

# NAHMANIDES' UNDERSTANDING OF ABRAHAM'S MESOPOTAMIAN ORIGINS

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In this paper, we shall discuss which sub-region of Mesopotamia is the true birthplace of Abraham. For the purposes of this article, the region of Mesopotamia (the area between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers) is divided into two sub-regions: the southern region known as Sumer (*Shinar* in the Bible) and the northern region known as Aram. Under this classification, Sumer includes Babylon and the other cities which Nimrod (son of Cush son of Ham) built and ruled in southern Mesopotamia (Gen. 10:8–10). The northern Mesopotamian region of Aram includes the city of Aram Naharaim, also known as Haran, and Aram Zoba, also known as Aleppo (Halab).

## ABRAHAM WAS BORN IN UR

In painting the picture of Abraham's background, most biblical commentators assume that Abraham was born in Ur and that his family later migrated northwards to Haran. The Bible (Gen. 11:28; 11:31; 15:7; Neh. 9:7) refers to the place of Abraham's birth as *Ur Kasdim*, literally "Ur of the Chaldeans." Academia generally identifies this city with the Sumerian city Ur (although others have suggested different sites).<sup>1</sup>

According to the midrashic account, Abraham's family left Ur and relocated to Aram in order to flee from Nimrod, who sentenced Abraham to death by fiery furnace for his iconoclastic stance against idolatry.<sup>2</sup> After Abraham miraculously escaped from the fiery furnace, his father Terah decided to relocate the family from Ur (within Nimrod's domain) to Canaan, ultimately stopping in the city of Haran in the Aram region (Gen. 11:31), which was relatively free from Nimrod's reign of terror. It was from Haran that Abraham later embarked on his historic journey to the Land of Canaan (Gen. 12).

Josephus in *Antiquities of the Jews* describes a similar version of events. He quotes the first-century Greek historian Nicolaus of Damascus who wrote that Abraham, a "foreigner" from Babylonia, came to Aram. There, he

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reigned as a king for some time, until he and his people migrated to the Land of Canaan.<sup>3</sup>

#### ABRAHAM WAS BORN IN HARAN

Nahmanides (in his commentary to Gen. 11:28) offers a slightly different picture of Abraham's origins and bases himself upon a series of assumptions which we shall call into question.

He begins by rejecting the consensus view that Abraham was born in Ur Kasdim by reasoning that it is illogical that Abraham was born there in the land of the "Chaldeans" because he descended from Semites, yet Chaldea and the entire region of Sumer are Hamitic lands. He supports this reasoning by noting that the Bible refers to Abraham as a "Hebrew" (Gen. 14:13), not a "Chaldean."

He further proves this point from a verse in Joshua (24:2) which states, *Your forefathers always [meolam] dwelt 'beyond the River', even Terah, the father of Abraham, and the father of Nahor.* Nahmanides asserts that the word *always* in this context implies that Abraham's family originated in the "beyond the river" region, even before Terah. Similarly, the next verse there (24:3) states, *And I took your forefather Abraham from 'beyond the river' and led him throughout all the land of Canaan,* which also implies that Abraham was originally from the region known as "beyond the river." Nahmanides assumes that the term "beyond the river" favors the explanation that Abraham was originally from Haran rather than Ur Kasdim. Haran is considered within the region of "beyond the river" since it lies between the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers (making it "beyond the Euphrates" if the Land of Israel is one's point of reference).

Nahmanides further proves his assertion from the fact that the Bible mentions that *Terah took Abram his son, and Lot the son of Haran, his grandson, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Abram's wife and he went forth with them from Ur Kasdim to go into the land of Canaan and they came unto Haran and dwelt there* (Gen. 11:31). In this verse, the Bible does not include Nahor in the list of people moving to Haran. However, elsewhere the Bible mentions that Nahor lived in Haran (see Gen. 24:10 which refers to Haran as the *City of Nahor*). Nahmanides reasons that if Abraham's family originally lived in Ur Kasdim and only later moved to Haran without taking Nahor with

them, then Nahor should have been recorded as living in Ur Kasdim, not in Haran. Hence, the fact that Nahor lived in Haran proves that the family originally lived in Haran at a prior time.

In his commentary to Genesis 24:7, Nahmanides offers another proof that Abraham was born in Haran and not Ur Kasdim. He notes that when Abraham commanded his servant to find a suitable bride for his son Isaac, he told him, *Go to my [home]land and the place of my birth* (Gen. 24:4), and the Bible continues to tell that the servant went to Haran, not to Ur Kasdim, implying that Haran is the place of Abraham's birth. He further notes that it is inconceivable that Abraham would tell his servant to go to Ur Kasdim to find a suitable mate for Isaac, because its inhabitants – the Chaldeans – were Hamitic and are therefore unsuitable to intermarry with the family of Abraham who were of Semitic descent.

