



From Atheist to Theist (Part 16)

History or Myth?

By

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The Hebrew Bible records the history of the world in some detail, but the history of Israel in great detail. Rather than a book of myth and legend, the Hebrew Bible was written as an historical narrative of a people and their God. That means their existence, both people and God, can be investigated according to historical detail.

When I was looking into the claims of Christianity in 1971, I found archaeological discoveries in Palestine of great interest in supporting the historicity of biblical writings. The nation of Israel, beginning with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, interacted with many other tribes, city- states and nations. We've already looked at some of the ancient finds from ancient Babylon, Assyria, Philistia and Moab. We turn now to Egypt.

Egypt is one of the oldest countries in the world. I wrote extensively about Egypt in A History of Man's Quest for Immortality (Fifth Estate Publishing, 2007). The biblical timeline of its history with Israel began about 4,000 years ago when Abram and his family traveled from Ur to Haran to Canaan to Egypt. What evidence exists to support this timeline?

Ur

Let's begin with Abraham's genealogy. Genesis 11 says that Abraham (Abram) descended from the line of Shem (son of Noah). After several generations a man named Terah married and had three sons: Abram, Nahor and Haran. They lived in Ur of the Chaldeans, but was that a real place? If Ur wasn't real, maybe Abram wasn't real.

Representatives from the British Museum excavated an ancient site in the middle 19th century A.D. believed to be the ancient city of Ur. It's located in the Dhi Qar Province of southeast Iraq – “the land bordering the head of the Persian Gulf between the Arabian desert and the Euphrates delta” (Encyclopedia Britannica Online). Was it plausible or even possible that archaeologists had actually discovered the ancient home of Terah and Abram? If so, what could they learn about the kind of life they would have lived before moving to Haran and later Canaan?

One of the obvious questions when studying the ancient Chaldeans is whether there were a people with that name during the lifetime of Abram. The Bible dates Abram's life from the late part of the Third Millennium B.C. to the early part of the Second Millennium B.C. (based on dating the Exodus according to 1 Kings 6:1), but I read that the first mention of Chaldea was in the annals of the Assyrian King Ashurnasirpal II from the middle of the Second Millennium B.C., centuries after Abram's life. Could it be that the Bible writers were wrong about Abram's birthplace or wrong about the existence of Abram?

Serious excavations of Ur (modern Tell el-Muqayyar, Iraq, "important city of ancient southern Mesopotamia (Sumer)" located about "140 miles (225 km) southeast of the site of Babylon" – Encyclopedia Britannica Online) began soon after World War I by archaeologist H.R. Hall of the British Museum. Sir Leonard Wooley, another famous British archaeologist, began an excavation of ancient Ur in the early 1920s that continued for more than ten years. It was a joint venture of the British Museum and the University of Pennsylvania.

Wooley's archaeological team discovered that settlers moved to the region during the Fourth Millennium B.C. Ur became the capital of southern Mesopotamia during the middle of the Third Millennium B.C. Cemetery excavations found royal tombs filled with great treasures and evidence of a highly developed civilization. The evidence included weapons, mosaic pictures, musical instruments, statues, engraved shell plaques and carved cylinder seals. Wooley also found evidence that the people who served the kings were buried with them. The findings also confirmed the existence of King Sargon I.

Other discoveries included a temple and ziggurat which helped date the city to the Third Millennium B.C. Wooley's team discovered that the citizens of Ur worshipped the moon god Nanna (Sin), "patron deity and divine king of Ur" (Encyclopedia Britannica Online). That would seem to indicate Abram and his family would have worshipped the gods of Ur. Is it possible that the father of monotheism had been a polytheist? Joshua, the man the Bible says led the people of Israel into the promised land, spoke briefly about the family of Abram serving "other gods" before God called

him from the “other side of the River” to travel to “the land of Canaan” (Joshua 24:2-3).

[Courtesy Bible-Archaeology.info]

The term “the River” at this point in Bible history usually identifies the Euphrates River, one of the four rivers mentioned in Genesis 2. It runs more than 1,700 miles from Eastern Turkey south through Syria and Iraq to where it joins with the Tigris River just north of the mouth of the Persian Gulf. When we look at a map of what would have been Abram’s journey from Ur to Haran to Canaan, he would have crossed the Euphrates River.

One of the discoveries Wooley’s team made in the royal cemetery in Ur is known as the Royal Standard of Ur. It was a hollow wooden box about the size of a small briefcase with inlaid mosaics, dating to about the middle of the Third Millennium B.C. Because of damage to the box from being buried for more than 4,000 years, Wooley’s team had to rebuild it from what remained. The mosaic pieces had kept their form in the soil, so excavators covered them with wax and were able to see the original design.

