having been taken from a Hebrew or Aramaic original. One would expect, after all that time and wandering, to find a pretty wild hodgepodge of stuff in the African Falasha dialect, but it is nothing of the sort. It is a perfectly sober, straightforward account, very close indeed to the “Testament of Abraham.”

Even a casual reading of the 119 currently available Abrahamic texts in English brings one to an obvious and immediate conclusion: These materials record substantially the same events with most disparities explainable due to the cultural voice<sup>38</sup> and the

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<sup>33</sup> The Samaritans are the descendants of the ancient northern kingdom of Israel. Samaria was the capital of the northern kingdom, hence the name. The Samaritans were those Israelites not taken into captivity by the Assyrians in 720 BC, which became known as the Lost Ten Tribes of Israel. Those that were left in the captured land of Israel were intermarried with Arabic tribes’ people that were relocated from the south of Judah. By the time of Christ, the Jews of Judea considered the Samaritans an impure, mixed race, whom they were highly prejudiced against, hence the essence of the parable of the Good Samaritan by Jesus.

<sup>34</sup> The Falasha are a Jewish enclave in the Ethiopian highlands, which was isolated there for hundreds of years without contact with other Jewish communities until the late 1860’s.

<sup>35</sup> Mandaean are those members of a pre-Christian religion considered Gnostic. Mandaean are labeled as gnostics due to the Mandaic word *manda*, which can be translated as *knowledge*, the same word is “gnosis” in Greek. Mandaean have lived quietly for many centuries in the borders of Iran and Iraq until the 1990’s when the political climate became increasingly unstable. They are now an essentially lost society.

<sup>36</sup> Tvedtnes, Hauglid, Gee, “Traditions About the Early Life of Abraham” (FARMS 2001) xxvii

<sup>37</sup> Moses Gaster, “The Apocalypse of Abraham,” Society of Biblical Archaeology Transactions 9 (1893) 197

<sup>38</sup> All of us view the world through our own cultural lens. What does that mean? Simply that we’re all wearing cultural sunglasses that shade everything we see through the knowledge we’ve gained, and our political, social, and religious predisposition. Things are surely not quite as they seem, but generally speaking our understanding of events and our reaction to them tend to work in our particular cultural setting. We usually think of our immediate response to new things as “logical” or “common sense.” But common sense can, and frequently does, elicit a different reaction depending on your cultural bias. In the study of ancient history, it is important to step outside this cultural bias and attempt to view things from the perspective of a person living in that place and time.

political environment in which the various scribes that are retelling the stories. Strict recording of events is complicated by the shift in meaning and intent of terms over time and as manuscripts were translated back and forth between languages in which time-dilated expressions changed over the centuries.

Whereas there is new and interesting information forthcoming from nonbiblical Abrahamic materials, it is clear these texts have more elements in common that they do not. This strongly suggests that scribes from different societies and times were using earlier source materials of common origin. Thus, I believe it is safe to conclude that there is significant agreement in most of these materials and therefore important insight to be gained on the life and legend of the great patriarch by reading them.

### **The Setting**

The Abrahamic story is set in the dark mysterious ages of the ancient past. The opening lines of the Book of Abraham, begin with this powerful and informative statement: "In the land of the Chaldeans, at the residence of my fathers, I Abraham, saw that it was needful for me to obtain another place of residence. And, finding there was greater happiness and peace and rest for me, I sought for the blessings of the fathers, and the right whereunto I should be ordained to administer the same; having been myself a follower of righteousness, desiring also to be one who possessed great knowledge, and to be a father of many nations, a prince of peace, and desiring to receive instructions, and to keep the commandments of God, I became a rightful heir, a high priest, holding the right belonging to the fathers." This is powerful stuff. It provides amazing insight in just the opening lines, and it's only the beginning.

One interesting story of Abraham's childhood, contained in several extrabiblical texts, is about Terah (Abraham's father) taking Abram to the king's palace for a personal interview with the infamous Nimrod.<sup>39</sup> As they entered the throne room there was an earthquake, which shook the throne and threw all the courtiers off their feet. This shattered their dignity, and the king, impressed by the coincidence of the tremor with the appearance of Abraham, cried, 'Truly thy God, Abraham, is a great and mighty god, and he is the King of all Kings.'<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Nimrod is the title-name the Bible gives the founding king of Babylon, with cities built or conquered as far away as the biblical "Nineveh" and all the way to the Mediterranean. His title-name translates to "rebel" or "rebellious to God." Many believe Nimrod to be Hammurabi, who was the founder of the Babylonia Empire and conqueror of the same areas noted in the Bible. Hammurabi formed a religion based on Marduk, which required human sacrifice. Hammurabi is best known for production of the codified laws of Babylonian society. Most scholars believe he lived between 1800 and 2000 years before Christ, the same period as Abraham. The Bible refers to Nimrod as a "hunter," probably meaning a hunter of men. He may also be the inspiration for parts of the Gilgamesh Epic, which also includes the Babylonian Noah story. Most kings in the ancient world were known by multiple names, many of which were titles.

