

# Exploring Genesis



***The Bible's Ancient Traditions in Context***

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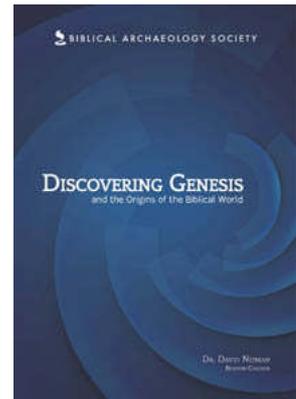
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Dr. David Neiman (1921–2004) was professor of Jewish theology at Boston College and specialized in a broad range of fields, including archaeology, biblical studies, Jewish history and Catholic-Jewish relations. He also organized Boston College's Institute of Biblical Archeology and participated in nearly a dozen archaeological excavations in Israel. He was the author of *Domestic Relations in Antiquity* (Little Acorns Press, 1994) as well as a commentary and selected translation of the Book of Job (Massada, 1972). He also wrote several important articles for the *Encyclopedia Judaica*. His lectures on the Book of Genesis were delivered in 2000 at the University of Judaism in Bel Air, California.

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## Introduction

The esoteric stories and lost landscapes in the Book of Genesis present a great challenge for historians. Biblical scholars and archaeologists have nonetheless been able to provide cultural contexts for many of Israel's earliest traditions. In this Biblical Archaeology Society eBook, explore Mesopotamian creation myths, Joseph's relationship with Egyptian temple practices and the homeland of Abraham, the founding father of the world's three great monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

The Creation story from Genesis explains how the world was formed and how humankind was created. Was this story heavily influenced by an ancient Babylonian Creation myth called *Enūma Eliš*? In "The Genesis of Genesis," Victor Hurowitz explores this question. A text which describes the divine activities of the gods and the creation of man, *Enūma Eliš* includes many of the motifs found in the Biblical Creation story. To what extent is there a relationship between these two texts? In this comparative study, Hurowitz examines the similarities and differences between the Babylonian myth and the Biblical story and sets them in the historical context of the ancient Near East.

The story of Joseph in Genesis is well known. Sold into slavery by his brothers, Joseph ended up in a prison in Egypt and there became known for his ability to interpret dreams. Summoned from the dungeon to interpret Pharaoh's dreams, Joseph shaved before approaching the ruler of Egypt. Most people in ancient Mesopotamia did not shave. Why, and what, did Joseph shave? In "Why Did Joseph Shave?" Lisbeth S. Fried examines Egyptian ideas of cleanliness and purity. These ideas may explain why Joseph had to appear hairless—and circumcised—before entering Pharaoh's palace.

In the story of Abraham, we learn how one man was called by God to become the founding father of the Israelites in the land of Canaan. In Genesis, Abraham was said to have been born in Ur of the Chaldeans. However, there were many places named Ur in antiquity. Where was Abraham's Ur? Sir Leonard Woolley claimed to have found it at Tell el-Muqayyar, now called Ur, in southern Iraq. There, the British archaeologist unearthed evidence of royal burials, a ziggurat, several temples and hundreds of golden baubles, weapons and vessels. Did Woolley actually locate the patriarch's native land, or was the famed excavator too eager to match the Biblical account with his archaeological site? In "Abraham's Ur: Did Woolley Excavate the Wrong Place?" Molly Dewsnap Meinhardt describes Woolley's excavations at Ur and the intrigue incited by his identification of Abraham's birthplace.

Since Sir Leonard Woolley's excavation of Ur in Iraq in the 1920s and 30s, his identification of the site as the birthplace of Abraham became one of the most popular theories for where the patriarch's native land is located. The identification of Abraham's birthplace received such widespread acceptance that Pope John Paul II planned to visit Iraq as part of his tour of Biblical sites to celebrate the new millennium. However, a careful reading of Biblical and ancient texts indicates that *this* Ur might not be the patriarch's hometown after all. In "Abraham's Ur: Is the Pope Going to the Wrong Place?" Hershel Shanks explores another popular theory for where Abraham was born: in Turkey.

Hershel Shanks's review of the case for a northern Mesopotamian site as the home of the Biblical patriarch reopened the debate in the pages of *Biblical Archaeology Review*. In "Where Was Abraham's Ur? The Case for the Babylonian City," Alan R. Millard lists the many strengths of the traditional southern Babylonian location.

The articles in this eBook are a preview of the many Biblical stories and histories covered in *Biblical Archaeology Review*, *Bible Review* and *Archaeology Odyssey*.

Robin Ngo  
Biblical Archaeology Society  
2013

## The Genesis of Genesis

*Is the Creation Story Babylonian?*

By Victor Hurowitz



*Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, France/Bridgeman Art Library*

Hovering above the newly created earth, God fixes the “two great lights”—the golden sun and the silver moon—in the heavens (Genesis 1:14–19). Since the discovery in the 19th century of a Babylonian Creation myth with striking parallels to the Genesis account, scholars have declared that the biblical tale of Seven Days of Creation has its roots in Babylonian mythology. But, as Victor Hurowitz explains in the accompanying article, the parallels between the Babylonian myth, called *Enūma Eliš* after its first two words (“When above”), and Genesis 1 are limited. According to Hurowitz, Genesis 1 should not be dismissed as a borrowed tale, but celebrated as a deliberate and skillful rewriting of earlier accounts of how a Creator God goes about his business.

On December 3, 1872, George Smith, a former bank-note engraver turned Assyriologist, stunned the Western world by announcing that he had discovered a Babylonian story of a great Flood resembling the well-known account of the Deluge in the Book of Genesis. Four years later, Smith published a collection of Mesopotamian myths and heroic legends entitled *The Chaldean Account of Genesis* (“Chaldean” being a synonym for Babylonian used in the Bible).<sup>1</sup> The book included Smith’s own English translation and discussion of a Babylonian Creation myth and other

mythological compositions that he had pieced together from cuneiform fragments discovered during the preceding quarter of a century by the British excavations at Kyunjik, ancient Nineveh.

About the Babylonian Creation myth, Smith wrote:

The story, so far as I can judge from the fragment, agrees generally with the account of the Creation in the Book of Genesis, but shows traces of having originally included very much more matter.

According to Smith, the biblical account of the Seven Days of Creation (Genesis 1:1–2:4a, also known as the Priestly Creation account,<sup>a</sup> quoted in full in the box) was simply an abbreviated Hebrew version of a more ancient Babylonian tale.



*By Permission of the Trustees of the British Museum*

**George A. Smith (1840–1876).** An amateur Assyriologist, Smith was hired by the British Museum to catalogue cuneiform inscriptions discovered by Austen Henry Layard at Kyunjik (ancient Nineveh). He gained international attention when he announced his discovery of a Babylonian Deluge story similar to the biblical account of Noah's Flood. He subsequently pieced together *Enūma Eliš*, which he dubbed "The Chaldean Genesis"—"Chaldean" being a biblical term for "Babylonian."

A century and a quarter after Smith made his astounding announcement, the Babylonian Creation myth—now regularly called by its Akkadian name *Enūma Eliš* (after the first two words, meaning "When above")—is widely recognized for its great importance to the history of ancient Mesopotamian religion. But for most Bible readers, the significance of *Enūma Eliš* (pronounced eh-NOO-ma eh-LEESH) lies in its perceived connection to the Creation story in Genesis 1:1–2:4a

and a few other biblical passages relating to the Creation and to a primordial conflict between the Israelite deity YHWH and some vicious sea monsters.

