

Abraham's Travels

BY ALAN RAY BUESCHER

Interior of a Bedouin tent. Continuing still today, Bedouin have a long-established tradition of extending hospitality to travelers and visitors.

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ARCHAEOLOGISTS care little for wandering nomads—they leave little or no material evidence of their lives for future generations to discover. So likewise with Abraham, who built no cities or buildings, and left no potsherds, tools, or jewelry in garbage dumps or tombs (at least that anyone has discovered). The concept of Abraham as a nomad or semi-nomad, however, may not survive the test of scriptural scrutiny. Old Testament scholar, D.J. Wiseman, described Abraham's lifestyle more akin to pastoral nomadism as described in the Mari texts, in which seasonal farming accompanied the herding of flocks and cattle close to town and cities.¹

When Abram set out from Ur of the Chaldeans with his father, Terah; his wife, Sarai; and his nephew, Lot; they had chosen Canaan as their final destination (Gen. 11:31). Genesis provides no reason for their settlement

in Haran nor how long they lived there (perhaps 50 years at most—quite an extended stay), nor why they had intended to go to Canaan. Nevertheless, after Terah died, God called Abram to go to the land that He would show him: their original destination of Canaan.

Abram's (and his entourage's) entry into Canaan brought them along the ridge route through the central hill country (12:6-8), farther south to the Negev (v. 9), and then down to Egypt after famine struck (v.10). Eventually they returned to the Negev and back into the central hill country of Canaan, with Hebron becoming their primary place of residence after a brief excursion further north "by stages" to Bethel (13:3, HCSB; see also v. 18). Eleven years after arriving in Canaan (including the brief time in Egypt), Hagar gave birth to Abram's first son, Ishmael (16:3,15-16). They remained in Hebron for the next 13 or 14 years



before moving to Gerar in the Negev where Isaac was born (17:1; 20:1; 21:5). Scripture provides no reason for Abraham's departing Hebron for the Negev. Twenty-five years provides ample time to consider a place home. Leaving Hebron would have required a good reason. Seeking better pasture for flocks due to climatic changes would qualify as a good reason, especially since famine had once sent Abraham and his family to Egypt; but Scripture's silence breeds only speculation.

Abraham's time in the land of promise significantly illustrates his lifestyle: he spent most of those 100 years settled in Hebron or in the Negev (in Gerar and Beersheba), although he apparently lived in tents rather than permanent structures (e.g., see 13:18; 18:1). In the Negev, the area around Beersheba provides the only land available for farming without water irrigation;

but, agriculture did not rank as the primary means of earning a living. The numerous ancient remains discovered at sites in the Negev reveal their main function as caravan stations for trade merchants traveling to and from Egypt.²

Perhaps Abraham participated in this trade, which could account partially for his wealth accumulation. He had flocks, cattle, and camels; he also possessed flour for baking (18:6-8) either from farming or via trade with sedentary farmers in nearby settlements. He possessed much silver and gold (13:2), which he earned or inherited from his time spent in Haran. Additionally, he may have accumulated some wealth in Egypt and Canaan through market transactions. Regardless, Abraham knew how to handle his finances.

Scholars have debated the specific time period in which Abraham

sojourned in the land of Canaan. God indicated that the Hebrews would endure 400 years of enslavement in Egypt (15:13). More than 110 years elapsed from Abraham's death at the age of 175 to Joseph's death at age 110. Jacob was 15 years old when Abraham died (see 25:26). So Joseph did not arrive into this world until after Abraham's death, after which, however long it took that generation to die (see Ex. 1:6), a new pharaoh enslaved the remaining Hebrews. Add almost 40 years for the wilderness wanderings under the leadership of Moses, and more than 550 years elapsed from Abraham's death until his descendants settled in Canaan.

The earliest extra-biblical written record for Israel's entry into the land of Canaan is on a stone carving known as the Merneptah Stele, which is dated sometime between 1213 and 1203 B.C.³ This inscription



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Left: Camels grazing in central Israel.

Lower right: Ruins of Beersheba in southern Israel; farmland is in the distance.

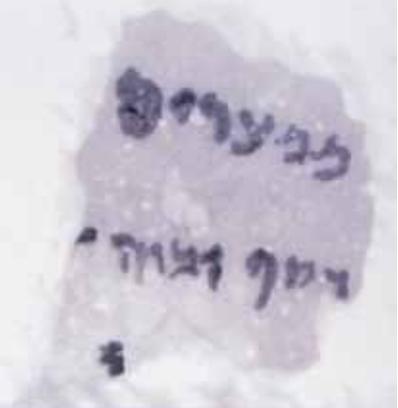
Below: Ruins of the palace at Mari in modern Syria. Mari was the capital city of the Amorites from about 2000–1750 B.C. The palace covered over 6 acres and had over 300 rooms. One of the most remarkable finds at Mari was the 15,000-plus texts that detailed everyday life in Mari before its fall. Many of the names on the texts are the same as some from the Old Testament, including Noah, Abram, Laban, Jacob, Benjamin, and Levi.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ JAMES MCLEMORE (21/28/15)

would thus indicate the date for Abraham's death at approximately 1753 B.C. at the latest, with the date for Abraham's first entry into Canaan at approximately 1853 B.C. at the latest, and his birth at about 1928 B.C. at the latest. These calculations place Abraham's lifetime