<sup>40</sup> Bin Gorion, *Sagen der Juden*, 1:154 as told by Hugh Nibley

## Bullets of Insight

So...what other new insights are we able to garner from the many early manuscripts, which are not treated, or fully developed, in the biblical text? A cursory list follows<sup>41</sup>:

- Abraham's defining traits are always righteousness and charity. He does the right things because they are right in spite of the predicaments it places him. There are many wonderful stories in numerous texts that emphasize Abraham's kindness in a very scary world. He was forever helping the helpless and caring for those who could not care for themselves. Our hero was as comfortable at the palace as he was helping the lonely downtrodden traveler.
- We learn from numerous texts that the worship of idols began innocently as the erection of statutes to famous men and women, usually after their death. The continued adulation of former heroes of society, or to animals that were critical to society's success, eventually became commonplace. Priestly classes emerged which garnered power by purportedly controlling access to specific hero-gods thus competing with others for power over the people. Over time, the original stories associated with these heroes of society grew into stories of a more fabulous nature.
- Abraham was intricately familiar with the gods and idols of Egypt, Canaan, Babylonia and Haran. There is no indication of the quiet pastoral existence so frequently portrayed as Abraham's lifestyle. He was embroiled in the political scene, and familiar with the halls of power in several countries.
- Abraham's treatment of all persons with equal dignity is a hallmark of the many stories retained in the collective memory of those who follow the admonition to "do the works of Abraham."
- Abraham's birth was heralded by celestial activity and his foreordination prophesied by the priests of Nimrod, the king and ruler of Ur of the Chaldeans in the land of Babylonia.<sup>42</sup> Threatened, Nimrod caused all the male babies in a specific township to be killed.<sup>43</sup>
- Abraham lived during a time of intense heat, crop failures, severe dust storms and worldwide famine. This situation caused immense suffering and many

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<sup>41</sup> The list is not in any particular order of priority. The author is indebted to the extensive work done by John A Tvedtnes, Brian M Hauglid and John Gee, as reported in "Traditions About the Early Life of Abraham." Some of the bullet items noted in this list are from Index A of the cited work, which includes extensive textual references supporting their conclusions. However, It should be noted that the list presented herein is not found anywhere else and is the responsibility of the author alone.

<sup>42</sup> Recently some scholars have presented evidence to indicate there were two cities by the name of Ur, and that the latter one, not previously well known, is much closer to Haran and might be more logical as the city where Abram was born.

<sup>43</sup> This information does not appear in the Book of Abraham but does appear in dozens of other ancient texts. The parallels and foreshadowing of both the Moses and the Jesus stories is obvious.

governments to collapse. According to Jewish tradition it was the worst famine ever recorded.

- Abraham's brother Haran died as a result of the famine. (Not to be confused with the city by the same name.) Some texts say Haran died instead of Abraham, in the sacrificial fire of the Chaldeans.
- Abraham prayed that God would end the famine in the land of his birthplace.
- In Abraham's day there were considerable celestial phenomenon including a planetary alignment and likely meteor impacts. What was probably a comet streaking across the nighttime sky coincided with Abraham's birth. (Some might prefer to call this meaningful celestial coincidence synchronistic.)
- Abraham was skilled in a "scientific approach" to the cosmos as opposed to the more prevalent astrological interpretations designed to suit a priestly class.<sup>44</sup>
- The City of Ur, Abraham's birthplace, is well known by scholars as the first true city in history, but the term "Ur of the Chaldeans" literally means "Fire of the Chaldeans." This may explain why the vast majority of extrabiblical texts refer to fire as the method for the attempted sacrifice of Abraham.<sup>45</sup>
- Abraham was both a skilled astronomer and an expert mathematician and he introduced knowledge of these things to other advanced civilizations, particularly Egypt.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> A monotheistic religion known as Zoroastrianism finds its roots in ancient Babylonia and Mesopotamia. It did not flourish widely until after the time of Abraham. It was the religion of the Persians during the captivity of the Jews in Babylon. The high priests of Zoroastrianism were (are) called Magi, or Wise Men and are surely those mentioned in the biblical record that came to honor the birth of the Savior approximately 2000 years after Abraham. Magi is the root of our word for magician. The Magi were highly skilled and educated "wise" men that developed the Zodiac; the same one used today by astrologers the world over. The Zodiac was initially developed to teach and track astronomical observations. Like the Mayas of the Americas, the Magi were great astronomers, patiently recording events over hundreds of years. Textbooks today credit the Magi as the forerunners of modern-day astronomy. An important tenet of Zoroastrianism is the belief in a prophesied Savior, that he would be born of a virgin and that a new star would herald his coming. This religion has been described as "an ethical monotheism...a faith which believes that there is one God who gives guidance and direction to his people through laws and commandments." They believed in angels, Satan, resurrection, and the afterlife. The Magi were stargazers, keepers of calendars, and were considered the most educated people of their day. "Within Zoroastrianism the faithful have an eternal view which spans a possible premortal life, mortality, and an afterlife with some interesting correlatives to Latter-day Saint perspective." They believed in the absolute goodness of God (Mazda) and the wickedness of Satan (Ahriman) and that all men were free to choose between good and evil.

<sup>45</sup> In virtually all cultures that made human or animal sacrifice, a sacrificial knife was used to ensure death at the altar before the offering was consumed by fire.

<sup>46</sup> It is well established that Egypt learned higher math and astronomy from the Babylonia and Mesopotamian areas. The time of the transfer of this knowledge is consistent with the time of Abraham.

