

Abraham And Isaac Were Real People

'These are the families of the sons of Noah within their nations; and these nations spread across the earth after the flood' (Genesis 10:32).

'This is the history of the generations of Shem. Shem was 100 years old when he became the father of Arpachshad, two years after the flood ... and had other sons and daughters' (Genesis 11:10 & 11).

From Noah's son Shem to Abram was ten generations. Noah's family slowly moved east through Mesopotamia towards what is now Iraq. Through Shem's family line came Terah. When Terah was around 70'ish, he had four children; Abram, Nahor, Haran and Sarai (Genesis 11:26; 20:12). Terah's eldest son Haran died in Ur of the Chaldees (Genesis 11:28) then the whole surviving family; Terah, his children Nahor, Abram and Sarai, and Haran's two children, son Lot and daughter Milcah moved from Ur to a city named Haran and settled there until Terah died (Genesis 11:29 to 31). Haran is in modern Syria.

Ur of the Chaldees is near modern day al-Basrah (Basra) on the edge of al-Hajar Desert in southern Iraq, not far from where the Euphrates and Tigris rivers meet. If you look at a modern atlas, you will see that area is still called Mesopotamia. There have been extensive excavations of Ur, which has shown us there was a high state of civilisation with a civic authority much like our civic councils. The houses were made of large stones about ½ metre square and mud bricks. The average house was two storeys and had between ten and twenty rooms. They had kitchens, bathrooms and toilets built in the houses, and each house had running water drawn from the nearby river and fed by aqueducts. Children went to school; school students studied reading, writing and arithmetic, mathematics, multiplication, division, learned square and cube root, just as do students today. Ur had detailed commercial trading. The name 'Abram' has been found etched into clay tablets. These people were not primitive 'cave men' but were intelligent, family oriented, hard working, well organised, civilised people who lived in a cohesive society. Abraham's family moved away from Ur to Haran. Imagine how hard it would have been for Abraham and Sarah to move from their well built, weatherproof home and all this luxury, to living a nomadic life in a tent!

Terah and Abraham's family was a real family, and they were close. Terah's son Nahor married Milcah, who was his niece (Genesis 11:29). Abraham married Terah's daughter, his half sister Sarah (Genesis 20:12). Abraham's son Isaac married his first cousin Rebekah, who was Nahor and Milcah's daughter (Genesis 24:47). Isaac's son Jacob married two of his first cousins, Leah and Rachel (Genesis 27:43; 29:13 & 14; 29:25 & 28). At that time Terah, his son Nahor and Nahor's son Laban were idolaters (Genesis 31:30). A story from Abraham's time is as follows: Terah ran a shop selling idols but Abraham strongly disapproved. One day while in charge of Terah's shop, Abraham smashed the idols with a mallet and smashed the arms of the largest idol. When Terah returned and saw the smashed idols, he angrily asked Abraham what had happened. Abraham told Terah the idols had quarrelled and the largest idol had smashed the smaller ones. Terah furiously told Abraham that was impossible because they had no power of life to do such things, to which Abraham calmly replied, "Why then do you serve them? Why do you pray to them? Do they answer your prayers?"

After the death of Terah, the Lord told Abraham to move from Haran to Canaan, several kilometres south west of the city of Haran (Genesis 12:1). Nahor, Milcah and their children stayed behind in Haran. This was about 4,000 years ago. Quite suddenly, God made Abraham an extraordinary offer. The Lord told Abraham to go to the place that He would show him and God would make him a great nation (Genesis 12:1 & 2). God did not quietly introduce himself to Abraham; the Lord just said to go and Abraham packed up and went. Abraham's response indicates an already stable relationship between Abraham and the Lord. The voice of God must have been very powerful for Abraham to believe so completely. Abraham must have walked along one of the many ancient trading routes to get to Canaan, and Abraham's journey ends the time in the Bible that is set in Mesopotamia. Abraham left the area that was the core of creation and early man. He was leaving the place where the rivers had nourished his family for about 2,000 years.

Abraham, Sarah and their nephew Lot became nomadic for a time and walked through the land of Canaan to Shechem and Moreh (Genesis 12:5 & 6), then on to the mountains at Bethel and Ai (Genesis 12:8), then south to Negeb (verse 9), then to Egypt (verse 10), then back to Negeb in the country of Judah (Genesis 13:1), then back to Bethel and Ai (Genesis 13:3). It is not until we travel to the Middle East that we can see how much walking Abraham must have done. Because of overcrowding, Lot left Abraham and moved to the lush green Jordan Valley but Abraham stayed in Canaan (Genesis 13:6 to 12).