As Wooley and others looked at the reconstruction, they saw scenes of life in Ur depicting both times of war and times of peace. Details of both war and peace helped archaeologists date the box to the Third Millennium B.C.

The dating of the city of Ur to the Third Millennium is interesting for many reasons, but during my investigation about the existence of God, and specifically the God of the Bible, it helped confirm the possibility that Abram could have been a real person living in Ur during that time.

“This is the genealogy of Terah: Terah begot Abram, Nahor, and Haran. Haran begot Lot. And Haran died before his father Terah in his native land, in Ur of the Chaldeans. Then Abram and Nahor took wives: the name of Abram’s wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor’s wife, Milcah, the daughter of Haran the father of Milcah and the father of Iscah. But Sarai was barren; she had no child. And Terah took his son Abram and his grandson Lot, the son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, his son Abram’s wife, and they went out with them from Ur of the Chaldeans to

go to the land of Canaan; and they came to Haran and dwelt there. So the days of Terah were two hundred and five years, and Terah died in Haran.”

Genesis 11:27-32

Haran

Did Haran exist at the time of Terah and Abram? One of the archaeologists Wooley worked with prior to excavations at Ur was T.E. Lawrence (also known as Lawrence of Arabia). Lawrence surveyed an ancient site hundreds of miles north of Ur in modern Turkey known as Harran. Archaeologist Seton Lloyd, well known for his excavations in Egypt, also surveyed the area decades later and a serious excavation of Harran began in 1951 under the guidance of Dr. D.S. Rice. Ancient ruins there have also been dated to the Third Millennium B.C. Archaeologists discovered that the moon god “Sin” was the major deity of Harran. Harran was also located along an important trade route in the ancient Near East and became a vital merchant outpost.

The Bible states that Terah died in Haran and God called Abram to leave Haran and travel to “a land that I will show you.” That land was known as Canaan. Genesis 12 says that Abram moved his family to Canaan and it was there that God promised to give the land to Abram’s descendants. The Bible states that Abram built an altar in Shechem, pitched his tent with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east and built another altar there “and called on the name of the Lord.

Question – did Shechem, Bethel and Ai exist during the late Third Century B.C.?

Shechem

Archaeological excavations of Tell Balata (ancient Shechem) began in the early 20th Century A.D. by a group of German scholars and continued after World War I. American archaeologists continued the research in 1956. Interestingly, the Bible calls Shechem a “place” in Genesis 12 and a “city” in Genesis 33. That is consistent with archaeological findings that the earliest urbanization of Tell Balta was in the early part of the Second Millenium B.C. and that Shechem would not have had fortification walls when Abram traveled through the area.

Bethel

Excavations at the village of Beitin began in the mid-19th century by Professor Edward Robinson and continued into the 20th century with archaeologists W. F. Albright and James Kelso. They published “The Excavation of Bethel” three years before I began looking into the claims of the Bible. They believed the area had been populated from the late part of the Third Millennium B.C.

Ai

Edward Robinson was also involved in locating the ancient city of Ai, which was close to Bethel. The site of Ai, known as Et-Tell, is located less than two miles from Beitin (Bethel). W.F. Albright and John Garstang surveyed the area in the early 20th century and concluded that Et-Tell was the site of ancient Ai. Findings also dated the city to the Third Millennium B.C.

*Excavations in the region since 1971 point to the possibility that the ancient cities of Bethel and Ai may be located a short distance away from the earlier sites or that residents moved locations sometime during the Second Millennium B.C.”

** The Ebla Tablets, discovered in the mid-1970s, support the earlier findings of archaeologists concerning many of the areas I studied during my investigation, but I am not referring to them because the tablets were not available for my research in 1971.

***** Links to further research:**

<http://www.truthnet.org/Biblicalarcheology/2/Patriarchalperiod.htm>

<http://www.truthnet.org/Biblicalarcheology/4/>

<https://www.ancient-hebrew.org/biblical-history/archives-of-eb-la-and-the-bible.htm>

<https://biblearchaeologyreport.com/2019/04/12/biblical-sites-ai/>

<https://library.biblicalarchaeology.org/article/eb-la-and-the-bible/>

Next Time

As I investigated the claims of the Bible concerning Abram leaving Ur of the Chaldees, traveling to ancient Haran, then on to Canaan, I came across many archaeological discoveries that supported the dating of the story in Genesis about his life and journey. I'll share some 'clues' in the next part of our series, From Atheist to Theist.