- Abraham learned astronomy from ancient records, direct revelation, and the training he received from his righteous progenitors.
- The writings of previous prophets, including scriptures and genealogical records, were entrusted to Abraham.
- There was a dramatic attempt to publicly sacrifice Abraham's life by Nimrod of Sumer-Babylonian and/or Pharaoh of Egypt.<sup>47</sup>
- Terah, Abraham's father, was a part of the attempt on Abraham's life, or at the least sanctioned his sacrifice.
- It was common practice during the time of Abraham to sacrifice humans, and particularly children. (This has also been confirmed by multiple archeological studies)
- Those who would not worship idols were sacrificed to them.
- Abraham was to be sacrificed because he would not worship idols.
- Abraham was severely tried and tested. There are numerous stories of the ten great trials of Abraham in both Judaic and Muslim records.
- Abraham sought God earnestly before he received a witness.
- Terah, Abraham's father, was political and held a position of great trust in Nimrod's government.
- Abraham's move from Ur to Haran was related to his escaping the sacrificial altar and the "Fire of the Chaldeans."
- Finding his life in serious danger many times, Abraham prayed.
- An angel of the Lord rescued Abraham from death and God spoke with Abraham face to face.
- The sacrificial altars (furnace of Nimrod and lion couch of Pharaoh) whereupon Abraham was to be slain, along with the priests administering this rite, were destroyed as Abraham was saved.
- Several references indicate Nimrod's inextinguishable fire was a surface petroleum deposit. (This fits exactly with ancient Iraq)

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<sup>47</sup> Because of the interactivity of these two ancient superpowers and various rites dealing with foreign dignitaries, it may well have been both.

- There are numerous references to earthquakes and volcanic activity during this time. Records infer that some of this activity may have been caused by a celestial impact, perhaps a meteor. From the “Clementine Recognitions” we read: “...the world was afflicted by fire, which beginning at Sodom, threatened to destroy the entire world.”<sup>48</sup>
- Terah manufactured and had responsibility for the idols of Ur and later Haran.
- After repenting of idol worship and following the example set by his son Abraham, Terah eventually returned to his idols and died in Haran.
- Sarah, Abraham’s wife, was a crown princess, the daughter of the king of Haran, although her family line tracks back to Syria.
- Sarai means “Princess of her people.” Sarah means “Princess of all people.”<sup>49</sup>
- Abram and Sarai, whose names were changed to Abraham and Sarah in their later years, were married in Haran under a special marriage covenant that required they introduce each other as brother and sister. It is also important to note that Isaac’s wife Rebecca and Jacob’s wives Rachel and Leah were also from Haran and were surely sealed with similar vows, as evidenced by several biblical stories.<sup>50</sup>
- Abram means, “Exalted father.” Abraham means, “Father of a multitude.”
- Abraham himself was of royal blood and varyingly referred to as “prince,” a “king,” “friend of God,” “champion,” “hero,” and other similar terms.
- Abraham’s move from Haran to Syria-Canaan was an escape from the rites and ceremonies of his “idolatrous fathers.”

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<sup>48</sup> The Minoan empire (predecessors of the Greeks with their capital city on the island of Crete in the Mediterranean) was destroyed by super volcanic activity about the same time

<sup>49</sup> Many Biblical characters received a change of name with major shifts in their lives.

<sup>50</sup> In Haran the equivalent of a law library was discovered in the late 1970’s that includes the details of these higher marriage vows. In essence, under Hurrian law, a man could dissolve a marriage but not the bond of a brother and sister, thus the special higher marriage vows for the elite dealt with the concept of a marriage of equals that called for numerous and interesting details meticulously preserved in the Bible including that the bride have her own property, her own handmaiden, be called sister, etc. One of the arcane details of the higher marriage sealing is that the bride was to retain house-gods from her family as proof of her independence and equality. This is similar in concept to the medieval practice of one carrying a signet ring as proof of authority. The requirement that a woman possess family house-gods as proof of her position sheds new light on Rachel’s possession of house-gods in the otherwise inexplicable story reflected in Genesis 31:14-35. In Egyptian royalty rites, women were also treated as equals.

- Abraham received the priesthood from Melchizedek and learned much from his worthy ancestors. He is linked directly to Noah through Shem. (His genealogy is set forth in Genesis 11:10-28 and again in First Chronicles 1:1-34, these genealogies are replicated in numerous extrabiblical texts, usually with not more than one or two slight changes.)
- Abraham desired to become a “prince of peace.” (Another foreshadowing of Christ.)
- Josephus,<sup>51</sup> one of the most trustworthy of ancient historians, reports that Abraham plotted a peaceful revolt among both the Chaldeans and Mesopotamians based on his preaching of the one true God. This may explain why Genesis 12:5 reports that Abraham took “the souls that they had gotten in Haran and went forth to go into the land of Canaan.”
- Numerous ancient manuscripts report that the “souls” that Abraham had gotten were indeed his converts to monotheism and that together they left Haran seeking the safety to worship their Lord and escape the stain of human sacrifice and idolatry.
- The threat from Babylonia (Ur) continued to plague Abraham and he was forced to leave Damascus (possibly Ebla) because of military and political pressure from the east.<sup>52</sup>
- When Pharaoh’s messengers reported on Sarah, it was her intellect, wisdom, and renowned kindness that were considered of greater worth than her fabulous beauty.
- Pharaoh was acutely aware that Sarah was of a royal line and that her father was the ruling king of Haran - Mesopotamia.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Flavius Josephus was born Joseph ben Matthias in 38AD. He was a priest from Jerusalem who became a general in the military and eventually the best-known historian of ancient times. In deference to his patronage of the emperor Vespasian of the Roman Empire, Josephus moved to Rome and spent the latter half of his life writing history. He wrote multiple works that rank above any other accounts that have survived over the ages dealing with the history, topography, social, political and economic life of Jerusalem and Palestine, then called Judea. He was a gifted man deeply versed in the written sources of his own times and of earlier days. His principal creations are “The Jewish War” in seven books and the “Antiquities of the Jews,” in twenty books that give a more complete and exhaustive record of the history of Israel from Genesis forward, than does the Bible or any other source, or collection of sources.