When Abraham left Mesopotamia, it would not be water and rivers that determined their destiny, but the belief in God. That was the start of a brand new cycle in the Bible. There was creation then destruction in the flood. It is almost as though God was walking side by side with Abraham as they shared the 'creation' of a new nation. Almost every other peoples, lands and nations on earth were ignored by God for another 2,000 years – until Paul began preaching to the Gentiles. Mesopotamia was a large empire and Egypt was a large power. Both empires had established religious beliefs. Canaan was a fresh new place because there was no religion established there at that time, so it was the obvious choice for God to put Abraham there to begin what would eventually be Judaism and the belief in the One true God. There was another probable reason why God placed Abraham in that area. The Lord's new nation would be in a place where they could have the most influence over a vast number of people. The Lord created the nation of Israel to tell the spiritually lost world about Himself, His laws, His expectations for mankind, His character, His mercy, His salvation and His love for all humanity, unlike the cruel pagan gods. The children of Israel were placed in the area where they would be the most effective witness. Canaan at that time in history was the only place where traders could travel between Asia and Europe to the north and Africa to the south. To the west were arid desert areas and to the east was the Mediterranean Sea. Ancient traders and travellers interacted with others enroute and they would have shared stories about the Israelites and their magnificent God of Heaven.

Apart from the times of drought, 4,000 years ago, Canaan was a very green place with high rainfall and the people could grow crops. Abraham finally settled in Hebron (Genesis 13:18) which was so lush and fertile, it took two men to carry one cluster of grapes (Numbers 13:23). The men were so impressed with the size of the fruit, they carried it back to camp (Numbers 13:26). Caleb, Joshua's assistant eventually inherited all of Hebron (Joshua 14:13). There have been archaeological finds in Hebron with Abraham's name inscribed on them so we know he was really there, plus, the area is still called Hebron.

Abraham was extremely wealthy (Genesis 13:2) but in spite of all his success, he was still childless and cried out to God in what seems to be real frustration (Genesis 15:3). The Lord promised Abraham he would have a son and initially, Abraham believed it (Genesis 15:6) then he doubted the Lord was going to give him the land (Genesis 15:8). Sarah became tired of waiting for a child and because of her age, thought she never would have a child, so she told Abraham to have sex with the maid Hagar, who bore Ishmael (Genesis 16:1 to 15). Abraham was 86 when Ishmael was born (Genesis 16:16) and another 13 years later, God visited Abraham and promised him a child with Sarah (Genesis 17:16). Abraham was so amused he fell on his face and laughed (Genesis 17:17) then he prayed for Ishmael (verse 18). Then Sarah laughed (Genesis 18:12) because she was so old she could not believe it was possible to have a baby. After Isaac was born, Sarah could still hardly believe it happened (Genesis 21:6 & 7). Reading through these passages of scripture, we can feel the strong emotions of these very normal people.

Poor Hagar suffered dreadfully, though. First, she was forced to have a child with her employer (Genesis 16:3), then she was thrashed by Sarah while pregnant (verse 6), when Hagar ran away from Sarah (verse 8), the Lord told her to go back to Sarah (verse 9). Thirteen years later, Hagar and Ishmael were cast out of the settlement into the wilderness which must have been a terrifying ordeal because they became lost in the desert and sobbed with despair. Eventually, the Lord came to their rescue and showed them where they could find water. They both survived (Genesis 21:9 to 21) and moved to Paran (roughly half way between the Dead Sea and Gaza), then when Ishmael was an adult he married an Egyptian. Ishmael and Isaac must have somehow kept in contact and the sibling rivalry must have abated, because 75 years later the half-brothers buried Abraham when he died (Genesis 25:9).

Isaac had a challenging future and there was a lot riding on his shoulders because Abraham's promises were all to take place through Isaac (Genesis 17:4 to 16). Through Isaac and his offspring, the Lord would make the covenant (Genesis 17:21), build the nation of people called the Hebrews (Genesis 14:13), the Children of Israel (Genesis 46:8), the Israelites (Exodus 9:7), and much later, the Jews (2 Kings 16:6). Through Isaac, the Lord would give the people the land that was later called Israel (Genesis 17:8; Exodus 32:13; Joshua 10:42). Ishmael was not to share in Isaac's inheritance (Genesis 21:10 & 12) and many years later, Isaac's descendants brought forth the Messiah (Matthew 1:2; Luke 3:34).