The notion that the biblical Creation story depends heavily on *Enūma Eliš* is so entrenched that most modern commentaries on Genesis mention the connection. Any compendium of ancient Near Eastern texts related to the Bible will include *Enūma Eliš*. The curriculum for teaching Bible in secular Israeli high schools has been revised to include the teaching of *Enūma Eliš*. Nahum Sarna's classic *Understanding Genesis* devotes four pages to the myth.<sup>2</sup> Alexander Heidel's widely used collection of Mesopotamian Creation myths, *The Babylonian Genesis* (written "not for the professional Assyriologist but rather for the Old Testament scholar and the Christian minister"), lends 58 pages to parallels between the Babylonian and biblical texts.<sup>3</sup>

But was George Smith right? Was the author of the Genesis Creation account heavily influenced by this ancient Babylonian tale? To answer this, we must first ask, What is *Enūma Eliš*?

First and foremost, *Enūma Eliš* is a poem, consisting of 1,059 lines written in the Akkadian language and inscribed in cuneiform on seven tablets.<sup>4</sup> The story that this great poem tells is a myth; that is, it explains the world as a reflection of divine activities and relationships between gods.

The poem begins on *Tablet 1*:

It is the timeless, mythic past when nothing existed apart from two personified masses of water, Tiamat (sea water) and Apsû (spring water). These proto-divine male and female figures engaged in an endless mingling of their waters that we might call the "Big Bang."<sup>b</sup> Such dalliance led inevitably to pregnancy (of both partners) and the birth of several gods. As time passed the baby gods grew into big gods, who were a rowdy bunch, partying constantly at home, which happened to be the watery realm that was the body of Tiamat. This wild behavior raised the ire of Apsû, who, as typical of haggard fathers throughout time, decided to end it all and kill the kids and the kids' kids and their kids, too. He plotted the act with his vizier Mummu, but the dastardly design got out, giving the young ones a chance to defend themselves, and, to be sure, one of the younger gods, Ea, ended up killing his great-great grandfather Apsû, stripping him of his divine regalia and building his own house on the body of his slain ancestor. Ea and his spouse, Damkina, immediately moved in, and the two of them set about making love and having a baby: Marduk.

The newborn infant was no regular lad. Four pairs of eyes and four pairs of ears (compare the four-faced creatures of Ezekiel 1:6) made him very attentive and gave him excellent peripheral vision, but he grew up rapidly and became a bit obstreperous. His favorite game was throwing dust into a set of four-winds (a present from grandfather Anum) and muddying up great-great-great granny Tiamat. This childish behavior may not have disturbed recently widowed and long-suffering Tiamat, but it did get on the nerves of the gods living within her; and they, playing on her sense of guilt over having failed to come to the aid of her late husband, cajole and convince her to take up arms and put an end to Marduk's intolerable behavior and their consequent suffering. In order to do the task, she has a certain Ummu Ḫubur (the name means "Mother Noise") produce for her a swat team of 11 raging, poisonous monsters at whose head she appoints the god Kingu.



*Dumbarton Oaks, Byzantine Collection, Washington, DC*

**Vestiges of the four-faced Babylonian deity may be found in Ezekiel's vision of a divine winged creature with four different heads (Ezekiel 1). On a sixth-century C.E. silver-and-gold liturgical fan, the heads appear, from left to right, as lion, man, ox and eagle.**

*Tablet 2.* The younger gods, threatened by these scary beasts, fly into a panic and start looking for someone to come to their rescue. Ea, who got word of the war preparations, first approaches his grandfather Anšar (the deified horizon) and then daddy, Anum (the sky god), and reports the dire situation, but they do not come to the rescue, so Chicken-Little style the whole bunch of them ends up appealing for help from none other than the ultimate cause of their woes, Marduk. Marduk opportunistically accepts the invitation on the condition that if he defeats Tiamat and saves the gods, they will obey his commands. He will be their supreme, unchallenged ruler.

*Tablet 3.* In order to conclude an agreement, an envoy named Gaga is dispatched to Laḥmu and Laḥāmu (Anšar's parents), and all the gods gather at a grand banquet with lots of eating and drinking. When they are sufficiently inebriated, they ratify the agreement and enthrone Marduk as number one god.<sup>5</sup>

*Tablet 4.* At the enthronement celebration Marduk is asked to prove the power of his word by making a constellation vanish and reappear, which he immediately does. "He spoke with his mouth, and the constellation disappeared; he spoke again with his mouth, and the constellation was formed," the text tells us. After this display of verbal creativity, the gods outfit him with royal regalia, arm him and send him off to meet Tiamat. The myth reaches its climax in a decisive duel to the death between champion Marduk and Tiamat. Marduk arms himself with a bow and arrow, mace, net, four winds (probably the toy that Anum had given him as a child), and seven special winds designed to get inside Tiamat and give her gas. He mounts a chariot drawn by winds that can apparently move in all four directions.<sup>6</sup> For armor and headgear, he dons terrifying divine radiance, and, lest he be wounded, he also carries in his mouth an incantation, and holds in his hand a plant for warding off poison. Fully suited and geared up, he goes off to find Tiamat. When he meets her, they engage in a war of words and finally they lock in battle. At this point, Marduk opens his net with the intent of bagging her in it and then "the wicked wind which was sneezing behind him he directed into her face."<sup>7</sup> This is surely a thinly veiled way of saying that he broke wind in her face. As if this were not enough, Tiamat opens her mouth wide to swallow the wind dispatched from his rear but in the end she fills up with wind, developing stomach cramps and constipation. Finally, Marduk shoots his arrow at her and splits her belly.<sup>8</sup> With Tiamat defeated and, literally, deflated, the gods supporting her go into hiding and the 11 terrible monsters are captured and led away. Finally, Marduk captures Kingu, the god who was leading the monsters, and takes away the tablets of destiny that Tiamat had given him before the battle. The war over and the enemy rounded up, Marduk returns to his captive, Tiamat, splits open her head with his mace, and has the wind blow away her blood. He next splits open her body "like a drying fish," creates the heavens in the upper half, and establishes there a divine dwelling place, Ešarra, which is the mirror image of Ea's subterranean dwelling place, Apsû.

*Tablet 5.* At this point "Creation"—or, rather, the ordering of the known world—starts. Working more or less from top to bottom, Marduk installs in the appropriate parts of Tiamat's corpse the heavenly bodies in the heavens, meteorological phenomena in the atmosphere, and mountains, subterranean waters, the Euphrates and Tigris, the bond of heaven and earth, the netherworld and the oceans in and on the earth. Marduk then celebrates his triumph by distributing trophies and displaying vanquished enemies. He dons royal garments, and the gods declare him king and accept his authority. He then proposes to build Babylon to serve as a lodging place for gods who

go up and down between the subterranean Apsû and heavenly Ešarra (compare Genesis 28:10–22, in which Jacob dreams of angels ascending and descending a staircase that reaches to the heavens).<sup>9</sup> The gods eagerly accept this proposal.