<sup>52</sup> Josephus, Antiquities I, 6,5

<sup>53</sup> For most of history, national treaties and empire building had more to do with marrying into the right bloodlines than anything else.

- The Lord instructed Abraham to tell Pharaoh that Sarah was his sister<sup>54</sup> and to ASK Sarah to say likewise. This was a means by which Abraham and Sarah, (the royal princess of Haran), was introduced into the pharaoh's court and by which Sarah was assured of her safety. (A very different situation than what we infer from the Bible narrative)
- Had Sarah married Pharaoh it would have made her the ruling queen of Egypt, which in almost no other land held the significance as it did in Egypt. In Egypt it was the queen who held the power to determine the next Pharaoh to be. The royal bloodline in Egypt was matriarchal verses the patriarchal lineage of the priesthood of Abraham.
- Various texts reflect Abraham's knowledge of Egypt and that he had an extensive relationship with ancient Egypt. Some sources indicate he, his family, and possibly his followers, lived in Egypt for twenty or more years.<sup>55</sup>
- Egyptus was a descendant of Cain, the wife of Ham. She had a daughter by the same name; she was the mother of the first ruler of Egypt. Egyptus' named her first son Pharaoh. Egypt is the name the Canaanites gave the land of the Nile. The Egyptians originally referred to their land as Memphis. The term Pharaoh became a title name meaning "king by royal blood."
- Multiple texts indicate that Abraham was an exalted teacher to the wise men of Egypt, and like his yet unborn grandson Joseph, Abraham apparently rose to a position of great influence in the Egyptian court.
- Some texts claim that Abraham lived in Heliopolis where he instructed the Egyptians in the discoveries made by Enoch and himself. Some texts credit Abraham as founding the city of Heliopolis.<sup>56</sup>
- Heliopolis is the Greek name for this ancient city of study and learning, best known for astronomy. In Coptic it was known as the city of "On." Two generations later, Asenath the famous wife of Joseph (the Joseph in Egypt story) was the daughter of the high priest to the "creator-god" or the "one-god" at the temple of On.
- Some sources say that Abraham became a counselor and possibly the vizier to Pharaoh and was allowed to sit on his throne. It appears this exact formulation may have happened in other kingdoms consistent with an annual festival and rejuvenation event common in the old world.

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<sup>54</sup> In both Phoenicia (Canaan's Mediterranean coastline countries) and Egypt, it was common to use the term "sister" and "wife" simultaneously. See Albright, "Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan," 128 A sister-wife was an official Hurrian term (Haran) signifying the highest social standing.

<sup>55</sup> Artapanus, a Greek of the first century BC, wrote that Abraham stayed twenty years in Egypt.

<sup>56</sup> Pseudo-Eumolpus

- The Pharaoh of Abraham's time was related to Nimrod of Babylonia by blood. (Historically this is a common characteristic of kingship. Virtually every Pharaoh whose line can be traced shared Canaanite blood.)
- According to the Bible, Pharaoh gave Hagar to Sarah as a handmaiden. We learn from other sources that Hagar was an Egyptian princess, a literal daughter of Pharaoh.
- Abraham became known as a great healer. In several stories, he heals a Pharaoh by placing his hands on his head and giving him a blessing.
- Abraham learned that there was advance planning for the creation of the earth and the cosmological elements that would affect it. He learned that the earth had been organized from pre-existing materials rather than created out of nothing, a concept introduced to Christianity in the fourth century AD in Rome.
- Abraham saw in vision the premortal spirits that were to come to this earth.
- Abraham left a written record of his own.<sup>57</sup>
- Abraham was sixty-two years of age when he left Haran, not seventy-five as recorded in Genesis. (Although this seems to be a minor item it was first presented in the Book of Abraham and later confirmed in other ancient manuscripts.)
- True believers and doers of the gospel become the adopted seed of the royal lineage of Abraham and are blessed through him based on their individual righteousness.
- Abraham was clearly a "type and shadow" in multiple ways, of the coming Messiah, whom he was shown in vision. The scriptures, and numerous nonbiblical texts, confirm Abraham's symbolism as the forerunner of Christ. The Messiah means, "anointed one." Abraham received a promise that the Messiah would be born through his own royal lineage. This would eventually play out exactly as promised.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> "But the records of the fathers, even the patriarchs, concerning the right of Priesthood, and Lord my God, preserved in mine own hands; therefore a knowledge of the beginning of the creation, and also of the planets, and of the stars, as they were made known unto the fathers, have I kept even unto this day, and I shall endeavor to write some of these things upon this record, for the benefit of my posterity that shall come after me." BoA 1:31

<sup>58</sup> Abraham and Sarah, to Isaac and Rebecca, to Jacob (Israel) and Rachel, through their son Judah descending to the House of David and thence on to Mary and Joseph. Interestingly, both Mary and Joseph were descended from the House of David.

