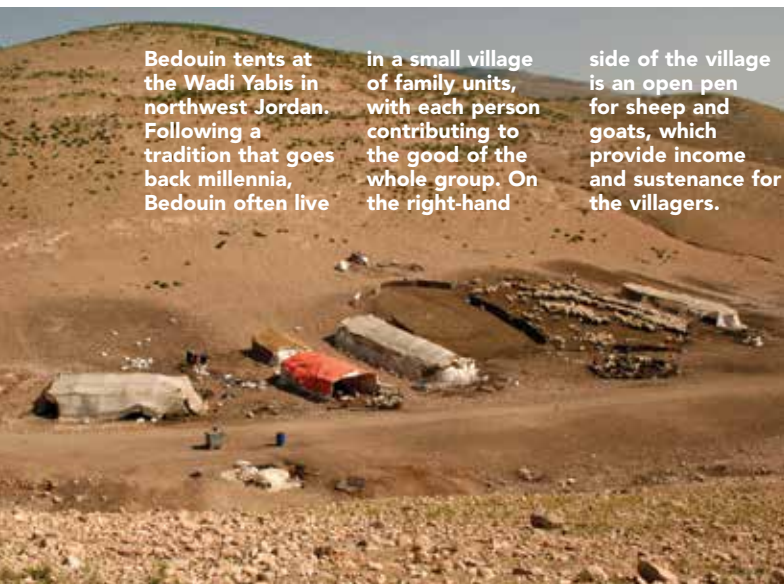




# Abraham's Family

*An Overview*



Bedouin tents at the Wadi Yabis in northwest Jordan. Following a tradition that goes back millennia, Bedouin often live

in a small village of family units, with each person contributing to the good of the whole group. On the right-hand

side of the village is an open pen for sheep and goats, which provide income and sustenance for the villagers.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRENT BRUCE (60/8005)

## By Roberta Jones

**G**OD LED ABRAM to leave the Mesopotamian city of Ur,<sup>1</sup> travel to Haran, and later go to Canaan (Acts 7:2-4; Gen. 11:27-12:5). Eventually, God changed Abram's name to Abraham and gave him and his descendants the land of Canaan (17:5-8). Abram produced eight children by three women (16:15; 21:2-3; 25:1-6). Members of Abram's family showed fear, favoritism, and jealousy, mixed with love, laughter, and faith. Abraham lived from about 2166 to 1991 B.C.,<sup>2</sup> but his life teaches us today.

### Abram in Ur and Haran

Different peoples of the ancient Near East shared similar patterns for family formation and structure. Rulers commonly had multiple wives and many children. For instance, one king of Ur acquired nine wives and fathered over 50 children.<sup>3</sup>

The patron deity of Ur was an ever-present reminder of people's desire for multiple offspring. The moon-god (called "Nanna") dominated the city. Just as the moon in its cycles would disappear and return to fullness, the people of Mesopotamia believed Nanna had

**Right: Partially reconstructed ruins of the ziggurat at Ur. Ancient peoples believed the gods would come down from the heavens, descend the steps of the ziggurat, and bless the city below.**



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ PHILIP J. GAFFNEY (32/2/14)

regenerative powers. Thus they attributed to Nanna the power to "keep herb, herd and humanity fertile and prolific."<sup>4</sup> Residents also believed Nanna owned the land and required tithes and rent. Farmers brought butter, oil, sheep, and cattle to Nanna's temple. Jewelers brought silver and gold. The temple complex included a step tower, or ziggurat.<sup>5</sup>

Although the city of Ur had a patron deity (as did many cities in the ancient Near East), worship was primarily centered in the home, with the father serving as the family priest. Abram's father, Terah, worshiped other gods (Josh. 24:2). As the family priest, Terah likely maintained altars, conducted worship, and offered sacrifices. Fathers, or father figures, naturally urged their relatives to worship traditional family gods.

Terah left Ur with two sons—Abram and his wife Sarai, and Nahor

and his wife Milcah. Terah also took Lot, his fatherless grandson. Terah and his family arrived in Haran, a prominent trade center with another moon-god temple.<sup>6</sup>

Hittites lived northwest of Haran during Abraham's lifetime and in later centuries. Their myths reflect general thoughts about family relationships. In one such myth, a Hittite, Kessi, married a beautiful woman "endowed with everything." While charmed by his new wife, Kessi quit bringing thick loaves of bread to the gods. Spiteful gods thus hid the wild game. In a separate myth, Telipinu, son of the storm god, disappeared and removed his blessing. Then, wheat and barley remained unripe. Cattle, sheep, and humans no longer reproduced. In yet a third story, a childless fisherman found an abandoned child and told his wife to lie in bed and wail. To





**Right: Beehive houses at Haran, which is located in modern south-western Turkey.**

**Below: Dated to about 2500 B.C., an alabaster cup dedicated to Nanna, the moon god of Ur.**



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ LOUISE KOHL SMITH (32/27/9)