*Tablets 6 and 7.* But before Marduk carries out his plan, he decides to help relieve the gods of their work by creating Man. Actually, creating Man is only his suggestion, for the actual act is carried out by his father, Ea. The creation of Man is described only briefly and elliptically; we learn only that Man was made from the blood of Kingu, who was slaughtered as punishment for having led the rebel gods. Having created Man, the gods proceed to carry out Marduk's plan to build Babylon, and in particular its main temple, Esagila. The gods mold bricks for a year, and when the temple is finally in its place as a rest stop between subterranean Apsû and heavenly Ešarra, all the gods of heaven and the underworld sit down together at a grand dedication banquet. This ceremony is another opportunity for reaffirming allegiance to Marduk and glorifying him by proclaiming his 50 names along with intricate explanations of each one.

The poem concludes:

The [wo]rd of Marduk who created the Igigi-gods,

[His/Its] let them [ ], his name let theme invoke.

Let them sound abroad the song of Marduk,

How he defeated Tiamat and took kingship.<sup>10</sup>

How much does this strange and exciting tale really resemble the Creation account of Genesis 1:1–2:4a and other biblical references to Creation? What kind of relationship, if any, is there between these texts?

The concluding couplet of *Enūma Eliš*, quoted above, suggests one of the most significant differences. Here, as in many Mesopotamian works, the author explains to the readers what the text they have just read is really about. In this case, he defines the entire composition as a hymn or song in praise of Marduk, who created the great gods (Igigi), defeated Tiamat and then assumed the throne. Compare this with the concluding line of the biblical Creation account:

Such is the story of heaven and earth when they were created.

(Genesis 2:4a, New Jewish Publication Society Version)

In short, Genesis 1 is about the Creation, while *Enūma Eliš* is about the creator. That's why near the end of *Enūma Eliš*, the gods bless Marduk, hero of the story, while at the end of the Creation account, God, hero of the story, blesses and sanctifies the Sabbath, his final creation. Further, in Genesis 1 God sees several times that what he has created is good, while in *Enūma Eliš* the gods on several occasion express approval for Marduk and what he has promised to do or has done.

The two stories also vary in tone. Genesis 1:1–2:4a is a tightly structured narrative, simple in language but stately in elevated prose style and marked by use of repetition, formulaic language, and command-fulfillment sequences (“God said, ‘Let there be’ ... and there was”), all of which suggest divine planning, control and transcendence. *Enūma Eliš*, in contrast, is a dramatic narrative poem in which tension builds and then is relieved again and again. Moreover, it is (in my opinion) a comic-heroic work not lacking in frivolity. Though some refer to *Enūma Eliš* as the Babylonian Genesis, this is an unfortunate appellation—encouraging readers to approach the text with religiosity and reverence, when they might better bring a sense of humor and a taste for adventure.

Nevertheless, from the Victorian period on, numerous scholars have attempted to draw parallels between Genesis 1 and *Enūma Eliš*—especially Tablet V, on the ordering of Creation. George Smith, in his *Chaldean Account of Genesis*, listed several, from the watery chaos that precedes Creation (see Genesis 1:1) through Marduk's and God's satisfaction with Creation: “And God saw that it was good” (Genesis 1:12, etc.).

In 1902, Bible scholar Friedrich Delitzsch offered one of the most famous discussions of the Bible and *Enūma Eliš* in the first of his *Babel und Bibel* lectures, delivered before Kaiser Wilhelm II.<sup>11</sup> In this lecture Delitzsch solemnly announced that Babylonian sources preserved more ancient and thus more original forms of full cycles of stories found in the Bible. Delitzsch suggested that the biblical authors had transferred directly to YHWH, God of Israel, the heroism of Marduk, god of Babylon, as known from *Enūma Eliš*. He offered a handful of biblical examples, including Job 9:13, Psalm 89:10–11 and Psalm 74:13–15 (quoted here):

It was You who drove back the sea with Your might,

Who smashed the heads of the monsters in the waters;

It was You who crushed the heads of Leviathan,

Who left him as food for the denizens of the desert,

It was You who released springs and torrents,

Who made the mighty rivers run dry.

Delitzsch showed his audience a cylinder seal bearing a picture of Marduk with one large eye and one large ear, standing on a dragon and holding a weapon in his right hand. This seal, which had been discovered by German excavators, was cited by Delitzsch as the background for Isaiah 51:9–10 and Job 26:12–13, both of which describe the Lord striking down the sea monster Rahab and piercing a snake or dragon.



**Gods and monsters. A cylinder seal shows Marduk with an enormous eye and ear, standing on a sea monster.**

**Strikingly similar imagery appears on a silver chalice excavated at 'Ain Samiyah, in Israel. The chalice depicts a Janus-headed figure with the hindquarters of two bulls. An enormous serpent raises its head toward one of the plants this hybrid figure is holding.**

According to Delitzsch, the Priestly author of the Creation account in Genesis 1:1–2:4a, in contrast to the authors of Psalms, Job and Isaiah, tried to remove all mythological traces from his text, yet he was not entirely successful. Trace elements of Babylonian myth could be found throughout Genesis, said Delitzsch. For example, the light splitting the Deep (Hebrew *T<sup>h</sup>ôm*) in Genesis 1 recalls Marduk splitting the watery goddess Tiamat.

Delitzsch was not saying anything new,<sup>12</sup> but he created a sensation throughout Europe and America by introducing the connection between *Enūma Eliš* and the Bible to the popular consciousness, from the Kaiser on down. Delitzsch also gained attention and support for his subjective, anti-Semitic and anti-Christian insinuations that Mesopotamian religion was on an

equal if not higher level than that of the Hebrew Bible, and that the Bible contains no religious truth of its own but is only an accumulation of shallow literature drawn from Babylonian texts.<sup>c</sup> If the generation preceding Delitzsch used archaeological and Assyriological discoveries to prove the truth of the Bible, from his time on the same evidence would be enlisted in demonstrating the Bible's inferiority.<sup>d</sup>

Alexander Heidel, in his well-known book *The Babylonian Genesis*, offers a clear summary of the parallels (he calls them “points which invite comparison”) that Smith, Delitzsch and other early scholars had detected:

Thus *Enūma elish* and Genesis 1:1–2:3 both refer to a watery chaos, which was separated into heaven and earth; in both we have an etymological equivalence in the names denoting this chaos [Hebrew *T<sup>e</sup>hôm* and Akkadian *Tiamat*]; both refer to the existence of light before creation of the luminous bodies; both agree as to the succession in which the points of contact follow upon one another; and in both cases the number seven figures rather prominently. And turning to the poetic writings of our Old Testament literature, we find quite a number of passages which, like the story of Marduk's fight with Ti'âmat, treat of a conflict between the creator and various hostile elements.



*Casa Editrice Mistretta, Palermo, Italy*

**The Bible's first and last days of Creation exhibit the strongest parallels to the Babylonian account. When God begins his work, the earth is “unformed and void, with darkness over the face of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water” (Genesis 1:1). God then breaks up the darkness by creating light. In *Enūma Eliš*, Creation begins with the splitting of the watery chaos personified by the goddess Tiamat. Further, the Hebrew term for “the Deep” (*T<sup>e</sup>hôm*) may be etymologically related to the Akkadian name Tiamat. The 12th-century mosaic artist who created both these scenes for the Cathedral of Santa Maria Nuova in Monreale, Sicily, unwittingly emphasized the parallel when he took the phrase “face of the deep” literally and gave the watery chaos a face with undulant hair.**

Heidel adds to this list the divine nature of the participants in Creation; *creatio ex nihilo*—creation out of nothing; polytheism and monotheism in the respective stories; primeval chaos; primeval darkness; creation of the firmament; creation of the earth; creation of the luminaries; creation of plant and animal life; creation of man; the word of the creators; divine rest; the seven

tablets and the seven days; and the general outlines of events in *Enūma Eliš* and Genesis 1:1–2:3.