#### ABRAHAM'S EARLY TRAVELS ACCORDING TO NAHMANIDES

In light of his conclusion that Abraham was born in Haran, not in Ur Kasdim, Nahmanides offers a slight twist to the accepted narrative. He explains that Abraham was really born in Aram, which is within the region known as “beyond the river,” and is well within the territory of Shem's descendants. He explains that Terah originally lived in Aram where he fathered Abraham and Nahor. Sometime later, Terah took his son Abraham and moved to Ur Kasdim, while Nahor remained in Aram in the city of Haran. Terah's youngest son, Haran, was born in Ur Kasdim. Based on this, Nahmanides explains that when the Bible says *Haran died in the presence of his father Terah in the land of his birth, in Ur Kasdim* (Gen. 11:28), the Bible means to stress that Ur Kasdim was only the city of Haran's birth, but not the city where Abraham or Nahor were born. After living in Ur Kasdim, Terah and his entourage eventually left and returned to Haran (when Abraham was *en route* to the Land of Canaan).

TB *Bava Batra* 91a mentions that Abraham was jailed in the city of Cutha and identifies that city with Ur Kasdim. Nahmanides also cites Maimonides (*Guide for the Perplexed* 3:29) who quotes the ancient gentile author of *Nabataean Agriculture*<sup>4</sup> who writes that Abraham, who was born in Cutha, argued against the accepted philosophy of his day which worshipped the sun, and the king imprisoned him, confiscated his possessions, and eventually

chased him away. Nahmanides explains that researchers have revealed that the city of Cutha is not in Sumer, the land of Chaldeans, but is, in fact, located in the northern Mesopotamian region of Aram between Haran and Assyria.<sup>5</sup> Thus, argues Nahmanides, the Talmud also shares his view that Abraham was born in Aram, not Sumer.

Based on his view of Abraham's early life, Nahmanides explains an inconsistency addressed by the early commentators. When God commanded Abraham to go to the Land of Canaan, He told him to leave *from your [home]land and from the place of your birth and from the house of your father* (Gen. 12:1). The early commentators (see Rashi and Ibn Ezra ad loc.) address the following question: If Abraham had already left Ur Kasdim, the presumed place of his birth, and had moved with his father to Haran, then why did God tell him again to leave the place of his birth? Nahmanides answers that according to his approach this question does not even begin to arise because Abraham was not born in Ur Kasdim, he was born in Haran and later moved to Ur Kasdim, only to return to Haran from where God commanded him to go to the Land of Canaan.<sup>6</sup>

#### QUESTIONING NAHMANIDES' ASSUMPTIONS

Nahmanides' position is based on several assumptions, each of which needs to be examined. Firstly, Nahmanides asserted that it is illogical to claim that Abraham was born in Ur Kasdim because the inhabitants of Sumer were Hamitic peoples, yet Abraham was a Semite. This claim is unjustified because there is no reason to assume that only Hamites lived in Sumer, only that Sumer was, in general, a Hamite-dominated principality. Furthermore, even according to Nahmanides, Abraham and his family did live in Ur Kasdim at some point, thus he clearly concedes that Semites could live there. Moreover, the classification of Chaldeans as Hamitic is not easily supported by the Bible.<sup>7</sup>

Secondly, Nahmanides maintains that while Terah and his two eldest sons were born in Haran, he later relocated with Abraham alone to Ur Kasdim. Nahmanides fails to explain Terah's rationale for moving with Abraham to Ur Kasdim and why he did not take Nahor with him.<sup>8</sup> This vital part of the story should have been explained by the Bible or at least by tradition. Abarbanel (to Gen. 11:26) raises this issue as one of five difficulties with

Naḥmanides' approach. He compounds the difficulty by arguing that if Terah's family originally lived in Haran and only later moved to Ur Kasdim, then the Bible should read *and he went forth with them from Ur Kasdim to go into the land of Canaan* and they returned to Haran and dwelt there, to imply that they had once lived in Haran. Yet, instead the Genesis 11:31 states *and they came unto Haran and dwelt there*, implying that they reached Haran for the first time.

Furthermore, Naḥmanides proves that Abraham's family originated in Haran and not Ur Kasdim from the fact that after Terah took Abraham, Sarah, and Lot from Ur Kasdim to Haran, leaving Naḥor where he was, Naḥor was also found in Haran, even though he did not come there with his father. However, Ibn Ezra, in his commentary to Gen. 11:29, points out that it is likely that Naḥor arrived in Haran either before or after his father and for that reason he is not listed amongst Terah's entourage when relocating from Ur Kasdim to Haran. There is Biblical precedent for Ibn Ezra's first suggestion, for when Jacob and his family relocated from the Land of Canaan to Goshen in Egypt, Judah was sent there ahead of the rest of his family (see Gen. 46:28), so it is possible that when Terah relocated his family from Ur to Haran, Naḥor was sent ahead of everyone else.

