



From Atheist to Theist (Part 17)

Clues and Questions

By

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I had been told for a long time that the stories in the Bible were fairy tales without any possible connection to real people and historical facts, but archaeologists had been finding clues for more than a century that demonstrated the historical nature of Genesis. Real people, living real lives, interacting with other real people. 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.

In the case of Abraham, whether he was real or myth would have a serious impact on billions of people who believe he is the “father” of their religion (e.g. Christianity, Judaism, Islam).

[A reminder that I am including only those archaeological references available for my research during the first half of 1971.]

“Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to dwell there, for the famine was severe in the land. And it came to pass, when he was close to entering Egypt, that he said to Sarai his wife, ‘Indeed I know that you are a woman of beautiful countenance. Therefore it will happen, when the Egyptians see you, that they will say, ‘This is his wife’; and they will kill me, but they will let you live. Please say you are my sister, that it may be well with me for your sake, and that I may live because of you.” So it was, when Abram came into Egypt, that the Egyptians saw the woman, that she was very beautiful. The princes of Pharaoh also saw her and commended her to Pharaoh. And the woman was taken to Pharaoh’s house. He treated Abram well for her sake. He had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male and female servants, female donkeys, and camels.” Genesis 12:10-16

Genesis claims that soon after Abram arrived with his family in Canaan he had to deal with a “famine in the land.” Abram traveled to Egypt to live there for awhile because the famine “was severe in the land.” In 1971, when I was investigating the Bible for the first time, were there any archaeological findings that might support severe famines in Canaan during the years Abram was first in the land? Any support for people in Canaan traveling to Egypt and being allowed to live there during famines? What other archaeological evidence is there for the story of Abram (Abraham) in the Bible?

Question

Are there any archaeological findings that might support severe famines in Canaan during the years Abram was first in the land and any support that people in Canaan traveled to Egypt to find food?

According to Genesis 12:4 Abram was 75-years-old when he left Haran for Canaan. Estimates of his birth date are toward the end of the 3rd Millennium, so that would place Abram's visit to Egypt toward the end of Egypt's First Intermediate Period and the beginning of the Middle Kingdom (approximately 2100-2040 BC). This included a time of a weakened central government and different leaders vying for the throne. Nebhepetre Mentuhotep II was a pharaoh during the 11th Dynasty (approximately 2046 – 1995 BC) and was able to finally reunite Egypt and bring the First Intermediary Period to an end.

Famines (often caused by drought) were a serious problem in the ancient world because the economy was rooted in agriculture. Egypt had a history of helping feed people in the region. Archaeologist/Egyptologist Gaston Maspero was the first to investigate the Pyramid of Unas in Saqqara in the latter part of the 19th century AD. King Unas was the last king of the 5th Dynasty (2464 – 2325 BC – Encyclopedia Britannica). Archaeologists Alessandro Barsanti and Sir Charles Firth investigated the ruins during the early part of the 20th century AD. Findings included a long causeway that linked the mortuary and valley temples. Relief scenes on the walls of the causeway showed starving people. Some Egyptologists have surmised that King Unas included the famine reliefs because feeding starving people would have been one of his good deeds to take with him into the afterlife (Ancient Egypt, Lorna Oakes and Lucia Gahlin, Barnes & Noble Books, 2003, pg. 95). Archaeologists also found scenes of trade with foreigners, some who may have come from Canaan.

French Egyptologist Jacques Vandier wrote in 1950 about the tombs of Ankhtyfy and Sobekhotep. In the tomb of Egyptian provincial governor Ankhtifi, Vandier found an inscription that read – “The whole of Upper Egypt died of hunger and each individual had reached such a state of hunger that he ate his own children. But I refused to see anyone die of hunger and gave to the north grain of Upper Egypt. And I do not think that anything like this has been done by the provincial governors who came before me....I brought life to the provinces of Hierakonpolis and Edfu, Elephantine and Ombos!” (Wikipedia) Dating of that famine is believed to be toward the end of the First Intermediate Period.