- Abraham possessed the Urim and Thummim<sup>59</sup> through which he received a revelation about the planetary system. God spoke with Abraham face to face and further explained his creations.
- Abraham had extensive information about the creation, both from ancient records provided by “the fathers”, (those that came before him and that held priesthood authority), and through direct revelation in response to his petitions for specific knowledge.
- Abraham was foreordained to be a prophet, patriarch, and the head of a dispensation of time on earth. He was told, “Abraham thou wast chosen before thou wast born.”
- Abraham is portrayed as a true hero, a man of testimony, valor, nobility, and integrity. He is highly motivated to “choose the right” in his pursuit of happiness, peace, righteousness, knowledge, and spiritual insight.
- According to many ancient texts, Abraham and his followers’ unflinching traits are compassion and forgiveness, regardless of whether the person receiving compassion and/or forgiveness is a believer or not.
- Abraham wants to teach what he has learned and pass it on to generations to come, to both his own progeny and to the world at large.
- The test that Abraham endured when asked to sacrifice his birthright son, the only child of Sarah, is made even more dramatic when one understands that Abraham spent his life preaching against the ancient practice of child sacrifice. It also stands in stark contrast to his personal escape from the sacrificial knife.
- Numerous texts refer to Abraham’s son Isaac’s physical appearance to be so much like his father Abraham, as to be his double. (Isaac was born of Sarah, Abraham’s royal wife.) According to various stories, apparently several palace courts were unable to tell one from another until Abraham’s hair turned completely white.
- The deeds and good works of Isaac seem to have merged with those of his father. They were of identical upright character and considered to be essentially one and the same.

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<sup>59</sup> From the Catholic Encyclopedia: The sacred means by which the ancient Hebrews were wont to seek manifestations of the Divine will. Two other channels of Divine communication were recognized, viz. dreams and prophetic utterance, as we learn from numerous passages of the Old Testament. Urim is derived from the Hebrew for "light", or "to give light", and Thummim from "completeness", "perfection", or "innocence".

- An interesting curiosity preserved in a number of ancient texts is that the name of Abraham's prize ram had the same name as his birthright son. Some texts say that it was "Isaac" the ram that was ultimately sacrificed instead of Isaac, Abraham's son.

## **Mythology**

It has become widely recognized by scholars researching the mythological pantheon of ancient cultures that the gods of virtually all the related civilizations of the pre-Christian world were based on essentially the same primitive hero-types. Their names and some of their feats were re-scripted to fit local society, but the central threads of their commonality remain to testify to this evolution of status. The list is endless, but in simplistic terms the Etruscans-Romans got most of their gods from the Minoans-Greeks who adopted many of their deities from the Egyptians. Hundreds of years before the time of Christ, Greek historians understood this phenomenon and were writing about it.

Egyptians based most of their gods on early hero-types; many were adopted from Sumer, Babylon, Assyria and Canaan. As already noted, the heroes of the ancient world were not originally thought of as "gods" but were widely considered to have an elevated status, which continued to expand over time. It may be helpful to think of these early heroes and their evolving cultural status as similar to being designated a "saint" by the Roman Catholic Church. Many Catholics, especially in third-world countries, tend to pray to their patron saints rather than directly to God in the name of the Savior, as is prescribed in the Bible. The process of escalation of a hero-saint into something higher and greater than a mere human is still happening.

Merchants moving back and forth about the ancient, civilized world carried the stories of their heroes, which over time took on god-like status. Most of these primitive hero types were easily recognizable by other names then present in multiple cultures. Amazingly, a number of these hero-gods, from diverse ancient cultures, appear to trace their origin back to Abraham – the ultimate champion and hero-patriarch – who seems to have been universally known throughout the old world.

Recent historical research points out that all the main events of Abraham's life seem to have taken place at ancient cult centers. Ancient history, archeology, and religious manuscripts, validate the sacrificial and annual festival drama elements that thread their way through the Abraham stories. "Origen, a native of Egypt, says that it was common in his day for Egyptian soothsayers to command the demons by the God of Abraham without having the least idea who Abraham might be."<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Origen of Alexandria, (Egypt) is considered one of the greatest of all Christian theologians. As a philosopher, he is famous for composing the seminal work of Christian Neoplatonism, his treatise "On First Principles." Origen lived through a turbulent period of the Christian Church, when persecution was widespread. Source: Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Origen lived 150 years BEFORE the organization of the Catholic Church by emperor Constantine of Rome. / The quote is from Origen, "Against Celsus" I, 22 in PG 11:697-700, as reported by Nibley.

“A number of legends fit Abraham snugly into the peculiar category of victims of Procrustes. In the standard Procrustes-type story, of which there are many, a wandering hero and prince is entertained at the palace of a king who tries to subject him to a sacrificial death, but whose attempt fails when the hero at the last moment is miraculously freed and repays his host’s inhospitality by putting either him or his priest to death. Among the most celebrated monsters of the Procrustes persuasion are Mino, Philomeledes, Amycus, Cycnus, Syleus, Antaeus, Phalarus, Cronus, Lityerses, Faunus, Cacus, Athamus, Proteus, Polyphemus, Eurytheus, Sciron, and many others, the most famous of all being Busiris of Egypt.<sup>61</sup> Among the heroes who met and bested them are Odysseus, Pollux, Menelaeus, Paris, Hermes, Jason, Bellerophon, Cytisorus, etc.”<sup>62</sup> (The most famous hero of this order is probably Hercules.)