In addition, Naḥmanides proves from Abraham's incarceration at Cutha that he lived in Aram at the time; however, contemporary scholars seem to agree that Cutha is actually in Sumer, not in northern Mesopotamia, as Naḥmanides mentions in the name of other researchers.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, to Naḥmanides' credit, there is some evidence that Cutha is in northern Mesopotamia, not in Sumer.<sup>10</sup>

#### R. NISSIM OF GERONA AND ABARBANEL DISAGREE WITH NAḤMANIDES

R. Nissim of Gerona (1320–1376), in his commentary to the Torah, quotes Naḥmanides and then proceeds to disagree. He argues that even if Ur Kasdim is in Sumer as Naḥmanides assumes, the verse *Your forefathers always dwelt beyond the river* (Joshua 24:2) is still not true. This is because the word *always* implies that Abraham's family never lived elsewhere, yet Naḥmanides admits that the family lived in Ur Kasdim, which he does not consider within the region of *beyond the river*. R. Nissim reasons that if Haran and Lot were born in Ur Kasdim, then Terah's family must have stayed there

for at least thirty years (a reasonable age of fatherhood in the post-Babel era, see Gen. 11:10–26) for Haran to be born, mature, and father Lot.

Instead, R. Nissim proposes that Ur Kasdim is, in fact, considered *beyond the river*. Accordingly, he understood that Ur Kasdim is actually located in northern Mesopotamia<sup>11</sup> and Abraham was born there, as were Haran and Lot, before the family relocated to Haran, which is also within the same region. According to this explanation, *Your forefathers always dwelt beyond the river* literally means that Abraham's family never left that region, even when they lived in Ur Kasdim.<sup>12</sup> This view is also adopted by Abarbanel.<sup>13</sup>

Abarbanel also disagrees with Nahmanides' assumption that Ur Kasdim is not considered *beyond the river*. He cites two Biblical verses which together imply that Ur Kasdim is considered *beyond the river*. When God identified Himself to Abraham, *He said unto him: 'I am the LORD that brought thee out of Ur Kasdim, to give thee this land to inherit it'* (Gen. 15:7). Quoting God, Joshua says *I took your father Abraham from beyond the River, and led him throughout all the land of Canaan, and multiplied his seed, and gave him Isaac* (Josh.24:3). When analyzing these two verses collectively, one concludes that Ur Kasdim and *beyond the river* are synonymous, casting suspicion on Nahmanides' view that Ur Kasdim is not considered *beyond the river*. Nahmanides himself addresses this issue by differentiating between being "brought out of" Ur Kasdim and being "taken" from *beyond the river*, a distinction which Abarbanel rejects.

In short, R. Nissim and Abarbanel explain that Abraham was born in Northern Mesopotamia – in Ur Kasdim – which the Bible still considers *beyond the river*. According to this approach, Ur Kasdim is not the same as the place known as "Ur of the Chaldeans," and the term "Kasdim" may instead be connected to the name of one of the sons of Nahor, Kesed.<sup>14</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

There are essentially three opinions regarding Abraham's birthplace: The classic view is that Abraham was born in the Sumerian city of Ur and his family later relocated to Haran, in the northern Mesopotamian region of Aram. Nahmanides proposes a new theory that Abraham was actually born in Haran, before his family relocated to Sumerian Ur and eventually returned to Haran. Nahmanides offers several justifications for his theory, mostly based

on prooftexts from the Bible itself. We cast doubt on most of his proofs by calling into question many of his assumptions. In trying to reconcile some of the issues raised by Nahmanides, we elaborated on a third view, that of R. Nissim and Abarbanel. They understood that Ur Kasdim was not located in the southern Mesopotamian region of Sumer, but was rather located in northern Mesopotamia. They explain that all of Abraham's early travels were confined to that region alone which is referred to by the Bible as *beyond the river*.<sup>15</sup>