But Heidel concludes:

The similarities are really not so striking as we might expect ... In fact, the divergences are much more far-reaching and significant than are the resemblances, most of which are not any closer than what we should expect to find in any two more or less complete creation versions (since both would have to account for the same phenomena and since human minds think along much the same lines) which might come from entirely different parts of the world and which might be utterly unrelated to each other.<sup>13</sup>

What Heidel does consider striking, however, is “an identical sequence of events as far as the points of contact are concerned.” In other words, of all the points mentioned above, only a few are really highly similar, but these particular points appear in the same order in the respective compositions. This indeed seems to be a strong argument in favor of dependence.

In discussing the possible connection between Marduk and the God of the Hebrew Bible, Heidel noted that the idea of a primeval war between a god and the sea is an idea born in the West and imported into Mesopotamia, so the Bible would more likely have borrowed it from closer neighbors than the Babylonians. Here, Heidel relies on evidence in myths discovered at Ugarit (on the Mediterranean coast of modern Syria) a decade after the First World War (and *ipso facto* unavailable to Smith and Delitzsch). Proof that this was indeed the case comes from the words the Bible uses for the sea monster. On the fifth day of Creation, in Genesis 1:21, God creates *Tannîn*, often translated “sea serpents”). This same creature appears as *tnn*, or Tunnan, in Ugaritic myth:

Surely I fought Yamm [Sea], the Beloved of El

Surely I finished off River, the Great God,

Surely I bound Tunnan and destroyed (?) him.<sup>14</sup>

The biblical Leviathan (Psalm 74) has its parallel in *ltn* (Litan), who battles god in another Ugaritic myth:

When you killed Litan, the Fleeing Serpent,

Annihilated the Twisty Serpent,

The Potentate with Seven Heads,

The heavens grew hot, they withered.<sup>15</sup>

Assyriologist Wilfred Lambert, who is preparing the eagerly awaited authoritative edition of *Enūma Eliš*, notes that many of the parallels between the Babylonian poem and the Bible are so common throughout Near Eastern literature as to be insignificant.<sup>16</sup> The watery beginnings of the universe have parallels not only in other Mesopotamian Creation myths but even in Egyptian and Greek texts and thus cannot be evidence of particularly Babylonian influence. The splitting of the waters (in Genesis, on the second day) is uniquely parallel to the splitting of aqueous Tiamat in *Enūma Eliš*, although the splitting of other substances is well attested in Sumerian, Akkadian, Hittite, Egyptian and Greek myths. As for the third day, Lambert finds a Mesopotamian parallel to the separation of the sea from the dry land, but it is not from *Enūma Eliš*. The most important parallel Lambert finds is with the seventh day, the Sabbath. Man is created in *Enūma Eliš* to give rest to the gods. If so, both *Enūma Eliš* and Genesis 1:1–2:4a climax with divine rest.<sup>17</sup> All told, Lambert sees the connections between Genesis 1 and *Enūma Eliš* as relatively few in number.



Casa Editrice Mistretta, Palermo, Italy

**The Bible's first and last days of Creation exhibit the strongest parallels to the Babylonian account.**

**“On the seventh day, God finished the work that He had been doing, and He rested” (Genesis 2:2). Similarly, in *Enūma Eliš*, man is created so that the gods can get some rest.**

As recent scholarship is making clear, simplistic comparison between *Enūma Eliš* and the biblical tradition—as if the Bible were directly dependent on *Enūma Eliš* and it alone—is patently untenable. And yet there is clearly some kind of relationship. *Enūma Eliš* appears to be one of a range of sources that the biblical authors drew upon.

But although Delitzsch and Smith dismissed this borrowing as naive and mechanical, I believe something far more thoughtful and thought-provoking was taking place. The literary character of *Enūma Eliš* itself offers an example of how and why the Biblical author drew on this source.

*Enūma Eliš* is on the surface a unified work with a clear, consistent plot and message.<sup>18</sup> Yet it, too, adopted and assimilated numerous ideas and literary themes from earlier sources.



*Oriental Institute, Chicago*

**With eyes in the back of his head (and on both sides, too), this four-faced deity may represent the god Marduk, whose multiple eyes and ears helped him reign supreme over the Babylonian pantheon. Wearing a horned cap, the god carries a scimitar and rests one foot on a ram. The bronze statuette, dating to the early second millennium B.C.E., was discovered by looters at Ishchali, in Iraq, and is now in the Oriental Institute, in Chicago.**

**Vestiges of the four-faced Babylonian deity may be found in Ezekiel's vision of a divine winged creature with four different heads (Ezekiel 1).**

So, for instance, the notion of the creation of the gods and the world by sexual intercourse and birth is already found in Sumerian sources. Young gods who prevent their parents from sleeping, and, indeed, divine unrest and sleep deprivation are central themes in the *Atra-ḫasis* myth dating to the Old Babylonian period (first half of the second millennium B.C.E.), with roots in the Sumerian myth of Enki and Ninmaḫ. Marduk in *Enūma Eliš* has four eyes and four ears. This reminds us of Ezekiel's chariot vision, but more important is a bronze statue found near Ishchali (ancient Neribtum, Iraq) dating from the Old Babylonian period representing an identically endowed deity. If this statue is not Marduk himself it is without doubt a god of the same species.<sup>19</sup> The sequence of events of giving the Tablets of Destiny to Kingu, danger threatening the gods, the gods' panic, the appeal to several gods in search of a champion who will defeat the monster

holding the tablets, and the eventual transfer of the Tablets of Destiny to the victorious champion has a close parallel in the Akkadian myth about the god Ninurta's defeat of the Anzû bird.<sup>20</sup> The 11 monsters in Tiamat's retinue are also parallel to 11 monsters who fought alongside the Anzû.<sup>21</sup> The war between Marduk, with his army of winds, and Tiamat, who embodies the sea, has parallels in earlier Western myths about a conflict between a storm god and a sea god. A Middle Bronze Age silver goblet from 'Ain-Samiyah, Israel, is decorated with a similar mythological scene that the late Israeli archaeologist Yigael Yadin interpreted as the slaying of Tiamat by Marduk.<sup>22</sup> This scene is similar to one on a clay plaque from Khafaje, in eastern Iraq, of the Isin-Larsa period (late third to early second millennium B.C.E.) showing Marduk slaying Tiamat. Creating the cosmos by splitting the body of defeated Tiamat reflects Sumerian beliefs according to which the world was created by splitting various primeval cosmic elements. Creating man by mixing blood from a slain rebel god into the body of the man is rooted in accounts found in *Atra-ḥasis* and *Enki and Ninmaḫ*. In *Enūma Eliš*, Babylon is built by the gods who mold bricks. A similar description about the building of Nippur is found in a Sumerian hymn in honor of that city.<sup>23</sup> Finally, Marduk's 50 names are somehow related to 50, the symbolic number of Ellil, the chief god in the Mesopotamian pantheon.