There is evidence to suggest that Abraham, (not Joseph as is more frequently suggested) was the most famous of all Egypt’s wise men ... the renowned Imhotep of ancient lore. Although this is supposition, it is a tantalizing theory because of the close correlatives of character and accomplishment. Timelines appear to be the greatest obstacle in drawing a direct association of Abraham (or Joseph for that matter) with Imhotep, because most Egyptologists call for an earlier date for Imhotep than even Abraham. The dating obstacle has not stopped a growing number of those interested in demonstrating a correlative of Imhotep and the famous Joseph in Egypt, even though this claim actually strains the dating even more inasmuch as Joseph is Abraham’s great grandson.

Recently the Time-Discovery channel did a one-hour program on the thesis that Joseph was Imhotep.<sup>63</sup> According to an ancient Egyptian stele, Imhotep or possibly Amenhotep, advised the pharaoh regarding a prophesied seven-year bounty to be followed by a seven-year famine. A similar story is recounted in the Bible associated with Joseph. It is interesting to note that Imhotep is the first named person in ancient history to be considered a scientist by scholars. Subject to further study, it might be considered that Joseph was Amenhotep who came later but whose feats and accomplishments are so merged with that of Imhotep as to be almost inseparable. A large following over hundreds of years of these two great heroes of righteousness caused them to take on godlike status over time. Both of these great men were exalted mortals, that is to say they were not Pharaohs. Both were renowned teachers: of righteousness, medicine,

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<sup>61</sup> Busiris was a title-name for one of the Pharaohs of Egypt. The Busiris name was later identified as a place where each new Pharaoh would travel to be anointed.

<sup>62</sup> Hugh Nibley, “Abraham in Egypt” (Deseret Book Company 2000) 182

<sup>63</sup> Imhotep is the classic hero-god. He was the world’s first named architect, the man who designed and built Egypt’s first pyramid. He is also recognized as an astronomer, the world’s first doctor, a priest, scribe, sage, poet, and the vizier and chief minister to Pharaoh Djoser who is believed to have reigned from 2630–2611 BC. Imhotep’s name means “the one that comes in peace,” and there are valid reasons to believe he was a foreign dignitary living in Egypt. He existed as a mythological figure in the minds of most scholars until the end of the nineteenth century when he was established as a real historical person. Imhotep was revered for over three thousand years as a healer. He was eventually worshipped as a god in Greece and Rome. Early Christians worshipped him as the “Prince of Peace.” The legendary figure Hippocrates, whom the Greeks named “the Father of Medicine,” was a clear adaptation of Imhotep who lived almost 2000 years before Hippocrates was supposed to have been born.

astronomy, architecture, and of all things spiritual. They are both remembered as counselors, or viziers to Pharaoh. Abraham and Joseph also left indelible marks on the annals of Egypt, and their accomplishments seem to be the same as Imhotep and Amenhotep.<sup>64</sup>

### **The Book of Abraham**

Of all the ancient nonbiblical materials dealing with Abraham, one particular translation ranks at the top for clarity, substance, and veracity; this is the unparalleled “Book of Abraham.” In its present form it is only 5,552 words long, unfortunately it was not completed before the papyrus materials disappeared. However, the vast majority of the bulleted list above (which outlines significant elements in Abrahamic tradition that are not included in the Bible) appears in this single text. All of these items are broadly supported in non-canonical texts. Only the mention of Nimrod by name and a few other largely inconsequential items, are missing in the Book of Abraham narrative that are abundant in other texts. This puts the Book of Abraham out front as the most credible of all these texts. In addition, there seems to be a genuine relationship between the “Book of Abraham,” the “Apocalypse of Abraham” and its close cousin the “Testament of Abraham.” The latter two books were not available in the Western Hemisphere or translated into English until many years after the discovery and publication of the “Book of Abraham.”<sup>65</sup>

Both the “Apocalypse” and the “Testament” have been found in numerous ancient languages and have been subsequently translated and reviewed by multiple scholars. All three manuscripts speak in the first person as Abraham’s recording of events. Scribes in different geographical locations laboriously reproduced all three of these texts again and again over time in order that the information might be preserved and circulated amongst scholars and religious leaders of the day. In each case the manuscript copies are credited to Abraham as though each new production were actually penned in the original by Abraham. This is an interesting culturalism of the ancient East, ensuring credit to the author even if the manuscript were to be copied hundreds of times over thousands of years.

One might dismiss a single element found in a nonbiblical tradition that parallels the Book of Abraham as mere coincidence. However, “when a large number of such elements come together from diverse times and places, they overwhelmingly support the Book of Abraham as an authentic ancient text. There are far too many references to Terah as an idolator, Abraham as a sacrificial victim, Abraham as an astronomer, and Abraham as a missionary, to lightly dismiss their antiquity. In addition, many other distinctive elements found in these traditions add to the overall strength of the unique

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<sup>64</sup> Dr Nibley suggests that Imhotep may be Enoch and Amenhotep Abraham.

<sup>65</sup> As to how a back woods farm boy, with little to no formal education, was able to construct such an incredible piece of work from ancient papyrus writings, is not the point of this paper although it is clearly one of the stunning miracles of the century.

elements found in the Book of Abraham.”<sup>66</sup> The nonbiblical traditions about Abraham underscore the pervasive influence this great patriarch has had on ancient and modern peoples. Because the Book of Abraham parallels so many nonbiblical stories, it is clearly part of the same tradition.

### **Summary**

The Book of Abraham contains many distinctive and unique pieces of information that are absent from the Genesis account. And, as remarkable as it may seem, the vast majority of these elements are dramatically supported in extrabiblical traditions. In fact, these distinctive concepts are so well attested by a large cross section of traditions that it appears odd the biblical account does not include them.