#### NOTES

1. A. Marcus, *Keset HaSofer* (Tel Aviv, 1971) pp. 296–297, writes that Ur Kasdim was definitely in the southern region of Mesopotamia, close to the Persian Gulf.
2. TB *Pesahim* 118a, *Bereishit Rabbah* §38:13, Targum Pseudo-Jonathan to Genesis 11:28, and more.
3. See *Kitvei Yosef ben Matityahu, Kadmoniut HaYehudim* Vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Reuven Mass, 1939) p. 31.
4. The work *Nabataean Agriculture* was written in Arabic by the 9<sup>th</sup> century Muslim philosopher Ibn Wahshiyya. It is supposedly an Arabic translation of an ancient Syriac text describing the beliefs of the Sabian religion. However, academia believes this work to have been forged (at least in part) by Ibn Wahshiyya himself.
5. Interestingly, several popular maps place Ur Kasdim (the Sumerian city Ur) southwest of the Euphrates River, meaning that it is on the same side of the Euphrates as is the Land of Israel, technically outside of Mesopotamia, albeit still within the same general vicinity. This lends credence to Nahmanides' view that Aram is considered "across the river" (because it is east of the Euphrates) while Ur Kasdim is not, even though both are in the general region of Mesopotamia. See A. Kaplan, *The Living Torah* (New York: Maznaim Publishing Corporation, 1985) p. 42; *Ramban Al HaTorah – Bereishit* Vol. 1 (Artscroll/Mesorah Publications, 2004) p. 593; and Y. Elitzur & Y. Kiel (eds.), *Atlas Da'at Mikra* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1998) p. 66.
6. In addition to what Nahmanides wrote in his commentary to Genesis, he repeats this entire discussion of Abraham's origins in his "Discourse on the words of Ecclesiastes." C. Chavel (ed.), *Writings of the Ramban*, Vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1963) pp. 202–203. See also S. Spero, "Was Abram Born in Ur of the Chaldees?" *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 24:3 (1996).
7. See R. C. Klein, "Abraham's Chaldean Origins and the Chaldee Language," *The Seforim Blog* (December 30, 2014) [URL: <http://seforim.blogspot.com/2014/12/abrahams-chaldean-origins-and-chaldee.html>].
8. L. A. Feldman (ed.), *Peirush HaRan Al HaTorah* (Jerusalem: Machon Shalem, 1968) pp. 149–150, proposes that Genesis 11:30 mentions that Sarai was barren to explain why Abraham, Sarai, and Lot went with Terah, but Nahor did not. Since Abraham and Sarai were childless and Lot was an orphan they were more mobile and able to travel with Terah, while Nahor, who already established a family, did not move with them.
9. M. Berenbaum and F. Skolnik (eds.), "Cuth, Cuthah," *Encyclopedia Judaica* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Vol. 5. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007) pp. 344–345.

10. TB *Bava Batra* 91a notes that in addition to his incarceration at Cutha, Abraham was also jailed at Kardu. Where is Kardu? When Genesis 8:4 records that Noah's Ark landed at the mountains of Ararat, all the Tagumim (Onkelos, Pseudo-Jonathan, Neofiti, and Peshitta) explain that Ararat is Kardu. This leads to the conclusion that the location of Abraham's imprisonment was north of Assyria and northeast of Aram, the region in which the Ararat mountains lie (in present-day Turkey). In fact, the name Kardu may be preserved by a contemporary place name in that region: Kurdistan, and its inhabitants who are called Kurds. See Y. Elitzur & Y. Kiel (eds.), *Atlas Da'at Mikra* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1998) p. 386. Based on this, one can argue that if Abraham was incarcerated at Kardu, then Cutha is also likely in that same general area, placing the city closer to Aram than to Sumer.

11. P. Berlyn, "The Journey of Terah to Ur-Kasdim or Urkesh," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 33:2 (2005) suggests that Ur mentioned in the Bible is actually Urkesh, an ancient city in northern Mesopotamia. Other than that, she accepts the narrative proposed by Nahmanides (that Terah originally lived in Haran where Abraham was born, relocated to Ur, and later returned to Haran), without mentioning him by name.

12. L. A. Feldman (ed.), *Peirush HaRan Al HaTorah* (Jerusalem: Machon Shalem, 1968) pp. 153–154.

13. See there for an explanation of why Ur is associated with the "Chaldeans" if it is located in Aram. Rabbi Eliezer Ashkenazi (1512–1585) disagrees with Nahmanides' narrative and instead proposes that Abraham never lived in southern Mesopotamia. He argues that Abraham's family moved within northern Mesopotamia from Aram Naharim to Haran (which he understands to be two separate places) and all references to Ur of the Chaldeans do not refer to a southern Mesopotamian city named Ur but rather to the Chaldean (Sumerian?) dominion over northern Mesopotamia in Abraham's time. See Ashkenazi's *Maasei HaShem* (Warsaw, 1871) pp. 78a–79a.

14. See Y. Kiel, *Da'at Mikra – Bereishit* vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 2000) p. 132.

15. For an elaborate assessment of Nahmanides' view vis-à-vis that of Ibn Ezra, see the super-commentary of E. Eliezer Mizrahi to Genesis 12:1. R. David Luria in his glosses to *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer* (ch. 26) argues that the midrash follows the opinion of Ibn Ezra rather than Nahmanides.



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