A wall painting found in a tomb dated from the late 20th century BC in Beni Hasan shows a group of Asiatic nomads visiting Egypt from Syria-Canaan (University of Pennsylvania, School of Arts and Sciences). Archaeologists explored the tombs of Beni Hasan during the late 19th and early 20th centuries AD. Their findings support the probability of trade and travel between Canaan and Egypt during Abram’s lifetime.

Question

Is there archaeological support for domesticated camels being used in Egypt during the Third Millennium BC?

Genesis claims that the pharaoh treated Abram well and gave him sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male and female servants, female donkeys, and camels. Camels domesticated in Egypt in the Third Millennium? Bible critic T.K. Cheyne wrote in 1899 that believing in domesticated camels in Abraham's time was "unfounded." British zoologist George Cansdale wrote in 1970 that domesticated camels in the Third Millennium "seem unlikely."

However, German paleontologist and geological archaeologist Friedrich Eberhard Zeuner (Institute of Archaeology, University of London) wrote in his book, *A History of Domesticated Animals* (Hutchinson, 1963), about the domestication of camels in the Egyptian region during the Third Millennium B.C.

Archaeologist Joseph P. Free wrote this 80 years ago:

“Archaeological evidence showing early knowledge of the camel in Egypt includes statuettes and figurines of camels, plaques bearing representations of camels, rock carvings and drawings, camel bones, a camel skull, and a camel hair rope. These objects, some twenty in number, range from the seventh century B.C. back to the period before 3000. “(Abraham’s Camels, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, July 1944, 187-93)

British Egyptologist Kenneth A. Kitchen (School of Archaeology and Oriental Studies, University of Liverpool) also wrote about archaeological support of camels being used in Egypt during the time of Abraham.

“It is often asserted that the mention of camels and of their use is an anachronism in Genesis. This charge is simply not true, as there is both philological and archaeological evidence for knowledge and use of this animal in the early second millennium BC and even earlier. While a possible reference to camels in a

fodder-list from Alalakh (c. eighteenth century BC) has been disputed, the great Mesopotamian lexical lists that originated in the Old Babylonian period show a knowledge of the camel c. 2000/1700 BC, including its domestication. Furthermore, a Sumerian text from Nippur from the same early period gives clear evidence of domestication of the camel by then, by its allusions to camel's milk. Camel bones were found in house ruins at Mari of the pre-Sargonic age (twenty-fifth to twenty-fourth centuries BC), and also in various Palestinian sites from 2000 to 1200 BC. From Byblos comes an incomplete camel-figurine of the nineteenth/eighteenth centuries BC. This and a variety of other evidence cannot be lightly disregarded. For the early and middle second millennium BC, only limited use is presupposed by either the biblical or external evidence until the twelfth century BC.” (*Ancient Orient and Old Testament*, Kenneth A. Kitchen, London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1966, pp. 79-80).

Question

Is there archaeological support for Abram and his wife using a female servant to produce an heir?

Ancient documents from the Second and Third Millennium BC were discovered in the town of Yorghana Tepe in Iraq during the late 19th century AD. Archaeologists with the American Schools of Oriental Research and Harvard University conducted digs during the early part of the 20th century and discovered hundreds of cuneiform tablets. Most were legal and business documents from the Hurrian period during the early Second Millennium BC. Some dated to the Akkadian Empire period in the Third Millennium. The tablets are housed in the Iraq Museum (Baghdad), Harvard Semitic Museum (Cambridge, Massachusetts) and the Oriental Institute (Chicago).

Yorghnan Tepe was known as Nuzu (or Nuzi) during the Second Millennium (Akkadian name was Gasur). It's located near the Tigris River, north of Abraham and Sarah's birthplace of Ur. The tablets shed light on the lives of people living in Mesopotamia during the Second and Third Millenniums, including family practices. It was common practice for a childless couple to adopt a slave as an heir (e.g. Eliezer of Damascus – Genesis 15:2) and to produce an heir through a female servant (e.g. Hagar – Genesis 16:1-4).

Next Time

The possibility of Abraham being a real person during that time period had the ring of truth to it as I investigated the lifestyles of heads of family (e.g. tribal chief, nomadic/semi-nomadic chieftain). However that was a big jump for me from “fairy tale” to “possible.” I’ll share why in the next part of From Atheist to Theist.