**Drawing of silver chalice excavated at 'Ain Samiyah, in Israel. The chalice depicts (from left) a Janus-headed figure with the hindquarters of two bulls. An enormous serpent raises its head toward one of the plants this hybrid figure is holding. At right, two figures (only one remains) originally flanked a rosette or sun with a human face. A second serpent twists beneath the sun.**

The late Israeli archaeologist Yigael Yadin, who discovered the cup in a shaft tomb dating from 2200 to 2000 B.C.E., suggested the chalice depicts Marduk slaying Tiamat. Although the identification is uncertain, the chalice attests to the widespread appeal—from Israel to eastern Iraq—of accounts of gods battling fierce sea creatures. In the Bible, Yahweh takes on not just the Deep, but Rahab, Leviathan and Tannîn.



*Israel Museum, Jerusalem*

Strikingly similar imagery appears on a silver chalice excavated at 'Ain Samiyah, in Israel. The chalice depicts a Janus-headed figure with the hindquarters of two bulls. An enormous serpent raises its head toward one of the plants this hybrid figure is holding. Two figures (only one remains) originally flanked a rosette or sun with a human face. A second serpent twists beneath the sun.

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*Iraq Museum, Baghdad/Scala/Art Resource, NY*

Gods and monsters. An early second-millennium B.C.E clay plaque from Khafaje, in eastern Iraq, depicts Marduk splitting open the star-faced goddess Tiamat so that he can create the world out of her watery body (note the waves that make up her skirt).

Strikingly similar imagery appears on a silver chalice excavated at 'Ain Samiyah, in Israel. On the chalice, two figures (only one remains) originally flanked a rosette or sun with a human face.

The author of *Enūma Eliš* is deliberately attributing to Marduk and Babylon acts ascribed to other gods and cities in other myths. The author is stealing the thunder of these gods, undermining them in favor of Marduk. When Marduk receives Ellil's fifty names, he in effect becomes Ellil. When the gods build Babylon instead of Nippur, Babylon becomes the new religious capital. Most important, when Marduk defeats the 11 monsters that Ninurta fought in the ancient Anzū myth, Marduk son of Ea, god of Eridu, in effect usurps Ninurta son of Enlil, god of Nippur. *Enūma Eliš* is a story about Marduk that challenges a story about Ninurta. It reflects a political-theological competition over primacy in the pantheon and supremacy of the capital city.



*M. Amar and M. Grejevsky/Bible Lands Museum/Jerusalem*

**The seven-headed beast meets his demise. His lowest head droops from a wound inflicted by the kneeling warrior-god, at lower left, on this 1.5-inch shell inlay from Mesopotamia, dated from 2800 to 2600 B.C.E. The plaque is believed to depict the Sumerian deity Ninurta slaying a seven-headed monster who was trying to take over the world. According to author Hurowitz, the later tales of Marduk slaying Tiamat may have been conscious rewrites of the Sumerian tales, in which the Babylonian authors made Marduk out to be the new Ninurta. Similarly, the biblical authors may have improved upon aspects of Babylonian myths to show that their God, Yahweh, could do everything a Near Eastern god should do—and more.**

These tales of Marduk spawned further debate. An ancient Babylonian commentary praises Marduk;<sup>24</sup> an Assyrian commentary satirizes him.<sup>25</sup> What appears to have been an alternate Assyrian version of at least parts of *Enūma Eliš*—known only from some fragmentary manuscripts found at Aššur—offers a competing version of events by replacing Marduk's name with Anšar, a name given to Aššur, chief god in the Assyrian pantheon.<sup>26</sup> Wall reliefs in the *Akītu* (New Year's) House built by the Assyrian king Sennacherib depict Aššur, not Marduk, riding his chariot and vanquishing Tiamat.

The ancient Near East was full of conflicting claims to supremacy of this or that god or city over all others. The Bible is part of this polemic. The biblical authors borrowed from foreign Creation stories in order to make the best case possible for YHWH, God of Israel. They were

participating in a contemporary international debate on the basis of data considered basic and agreed upon by all.

For example, the preexistence of water may have been considered a “scientific” fact, common knowledge. In *Enūma Eliš* this water is personified as Tiamat; in “monotheistic,” “nonmythological” Genesis 1, the watery Deep is “just water.” Here, the biblical author is trying to correct the record.

The view of the world as a bubble with water above and below was a commonly held “scientific” truth at the time of the Bible, so it need not have been borrowed from a particular literary source. This water had to be parted *somehow* in order to form the bubble, and authors throughout the Near East had to decide how within the framework of their own beliefs. Marduk does this by physically splitting Tiamat, the personified waters. Genesis 1 has God ordain a firmament in the demythologized waters by simply speaking.

In *Enūma Eliš*, divine sleep deprivation is a constant problem. Tiamat and Apsū can't sleep so they try to kill their noisy kids. Man is created to give the gods rest, and Babylon is built to provide a resting place for gods in transit on a cosmic journey. This idea is rooted in the Mesopotamian myths of Enki and Ninmah or *Atra-ḫasis*.<sup>27</sup> In Genesis 1:1–2:4a God “ceases” and sanctifies the Sabbath, but in Exodus 31:17, a Priestly passage connected with the author's Creation story in Genesis, God “puts his heart at rest/is satisfied” (*wayyinnāpaš*).

It was common belief in the ancient Near East that a high god in a pantheon had to defeat the sea and create the world. A god, whoever he might be, had to act in a godly manner and do godly things! But the Priestly author of Genesis 1 gave the story a new spin. Rather than having God vanquish rebellious monsters, he had God create them (compare Psalm 104:25 where God creates Leviathan to play with), thus showing God's superiority from the start.

In light of all this and more, it is impossible to accept today in a simplistic manner the claims of Smith or Delitzsch that the biblical authors took the Babylonian Story of Creation, that is, *Enūma Eliš*, and simply applied it to YHWH, God of Israel. The specific parallels are fewer than originally thought, and even the best ones are not entirely certain. However, both the Bible and *Enūma Eliš* are products of the ancient Near East, each accepting common beliefs and knowledge, and each developing them in their own unique manner. They should be studied by modern scholars as mutually illuminating not only for what they hold in common but for the unique ways in which each presents their common heritage.<sup>28</sup>

## The Creation Story from Enūma Eliš



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The Creation story begins on Tablet 4 and continues on Tablet 5, which is, unfortunately, the least well-preserved section of the epic. In this translation, brackets indicate gaps in the text. (The photo shows Tablet 3.)

### Tablet 4

... The Lord [Marduk] trampled the lower part of Tiamat,

With his unsparing mace smashed her skull,

Severed the arteries of her blood,

And made the North Wind carry it off as good news.

His fathers saw it and were jubilant: they rejoiced,

Arranged to greet him with presents, greetings gifts.

The Lord rested, and inspected her corpse.

He divided the monstrous shape and created marvels (from it).

He sliced her in half like a fish for drying:

Half of her he put up to roof the sky,

Drew a bolt across and made a guard hold it.

Her waters he arranged so that they could not escape.

He crossed the heavens and sought out a shrine;

He leveled Apsû, dwelling of Nudimmud.