HAVE GOLD, WILL TRAVEL

Genesis 13:1-3 - Fragment and an infrared photo of one of the Dead Sea Scrolls. The text comes from Genesis 13:1-3 and describes Abram coming from Egypt into the Negev. It reads, "from Egypt...in silver and gold...between Bethel and...."



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in the Middle Bronze IIA period (abbreviated MBIIA), or about 2000–1800/1750 B.C. The Merneptah Stele does not indicate, however, the date the Israelites entered the land by this date. First Kings 6:1 states, "Solomon began to build the temple for the LORD in the four hundred eightieth year after the Israelites came out of the land of Egypt, in

the fourth year of his reign over Israel" (HCSB). Solomon's reign began about 970 B.C., so this presents a date of about 1446 for the exodus. Add 510 years (400 years of enslavement and 110 years for Joseph), and Abraham's death is pushed back to about 1950 B.C., still in MBIIA.

Israeli archaeologist Amihai Mazar believes the archaeological discoveries of the Middle Bronze II



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period provide similarities with the patriarchal record in the Bible that cannot be ignored. The Canaanite culture became established primarily along the northern coastal plain and eastward through the valleys of Jezreel and Beth-shean during MBIIA. The Canaanites built large fortified cities that had huge man-made earth ramparts, suggesting strong organization, either public or private. These Canaanites likely came from the coastal plain around Tyre and also from Aram (modern Syria). Egyptian documents from Byblos as well as documents from Mari during MBIIA contain West Semitic (Amorite) names among the population of Aram and Canaan. One of the Mari texts contains the earliest record of the designation “Canaanite” as one of the population groups of the area. Furthermore, West Semitic or Amorite names correspond closely to Canaanite names.⁴ Significantly, customs during the Middle Bronze Ages continued for hundreds of years if not longer, making chronological dating of events that much more difficult.⁵

Above: The modern city of Hebron, located in what is now the West Bank. The prominent structure in the center marks the cave of the patriarchs in which Abraham, Sarah, Rebecca,

Isaac, Jacob, and Leah are buried.

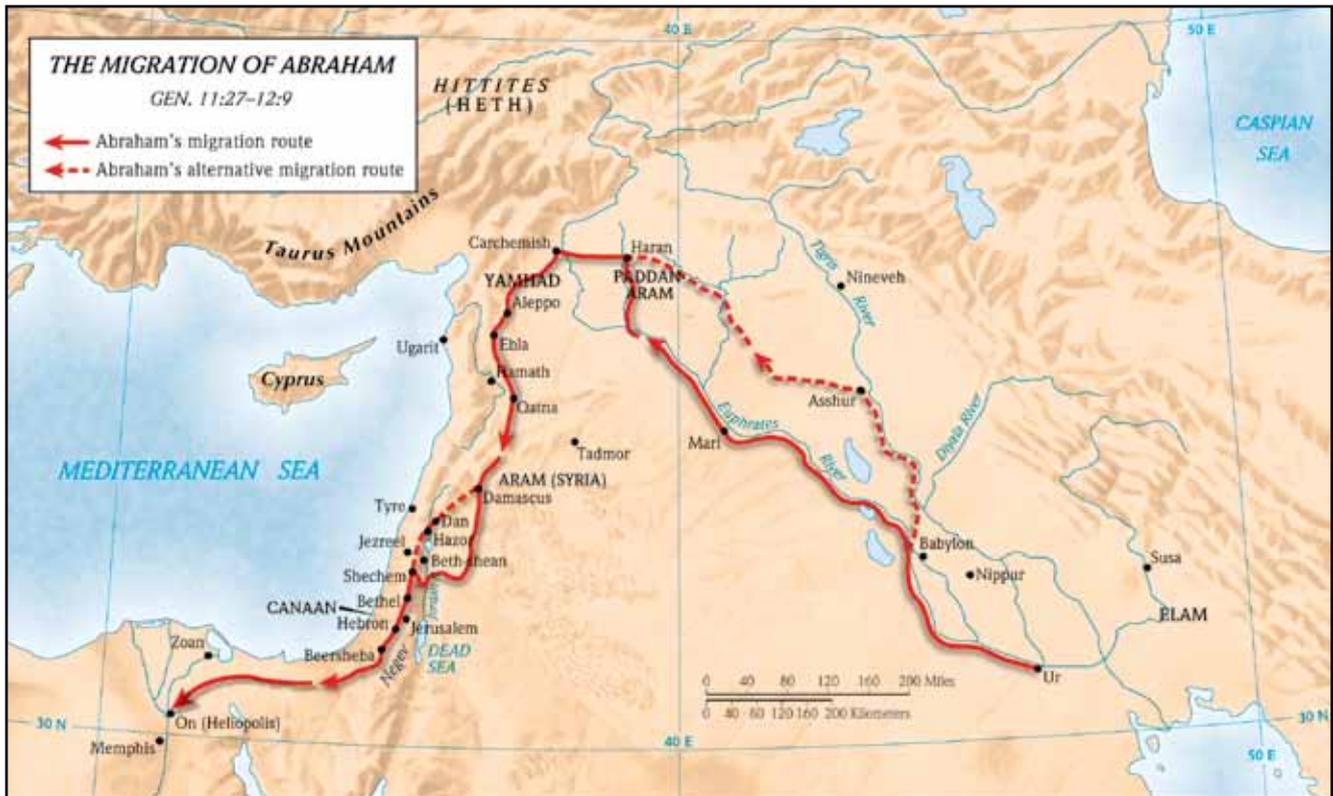
Right: In southern Israel, the northern Negev Desert where it meets the central plains. The Judean hills rise in the background.