### **Overview of Israel**

To give the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob context, it is helpful to remember that Jacob’s name was changed to Israel about midway through his life. Jacob, (or Father Israel as he would become known), had twelve sons and at least one daughter.<sup>67</sup> As each of his sons came to manhood they in turn had families of their own, but continued to refer to themselves and their progeny, as the children of Israel. Thus the twelve sons of Jacob along with their wives and descendants became collectively known as the “Twelve tribes of Israel”, “Israelites,” or the “Children of Israel.”

The history of Israel is long and complex but a brief outline of Abraham’s lineage through Isaac and Jacob is valuable to review. For example, as a matter of historical report, the fourth born son of Israel was named Judah, from whence the Jews of today are descended. Therefore, all Jews are Israelites, (“Children of Israel”), but not all Israelites are Jews, simply because the house of Judah was only one of the twelve tribes of Israel. To give further emphasis to this point, consider that if you are reading this paper there is a good chance you are yourself a literal descendent of Israel, although perhaps not from the house of Judah. Ergo, you may be an Israelite but not a Jew. So, if you are an Israelite and not Jewish, it is well to remember that the descendants of Judah are literally your family.

The original twelve tribal groups were changed slightly within the first generation according to Israel’s own instructions. His eleventh born son was the famous Joseph who was sold into Egypt.<sup>68</sup> This well-known tale of the righteous Joseph, sold by his brothers to merchants traveling through Canaan, suffering many trials but ultimately rising to the position of vizier of all Egypt, is all the more extraordinary because of the abundance of information now available to validate its reality. Although Joseph was a son of Israel there was no tribe given his name, instead Joseph’s two sons, (born in

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<sup>66</sup> Tvedtnes, Hauglid, Gee, “Traditions About the Early Life of Abraham” (FARMS 2001) xxxv

<sup>67</sup> Some sources refer to at least three daughters of Jacob.

<sup>68</sup> The story of Joseph in Egypt was recently re-popularized by the Broadway play entitled “Joseph and his Technicolor Dream Coat.”

Egypt of an Egyptian wife)<sup>69</sup>, were elevated to tribal fathers and each of their generations that followed became known after their respective tribal names, i.e.: Manasseh and Ephraim.

According to Hebrew law, (the law of the Patriarchs), the birthright son was entitled to a double portion of the equally divided assets of the father<sup>70</sup>, thus Joseph, who was the legitimate birthright son, (firstborn of Israel's first betrothed wife Rachel), did indeed receive a double portion of tribal influence, as two of the twelve tribes were to flow through his direct lineage. With Joseph not a direct tribal name, there was then technically thirteen tribes.<sup>71</sup> However, Father Israel designated that the worthy sons of one tribe of his family line<sup>72</sup> were to become the religious guardians for all the tribal families and be spread out equally among the other twelve political subdivisions, which eventually would become states of the nation of Israel.

When Israel was yet alive he and his family, including his eleven sons and their families, moved from Canaan<sup>73</sup> to neighboring Egypt in order to escape starvation due to a devastating famine in their homeland. The Nile river delta of Egypt seemed to be the only place in the civilized world with a dependable source of food at that time, just as had happened during the time of Abraham, Israel's grandfather.<sup>74</sup> When Israel and his collective families migrated to Egypt, his birthright son Joseph was already there and had effectively become Pharaoh's vizier, roughly equivalent to a prime minister, but with

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69 Asenath was the daughter of Potipherah priest of On, see Genesis 41:45. Asenath means gift of the sun god, which in Egyptian lore was the supreme god, or father of all. Asenath's betrothal to Joseph, and subsequent conversion to Judaism, are the subject of the book "Joseph and Asenath," one of the Pseudepigrapha books of the Old Testament area. Copies of this ancient text have been found written in Syriac, Slavonic, Greek, Latin and Armenian.

<sup>70</sup> The law of inheritance eventually became part of the Mosaic law several hundred years later. It is noteworthy that the oldest son received a double portion of the divided family assets upon the death of the father, but then again he was legally and financially responsible to the women of the family including his mother and any unmarried sisters. If the oldest son was not able or interested in his birthright responsibility it passed to the next in line, if there were no sons, the responsibility fell to the father's brothers and then on to their sons respectively. In this way, all women had legal demand on an income-producing male. Although women rarely worked outside the home, a married woman could pass on independent possessions, receive inheritance separate from men, and in Abraham's time, were able to be married, or perhaps sealed to each other, in such a fashion that they were considered equals. This type of marriage vow was discovered in the equivalent of a law library in ancient Haran dating to the time of Abraham, the very place that Abram married Saria, before their names were changed to Abraham and Sarah respectively. Another interesting curiosity of this higher form of marriage vow was that under the laws of Haran the husband was to introduce his wife as his sister.

<sup>71</sup> The twelve sons of Israel were Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, Benjamin, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, and Joseph, see Exodus 1:1-5. If you subtract Joseph and add Manasseh and Ephraim the total is thirteen.

<sup>72</sup> Levi and his sons received priesthood authority through their patriarchal father Israel, who in turn had received it from his father Isaac, who received it from Abraham, who was believed to be ordained by Melchizedek. The Levitical Priesthood is named after Levi.

<sup>73</sup> Ancient Canaan was an area that included modern-day Israel, Lebanon, the West Bank, and parts of Jordan. During some periods of time the Sinai, Syria and parts of Turkey were thought to be included in the biblical land of Canaan.