The Lord measured the dimensions of Apsû

And the large temple (Eshgalla), which he built in its image, was Esharra:

In the great shrine Esharra, which he had created as the sky,

He founded cult centers for Anu, Ellil, and Ea ...

#### **Tablet 5**

He fashioned stands for the great gods.

As for the stars, he set up constellations corresponding to them.

He designated the year and marked out its divisions,

Apportioned three stars each to the twelve months.

When he had made plans of the days of the year,

He founded the stand of Neberu to mark out their courses,

So that none of them could go wrong or stray.

He fixed the stand of Ellil and Ea together with it.

Opened up gates in both ribs,

Made strong bolts to left and right.

With her liver he located the Zenith;

He made the crescent moon appear, entrusted night (to it)

And designated it the jewel of night to mark out the days.

Go forth every month without fail in a corona,

At the beginning of the month, to glow over the land.

...

He [Marduk] put into groups and made clouds scud.

Raising winds, making rain, making fog billow, by collecting her poison,

He assigned for himself and let his own hand control it.

He placed her head, heaped up [ ]

Opened up springs: water gushed out.

He opened the Euphrates and the Tigris from her eyes,

Closed her nostrils, [ ].

He piled up clear-cut mountains from her udder,

Bored waterholes to drain off the catch-water.

He laid her tail across, tied it fast as the cosmic bond (?),

And [ ] the Apsû beneath his feet.

He set her thigh to make fast the sky,

With half of her to make fast the sky,

With half of her he made a roof; he fixed the earth.

He [ ] the work, made the insides of Tiamat surge,

Spread his net, made it extend completely.

He ... [ ] heaven and earth ...

From Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia* (New York: Oxford, 1989).

## The Creation Story from Genesis

When God began to create heaven and earth—the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep (*T<sup>e</sup>hôm*) and a wind from God sweeping over the water—God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, one day.

God said, “Let there be an expanse in the midst of the water, that it may separate water from water.” God made the expanse, and it separated the water which was below the expanse from the water which was above the expanse. And it was so. God called the expanse Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, a second day.

God said, “Let the water below the sky be gathered into one area, that the dry land may appear.” And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the gathering of waters, He called Seas. And God saw that this was good. And God said, “Let the earth sprout vegetation: seed-bearing plants, fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.” And it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation: seed-bearing plants of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that this was good. And there was evening and there was morning, a third day.

God said, "Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky to separate day from night; they shall serve as lights in the expanse of the sky to shine upon the earth." And it was so. God made the two great lights, the greater light to dominate the day and the lesser light to dominate the night, and the stars. And God set them in the expanse of the sky to shine upon the earth, to dominate the day and the night, and to separate light from darkness. And God saw that this was good. And there was evening and there was morning, a fourth day.

God said, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and birds that fly above the earth across the expanse of the sky." God created the great sea monsters (*Tannîn*), and all the living creatures of every kind that creep, which the waters brought forth in swarms, and all the winged birds of every kind. And God saw that this was good. God blessed them, saying, "Be fertile and increase, fill the waters in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth." And there was evening and there was morning, a fifth day.

God said, "Let the earth bring forth every kind of living creature: cattle, creeping things, and wild beasts of every kind." And it was so. God made wild beasts of every kind and cattle of every kind, and all kinds of creeping things of the earth. And God saw that this was good. And God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. They shall rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth, and all the creeping things that creep on earth." And God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. God blessed them and God said to them, "Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth and all the creeping things that creep on earth."

God said, "See, I give you every seed-bearing plant that is upon all the earth, and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit; they shall be yours for food. And to all the animals on land, to all the birds of the sky, and to everything that creeps on earth, in which there is the breath of life, [I give] all the green plants for food." And it was so. And God saw all that He had made, and found it very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

The heaven and earth were finished, and all their array. On the seventh day, God finished the work that He had been doing, and He ceased on the seventh day from all the work that He had done. And God blessed the seventh day and declared it holy, because on it God ceased from all the work of creation that He had done. Such is the story of heaven and earth when they were created.

(Genesis 1:1–2:4)

## George Smith's Other Find: The Babylonian Flood Tablet



*By Permission of the Trustees of the British Museum*

In 1866, George Smith, a British bank-note engraver, wrote a letter to the famed Assyriologist Sir Henry Rawlinson, asking if he might have a look at the fragments and casts of Assyrian inscriptions in the back rooms of the British Museum. Rawlinson agreed—thus initiating what would become an unusually fruitful friendship between an eager amateur and the man who had deciphered cuneiform.

Smith so impressed Rawlinson that the latter hired him in 1867 to help catalogue the museum's cuneiform inscriptions, including those excavated by Austen Henry Layard at Kyunjik (ancient Nineveh) in the 1840s and 1850s.

In the accompanying article, Victor Hurowitz describes one of Smith's most significant discoveries: the Babylonian poem *Enūma Eliš*. But Smith's most famous "find" in the British Museum store rooms was undoubtedly the Epic of Gilgamesh, with its dramatic account of a Great Deluge that threatened to wipe out humankind.

In his popular book *The Chaldean Account of Genesis*, Smith described the discovery: "I soon found half of a curious tablet which had evidently contained originally six columns of text; two of these (the third and fourth) were still nearly perfect; two others (the second and fifth) were imperfect, about half remaining, while the remaining columns (the first and sixth) were entirely

lost. On looking down the third column, my eye caught the statement that the ship rested on the mountains of Nizir, followed by the account of the sending forth of the dove, and its finding no resting-place and returning. I saw at once that I had here discovered a portion at least of the Chaldean [Babylonian] account of the Deluge."

According to a later source, Smith then "jumped up and rushed about the room in a great state of excitement, and, to the astonishment of those present, began to undress himself." The British Museum has dubbed Smith's Tablet 11, shown, "the most famous cuneiform tablet from Mesopotamia."

After he calmed down, Smith scoured the museum's holdings for further fragments, and soon found that his Flood tablet was the 11th tablet in a 12-tablet epic poem. On December 3, 1872, he presented his findings to the newly founded British Society of Biblical Archaeology and speculated that more of these tablet fragments remained buried in the sands of Nineveh.

Soon after, Edwin Arnold, owner of London's *Daily Telegraph*, proposed that his paper sponsor renewed excavations at Nineveh, with Smith at the helm. Smith, and the museum, agreed.

Smith later wrote, "Soon after I commenced excavating at Kouyunjik, on the site of the palace of Assurbanipal, I found a new fragment of the Chaldean account of the Deluge belonging to the first column of the tablet, relating the command to build and fill an ark, and nearly filling up the most considerable blank in the story."

The copies of the Gilgamesh Epic discovered by Layard and Smith came from the world-class library of the Assyrian king Assurbanipal (668–627 B.C.E.). The tales of Gilgamesh, the bold warrior-king of Uruk, are much older, however; many of them date back to the Sumerian period (third millennium B.C.E.). In the Old Babylonian Period (early second millennium B.C.E.), the various adventures of Gilgamesh were strung together in a cohesive narrative, which was rewritten many times. By the 12th century B.C.E., an 11-tablet version of the epic had emerged. In the eighth century B.C.E., a 12th tablet describing the death of Gilgamesh was added to the series.