This Amorite population continued to migrate east into Babylon during MBIIB-C (ca. 1800/1750–1550 B.C.), spreading its culture throughout the northern portion of the Fertile Crescent. During this time, foreign rulers known as the Hyksos came to power in Egypt. These outsiders were none other than Canaanites. Thus a West-Semitic/Amorite/Canaanite culture extended from Egypt, northward along the coastal plain of the promised land, across the Jezreel valley, and north along the Fertile Crescent to Babylon. This Canaanite influence that began in MBIIA, likely could have made a Semitic language the common language of the day for international trade purposes, and could explain how Abraham communicated with



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO: KEN TOUGHTON (2/3/11)

the Egyptians and Abimelech in the Negev. Akkadian, a Semitic language, became the universal language of scribes, priests, and the legal community throughout the ancient Near East by MBIIB-C and likely



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began its dominance in MBIIA, especially since the cultural transition between MBIIA and MBIIB-C proceeded gradually with no clear distinction between the two.⁶

Abraham lived in the Negev for perhaps 37 years (from the birth of Isaac to Sarah's death at age 127 in Hebron; see Gen. 23:1). Abraham spent the remaining 38 years of his life in Hebron; there Ishmael and Isaac buried him with Sarah in the cave he had purchased from the Hittites for Sarah's burial. Twenty-five years in Hebron, 37 years in the Negev, and then 38 years back in Hebron: Abraham did not travel much. Southern Canaan had become home, and yet, he never truly possessed the land. In the Negev, he "lived as a foreigner in the land of the Philistines for many days" (21:34, HCSB). Abimelech respected Abraham, and they lived peacefully as neighbors despite a couple of misunderstandings. In

Hebron, the Hittites also respected Abraham greatly, yet Abraham considered himself "a resident alien," owning only one piece of property: a burial cave.

Genesis provides a simple explanation of why Abraham went to Canaan: he believed and obeyed God. God did not promise to give the land solely to Abraham (15:7) but to his descendants as well (12:7; 15:18). Perhaps for this reason Abraham considered himself no more than a sojourner; God's covenant contained no severability clause concerning Abraham's descendants and the land. Abraham simply did not live long enough to see his seed possess the land (Heb. 11:13).

Abraham lived in Canaan in anticipation of God's future fulfillment of his promise concerning Abraham's descendants. Abraham had no message about God to deliver to a foreign people. He had no

goal to establish a nation. He simply inhabited the land by faith in spite of famine, in spite of nearly allowing Pharaoh and Abimelech to tamper with the mother of his descendent of the promise, and in spite of living as a man without a country most of his life. External and internal factors did not thwart God's plan. As Psalm 37:3 instructs, Abraham simply trusted God and lived accordingly. **B**

1. D.J. Wiseman, "Abraham Reassessed" in *Essays of the Patriarchal Narratives [Essays]*, ed. A.R. Millard and D.J. Wiseman (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 145.
 2. A. Reifenberg, *The Struggle between the Desert and the Sown: Rise and Fall of Agriculture in the Levant* (Jerusalem: Publishing Department of the Jewish Agency, 1955), 19.
 3. Amihai Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible, 10,000-568 B.C.E.* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 234.
 4. *Ibid.*, 174-89.
 5. M.J. Selman, "Comparative Customs and the Patriarchal Age" in *Essays*, 134.
 6. Mazar, 191-93, 224.

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