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRENT BRUCE/ UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA MUSEUM OF ARCHAEOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY (32/4/55A)

celebrate the birth, friends brought bread, beer, and fat.<sup>7</sup>

### **Abram's New Land of Canaan**

After Terah died, the Lord commanded Abram to leave Haran (Gen. 11:27-12:1). So, Abram, Sarai, and Lot obeyed (12:1-5). In Canaan, Abram, demonstrating his leadership role for the family, built an altar for worship. God promised to give the land to Abram's offspring and to make them a great nation. In addition, through Abram God would bless "all the peoples on earth." Further, God would curse his enemies and bless those who blessed him (vv. 2-7). Abram met his new neighbors and their many gods, the polytheistic Canaanites. These residents of Canaan worshiped gods of fertility, grain, love, war, and plagues. Dedicated individuals practiced divination, human sacrifice, and serpent

worship. Sacred prostitution supposedly guaranteed fertile women, fertile animals, and abundant field crops.<sup>8</sup>

Examples of fertility flourished in Abram and Sarai's lives. Their livestock increased, and their servants bore children (13:2; 14:14). Yet Sarai and Abram's desire to hear the pitter-patter of little feet in the tent remained unfulfilled. The Lord God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth, had not yet given them a child (14:22; 15:2).

Gazing upward one night, Abram saw stars too numerous to count. Did looking at the night sky make Abram think of his ancestors, the descendants of whom were still worshiping the moon-god Nanna? No one knows.

Scripture records only the result of that night. The childless man, the foreigner from Ur, the new man in Canaan, believed the One who made the stars and the moon. God credited Abram's faith as righteousness and assured him of a long life and a burial. In spite of God's promises and in spite of His speaking to Abram in a vision, Abram remained childless (15:1-16:1a).

### **Abraham's Three Families**

How could Abram find an heir? His nephew, Lot, was no longer an option. The men had separated over pasture for their flocks (13:8-12). Abram also considered his servant Eliezer as a possible heir (15:2-3). Abram waited and wondered. In ancient Near Eastern cultures, men frequently had concubines, women with less status than a wife. Another common custom assumed a slave would produce a child if a man had an infertile wife. Sarai offered her Egyptian slave, Hagar, to Abram. The scheme worked. As Hagar carried Abram's child, however, she and Sarai had conflict. An heir in Hagar's womb did not improve her role in the household. Sarai and Abram still considered Hagar to be Sarai's possession—a mere slave (16:2-6). In the muddle of



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broken lives, God remained faithful to His plan. He changed Abram's name to Abraham, meaning "father of many" (17:5). Sarai became Sarah, a "princess" (vv. 15-16).<sup>9</sup>

God gave Abraham a second son. Three men appeared on a hot day as Abraham sat in the tent door. He recognized these men as heavenly messengers. Abraham led the family unit to show hospitality to the guests. He brought water and had Sarah to bake bread. Abraham chose a tender calf, which a male servant prepared. Then, Abraham served the meal to the men (18:1-8). The Lord said that within a year's time Sarah would have a son. Sarah, already elderly, laughed to herself. When God questioned Abraham about Sarah's laughter, the fearful woman declared she had not laughed (vv. 9-15).

Isaac—the son chosen by God—arrived about a year later. Sarah laughed, this time with joy, and credited God for her happiness. After Sarah weaned Isaac, she ordered Abraham to drive out Hagar and her son, Ishmael. God, of course, provided for the slave and her rejected son (21:1-7,10-21). Isaac remained the

**Above: Tomb of the Patriarchs at Machpelah. Genesis 23:19 says, "Abraham buried his wife Sarah in the cave of the field at Machpelah near Mamre (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan" (HCSB).**

**Right: Terra-cotta plaque from Ur showing a mother and child; Babylonian; dated about 2000–1750 B.C.**

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO: BRITISH MUSEUM, LONDON (1/16/48)



child of promise, regardless of any past or future events (v. 12).

After the Bible describes Sarah's death (23:1-20), it mentions that Abraham married Keturah. This marriage produced six children (25:1-6). Earlier, Abraham had reluctantly sent away Hagar and Ishmael, with only food and water (21:8-21). Now, Abraham gave gifts to Keturah's children. He instructed these offspring to go eastward, away from Isaac (25:6).

Ideas of suitable marriages changed. During Abraham's lifetime, men and women married within the immediate

family unit. Milcah, Nahor's niece, became his wife: Abram married Sarai, his half-sister (11:27-29; 20:12). Scripture later prohibited marriages of close relatives (Lev. 18:6-18). God also banned marriages with foreigners, because they worshiped false gods (Deut. 7:1-4). Abraham's land contained many groups of pagan people. From one of these groups, Abraham's grandson chose two wives. Isaac and Rebekah grieved and felt bitter about their son Esau's marriages (Gen. 26:34-35).

### Faith For All

Abraham believed in the Lord and worshiped Him, the Everlasting God (15:6; 21:33). Today, believers in Christ travel a similar path. The apostle Paul explained, "And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, heirs according to the promise" (Gal. 3:29). We can gaze at the same moon and stars and accept Abraham's faith, now through Christ. **B**

1. All Scripture quotations are from the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB).
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