The Flood story does not number among the original Sumerian tales of Gilgamesh. Rather, it was inserted into the narrative in about the 12th century, and thus appears only in the 11- and 12-tablet versions of the tale (called the Standard Babylonian versions).

According to the tale, after the death of his beloved friend Enkidu, a disconsolate Gilgamesh searches for ways to live forever. His quest leads him, on Tablet 11, to the immortal Utnapishtim—often referred to as the Mesopotamian Noah, because he saved his family from a devastating worldwide Flood. Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh that he, too, was once a mere mortal and a king, of Shuruppak-on-the-Euphrates. In his day, five of the gods plotted to send a Flood to destroy humankind. One of the gods, Ea, surreptitiously informed the king, whispering, “Quickly, quickly tear down your house and build a great ship, leave your possessions, save your life ... Then gather and take aboard the ship examples of every living creature.” Utnapishtim finishes the ship and loads his family and animals just in time: “Ninurta opened the floodgates of heaven, the infernal gods blazed and set the whole land on fire. A deadly silence spread through the sky and what had been bright now turned to darkness. The land was shattered like a clay pot. All day, ceaselessly, the storm winds blew, the rain fell, then the flood burst forth, overwhelming the people like war ... For six days and seven nights, the storm demolished the earth. On the seventh day, the downpour stopped. The ocean grew calm. The land could be seen, just water on all sides, as flat as a roof. There was no life at all.” The boat runs aground on Mount Nimush. Utnapishtim sends out a dove, which flies right back, having failed to find land; he sends a swallow with similar results. Finally, he sends a raven, which never returns. The waters have begun to recede.

The gods convene and offer Utnapishtim and his family immortality. Having heard this tale, Gilgamesh recognizes he has little chance of being offered the same, and he returns home to Uruk to die.—M.D.M

Passages from Gilgamesh come from Stephen Mitchell's new translation *Gilgamesh: A New English Version* (New York: Free Press, 2004).

## Keep Reading

*Enūma Eliš* has merited numerous scholarly editions, translations to modern tongues, commentaries and studies; and the complete text is readily available for reading enjoyment. For recent English translations, see Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, The Flood, Gilgamesh and Others* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1989), pp. 228-277; and Benjamin Foster, *Before the Muses 1* (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 1996), pp. 351-402. The translation printed in “The Creation Story from Enūma Eliš” comes from Stephanie Dalley's work.

Those bold readers who wish to consult the original Akkadian should see Wilfred G. Lambert and Simon B. Parker, *Enūma Eliš: The Babylonian Epic of Creation, the Cuneiform Text* (Oxford:

The Clarendon Press, 1966). In this edition Tablet 2 is presented in partially preserved form. But see now F.N.H. Al-Rawi and A.R. George, "Tablets from the Sippar Library II—Tablet II of the Babylonian Creation Epic," *Iraq* 52 (1990), pp. 149-157. For additions and variants to Tablet 6 see the Neo-Assyrian manuscript from Me-Turnat (Tell-Hadad) published by F.N.H. Al-Rawi and J.A. Black, "A New Manuscript of Enūma Eliš Tablet VI," *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 46 (1994), pp. 131-139. The fifth tablet, published by B. Landsberger and J.V. Kinnier-Wilson in *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 20 (1961), pp. 154-179, remains the only one with significant damage, which is unfortunate because the missing parts describe the creation of the world. The authoritative edition of *Enūma Eliš*, promised by Wilfred G. Lambert nearly 40 years ago, is still eagerly awaited.

## Why Did Joseph Shave?

By Lisbeth S. Fried



*Erich Lessing*

**A priest with a shaved head plays his harp before Inherkhau and his wife in this 12th-century B.C.E. painting from the Workmen's Tombs in Deir el-Medina at Luxor.**

Everyone knows the Biblical story of Joseph (Genesis 37, 39–50). As a young lad he has dreams that predict his dominance over his brothers and parents. In retaliation, his brothers discuss killing him but instead sell him to traders who bring him down to Egypt, where he becomes servant to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh's guard. Potiphar's wife finds Joseph attractive and attempts to seduce him, but he rejects her. In return, she accuses Joseph of making advances and has him put in prison. While there, Joseph interprets the dreams of two fellow prisoners, foretelling their future. Two years later Pharaoh, too, begins to dream strange dreams, and Joseph is brought out of prison to interpret them:

Then Pharaoh sent and summoned Joseph and they rushed him from the dungeon, and he shaved and changed his clothes, and he came in to Pharaoh.

(Genesis 41:14)

Why did he shave? And *what* did he shave? And why does the text bother to mention it? I propose that this bit of tangential information is provided by a Biblical author who was familiar with the *realia* of the Egyptian court and of Egyptian mores.<sup>1</sup>

Most people in ancient Mesopotamia did not shave. A relief from the audience hall of Sennacherib's palace in Nineveh<sup>2</sup> shows in exquisite detail the fall of the Judean city of Lachish to the Assyrian armies in 701 B.C.E. It depicts the Assyrian king (whose head is unfortunately

defaced, though the beard is still visible), seated on his throne, receiving his chief minister (perhaps the "Tartan" mentioned in 2 Kings 18:17) and other officers from his army. Behind them, Jews from Lachish are shown bowing in submission. The Jews and the Assyrians are all in full beard. Behind the throne, two eunuchs fan the king. Their clean-shaven appearance makes them stand out.

In contrast to the majority of peoples in the ancient Near East, ancient Egyptians were clean shaven. At least from the time of the Old Kingdom (2686–2181 B.C.E.), the custom among men was to shave beard and mustache, and wear a false goatee on special occasions.<sup>3</sup> Foreigners can be distinguished from native Egyptians in many Egyptian tomb paintings by the presence of full beards, for example. In a mural from the tomb of Beni Hasan, a caravan of bearded foreign traders brings eye-paint to Egypt (c. 1890 B.C.E.).

By shaving his beard, Joseph immediately transforms himself from a foreigner to an Egyptian. This change foreshadows Joseph's acceptance at court, as well as the fact that later Joseph's brothers will fail to recognize him, taking him for an Egyptian.

More than this, I believe not only that Joseph shaved his beard and mustache, but that he shaved his entire body. In other words, I suggest that Joseph is depicted taking on the shaved body of the priesthood.