Abraham's greatest test was when the Lord told him to offer Isaac, his son of promise, as a burnt offering (Genesis 22:1 to 19). Even then, Abraham had so much faith he did not hesitate to obey God, although he did think about it and came to the conclusion, God could raise Isaac from the dead if He had to (Hebrews 11:17 to 19). Abraham was told to take Isaac to a region called Moriah where the temple was later built. Jerusalem is the place where Abraham offered Isaac as a sacrifice, and we know the Only Son (Jesus, Yeshua) was sacrificed outside Jerusalem. It was three days journey from home and Sarah's tent (Genesis

22:4). If Sarah had known about what the Lord had asked Abraham to do, she probably would have become hysterical because Isaac was her only child, so the sacrifice was to take place a long way away from her.

When Sarah died, Abraham bought a field in Hebron that had a cave where he could bury her (Genesis 23:17 to 19). We do not know which of the many caves she was buried in, but the caves that were there in Abraham's time are all still there today. After Sarah died, Abraham married a woman named Keturah (Genesis 25:1 & 2) and had six more sons. All of these sons plus Ishmael were sent away to the east country, away from Isaac, the son of promise and away from the Promised Land (Genesis 25:5 & 6). Everything was to go to Isaac and his son Jacob, who was about 15 when Abraham died. Isaac was 40 when he married Rebekah (Genesis 25:20), was 60 when Esau and Jacob were born (Genesis 25:26) and was 75 when Abraham died (Genesis 25:7). Remember that Abraham was 100 years old when Isaac was born and was 175 when he died, making Isaac 75 when his father died.

Abraham was the first man to believe in monotheism. Just by pure faith in the Lord, Abraham went to Canaan, to a land where he did not know a thing about the place and he did not know the people. Abraham did not even know where he was going because the Lord said to go to the place the Lord would show him (Genesis 12:1). The trust, faith and belief Abraham had in the Lord was accredited to him as righteousness (Genesis 15:6). God was able to bless Abraham in a way He could not bless any other man alive at that time in history, because of their sin and idolatry. The Lord knew Abraham would faithfully teach his children and those in his house, the way of the Lord (Genesis 18:19). Because of Abraham's righteousness and through those blessings promised by God, Abraham became the father of all believers, and people have been walking in his footsteps for thousands of years.

Abraham's nephew Lot was a real person, and was whisked away just before the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The Dead Sea, which the Bible calls the Salt Sea, is the lowest inland sea in the world. In the southern tip in the Salt Sea is an unusual and rare formation. Because the Salt Sea is so low, the water evaporates rapidly making the sea six times saltier than the ocean. The salty deposits scar the landscape for miles around. When the scriptures tell us the Lord rained fire and brimstone on Sodom, Gomorrah and the surrounding cities Admah and Zeboiim (Genesis 19:24 & 25; Deuteronomy 29:23), archaeological evidence shows us that is exactly what happened. The whole area has a huge amount of sulphur (brimstone) and salt deposits. There is no trace of the cities the Lord destroyed, because He destroyed them. They are burned as though they had been in a furnace (Genesis 19:28) and are gone forever because of the sin that was taking place within them (Genesis 18:20; 19:15). Abraham's nephew Lot, whom the Lord rescued from the city of Sodom, went to live in the caves (Genesis 19:30). Just like Abraham went from city dwelling to a tent-dwelling nomad, so also Lot went from the city to the caves. We can see that man went from city living to cave dwelling, not from being 'cave men' to building cities!

The Bible was set in real places and talks about real people and real lands. The events written about in the Bible did not happen on another planet. All of those events happened here on earth to real people. When we visit the Holy Land and walk where the patriarchs walked, we can actually walk through the Bible. We can feel the same ground under our feet that they felt; smell the same flowers; listen to the same breeds of birds; taste the same honey that is made by their native stingless bees and we can see the exact same scenery the Bible characters saw. The Bible stories are universal, yet they are so individual they can become part of each one of us.

Amen and God bless you.

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