<sup>74</sup> Genesis 26:1

greater power. Israel's descendants stayed on in Egypt for approximately four hundred years.<sup>75</sup> So, by the time Moses received his calling to lead the children of Israel out of Egypt (the famous Exodus story of the Bible) they had become a large people and were essentially Egyptian in a cultural sense.

After forty years adrift in the desert, a new generation of Israelites was sufficiently hardened to be ready to wage war on the numerous city-states, or kingdoms, that then constituted the land of Canaan. Under the leadership of Joshua, the conquest of Canaan was largely successful whereupon each of the twelve tribes were granted a land of their own inheritance, and they became essentially separate countries bound only by blood and their common religion. Another four hundred years went by, (the Biblical period of the Judges), after which the original twelve countries of common origin came back together and formed the ancient kingdom of Israel consisting of twelve states.

After approximately 120 years and only three kings, (Saul, David and Solomon) the united nation of Israel split into two separate countries.<sup>76</sup> The southern nation became known as Judah, the northern country retained the name of Israel. Several hundred years later, in 722 BC, the northern ten tribes of Israel were conquered by Assyria and its people taken into captivity to an area now a part of modern-day Turkey. It is widely believed that within a generation or so, the ten northern tribes were released to return to their homeland, but rather than go back to the warring Middle East they took flight into what was then barbaric Europe. They have been called the Ten Lost Tribes ever since.

By 587 BC the land of Judah had been conquered by the Babylonians in totality and its people relocated to modern day Iraq. Seventy years later the Jews were allowed to return when Cyrus the Persian conquered Babylon and extended great mercy to the Jews. Cyrus was deeply moved by the Jewish prophecy in the book of Isaiah, written two hundred years earlier, wherein Isaiah predicted Cyrus' emergence on the world scene calling him by name.<sup>77</sup> Many Jews failed to return to their homeland and instead formed a large community in Iraq, which remained there for almost 2,700 years until their eventual expulsion during the latter part of Saddam Hussein's reign.

The original lands of Israel and Judah formed the literal geographical crossroads of the ancient, civilized world. Thus it was, that after a long tumultuous history the southern country of Judah eventually became a shrunken province of Rome called Judea. Prior

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<sup>75</sup> Some chronologist's claim that the family of Israel stayed in Egypt for about 230 years, others ascribe different durations, but the most generally accepted time is approximately 430 years!

<sup>76</sup> I tend to think of the ancient nation of Israel, (its thirteen tribes and twelve nation-states) as similar to the initial thirteen colonies of the eastern seaboard of North America, which were forged into the nation that became known as the United States of America. In a very real sense, Israel the country was actually the united tribal-states of Israel. And, just like the United States, Israel had a civil war about a hundred years after it was formed. In Israel's case the north withdrew from the south and succeeded in forming a separate country. The tribe of Benjamin stayed with the tribe of Judah, as did a smattering of families from other tribes to the north.

<sup>77</sup> Isaiah 45:1-6

to their Roman overlords, Syrians, Greeks, Babylonians and Egyptians, as well as others not so well known, would control Judah. Throughout the history of Israel and Judah, Jews and others of the tribes of Israel, migrated to safer areas of the world in order to avoid wars and persecution. By the time that Jesus of Nazareth was born, only one tribe of Israel remained in the Middle East as an identifiable nationality. Ergo Jesus was born a Jew as had been prophesied since the time of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.<sup>78</sup>

In less than forty years after Christ's ministry, the Jews of Judea revolted against the tyranny of Rome and by 70 AD were utterly destroyed. Those that escaped Rome's fury did so by having previously relocated to Jewish communities that were then thriving in numerous places around the Mediterranean and beyond. For example, by 69 AD, there were actually more Jews living in Alexandria, Egypt than there was in Jerusalem. The various Jewish dispersions are called the Diaspora. There are two primary Diasporas, the first was caused by the war with Babylonia in 597 BC, and the second was just prior to Rome's destruction of Jerusalem in 69 AD. There were numerous other Jewish dispersions but the two mentioned are those generally thought to represent the Diasporas.

Almost 1,900 years after the wholesale slaughter of the remaining Jews of Judea by Rome, European and Russian Jews that had managed to escape the Nazi death camps of World War II, returned to their Abrahamic-covenanted homeland. Settlers staked claim on a small portion of real estate that was not a part of any other nation's territorial boundaries. Jews seeking refuge from all over the world began to collect in the newly declared Jewish homeland, largely financed by their American counterparts.

In fulfillment of ancient biblical prophecy, on May 14, 1948, the United Nations recognized the re-created Jewish territory as the nation state of Israel. The people that were crowded out to make the new Jewish state are today called Palestinians, although that name also applied to some of the people in the neighboring state of Jordan. One day after Israel proclaimed independence the regular armies of five countries invaded with the express mandate to eliminate the Jews. Iraq, Egypt, Syria, Jordan and Lebanon jointly participated in the initial onslaught forcing the beleaguered Jewish immigrants to defend themselves.

In what became known as Israel's War of Independence the poorly equipped Jewish settlers repulsed the invaders after fifteen months of conflict. By early 1949 U.N. negotiators helped secure signed armistice agreements between Israel and Egypt, Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon, thus ending the conflict. Only Iraq refused to recognize Israel as a nation.

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<sup>78</sup> Although Jewish by birth, Jesus was raised during his early formative years in Egypt, thus he would be intimately familiar with the land and teachings of this ancient and learned country.