In ancient Egypt, priests had to be physically pure (*w'b*) before entering a temple.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the very word for the most common category of priest is "pure one" (*w'b*).<sup>5</sup> Texts found on doors and lintels of Egyptian temples dictate the requirements of those who would enter. A text on the door of the temple of Horus at Edfu, for example, forbade those who were not "pure" (*w'b*) from entering.<sup>6</sup>

O prophets of the temple of Horus at Edfu, O powerful fathers of God, O Chaplain of the Golden Falcon ... O, pure priest of the god at Edfu, and whoever enters through this door. Let him keep himself from entering in a state of impurity, for the god loves purity more than a thousand pieces of gold.<sup>7</sup>

On the side door of the same temple was the added injunction: "Oh priests ... you who enter to the gods ... in the temple. Do not deal wrongfully, do not enter when unclean ..."<sup>8</sup>

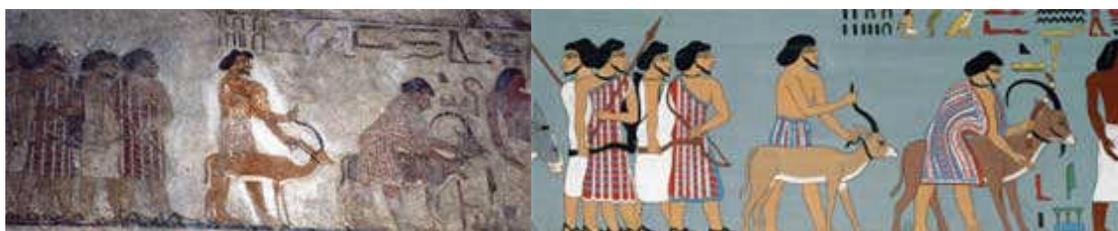


*Erich Lessing*

**Sennacherib, King of Assyria, receives his minister who is attended by military officers after the Assyrians defeated the Israelites at Lachish in 701 B.C.E. Behind the king stand the king's servants, clean-faced eunuchs, in contrast to the bearded officers and the king. The relief was mounted on a wall of the throne room in Sennacherib's palace at Nineveh.**

In Egypt, being physically “pure” or “clean” included having the entire body shaved.<sup>9</sup> Priests are easy to identify in Egyptian statues and bas-reliefs. They are the ones shown with shaved heads and beards. A tomb painting of Inherkhau, a foreman at the necropolis of Deir el-Medina on the West Bank at Luxor (c. 1194–1156 B.C.E.), depicts a family grouping showing Inherkhau, his wife and four small children. Another man is with them, presenting an offering table. According to the Egyptian custom, he and the other man are beardless, but each is shown with a full head of thick, black shoulder-length hair.<sup>10</sup> Another scene shows him and his wife being serenaded by a priest. In contrast to Inherkhau, the priest is shown with the shaven head and the shaven-but-painted eyebrow of the priesthood.

Part of being “clean” or “pure” was also being circumcised. Circumcision was common in ancient Egypt and was required for the priesthood. The gatekeepers of the Isis Temple in Philae were enjoined to admit only those who were “pure,” (*w'b*), and to prevent “the donkey, the hound, the uncircumcised (*'w'*) and the goat” from entering the temple.<sup>11</sup> The custom of circumcision goes back to earliest times.<sup>12</sup> A puberty-aged youth's circumcision is depicted in a scene from the Sixth Dynasty (c. 2340–2140 B.C.E.) tomb of Ankh-ma-Hor at Saqqara.<sup>13</sup>



*Erich Lessing*

**Unlike the Egyptians who will receive these emissaries from Asia, the foreigners in this caravan are distinguished by their dark beards. Depictions of foreigners and Egyptians regularly feature foreigners with beards and Egyptians clean-shaven. This painting, shown as a recreation and in the original, is located in the Beni Hasan tombs in Middle Egypt overlooking the Nile and dates to approximately 1890 B.C.E.**

The laity and the unclean were not permitted to enter the temple. Perhaps because of their monthly menses, women were considered impure at all times, and priests were expected to abstain from sexual activity during the period of their priesthood.<sup>14</sup> A text from the temple at Edfu admonishes the priests “not to frequent the place of women, not to do what should not be done there.”<sup>15</sup> Priestesses served as musicians and singers in the temple, but serenaded the god from the doorway.<sup>16</sup> Only male priests, the “pure ones,” could actually enter into the inner rooms of the gods’ sanctuaries to feed, bathe and dress their cult statues. This was the situation from earliest times, up to and including the Ptolemaic period. Herodotus, writing in the Persian period (484–430 B.C.E.), tells us that, even in his day, priests who entered the temple were circumcised and had the hair of their entire body shaved. They also abstained from fish.<sup>17</sup>

They [Egyptian priests] are beyond measure religious, more than [those of] any other nation; and these are among their customs: ... They are especially careful to wear newly washed linen raiment. They practice circumcision for cleanliness sake; for they set cleanliness above seemliness. Their priests shave the whole body every other day, that no lice or aught else that is foul may infest them in their service of the gods ... They may not eat fish.

(Herodotus, *History* II:37)

During the Ptolemaic period, a fine of 1,000 drachmas was required of temple priests who were found not to have been completely shaved.<sup>18</sup>

Egypt was not the only civilization that required those entering the temples to be completely shaven. The Akkadian term *gullubu*, literally “shaven,” refers to a type of priest,<sup>19</sup> and the installation ceremony of the high priestess of Baal at Emar (modern Syria) included a day set aside for shaving her, probably her entire body.<sup>20</sup>



*Borromeo/Art Resource, NY*

**A bare-headed priest in a leopard skin assists Inherkhau and his wife (with earring) as they make a libation in this painting from the Workmen's Tombs in Deir el-Medina at Luxor.**

Even the Levites of ancient Israel had to be completely shaved in order to participate in the sacrificial service:

Take the Levites from among the Israelites and cleanse them. Thus you shall do to them, to cleanse them: sprinkle the water of purification on them, have them shave their whole body with a razor and wash their clothes, and so cleanse themselves.<sup>21</sup>

(Numbers 8:6–7)

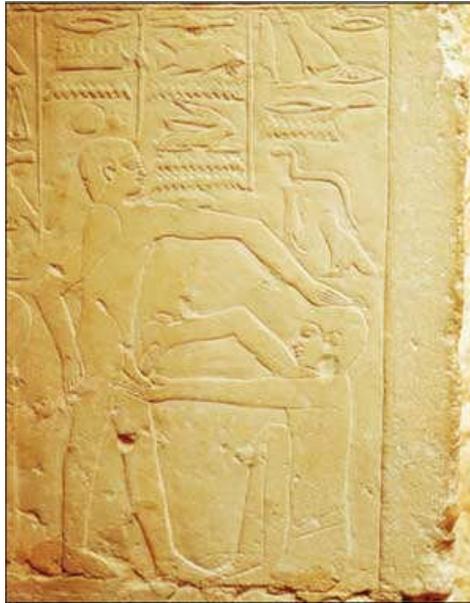
If being shaven and circumcised was necessary before entering an Egyptian temple, then one would expect it to have been necessary before entering into the inner chambers of Pharaoh's palace, since Pharaoh, too, was a god and his palace a temple. Pharaoh was primarily the god Horus, the all-powerful owner of the soil and its resources, responsible for the overflow of the Nile, the rising of the sun, as well as the birth of living beings and plants.<sup>22</sup> He was also the physical son of the sun-god, Re, the state god of Egypt and the natural mediator between mankind and the gods.<sup>23</sup>

Because of Pharaoh's divine character, his palace was a temple. Although it contained the normal qualities of an Egyptian home (living quarters, harem quarters, kitchen, bathrooms, gardens) and the normal qualities of a state administrative center (offices, archives, treasuries, libraries), the palace was primarily the sanctuary for the god-king.<sup>24</sup> It contained a chapel and a cult platform for royal ceremonies when Pharaoh appeared in festivals, either alone or with other royal gods: Horus (the divine form of himself), and Nechbet and Wadjet (patronesses and guardians of Upper and Lower Egypt respectively).

That this degree of cleanliness (that is, circumcision, the removal of all body hair and abstaining from fish) was required before entering the inner cult rooms of the palace is amply demonstrated by the Victory Stele of King Piye. King Piye was a Kushite (Nubian) ruler who conquered the Nile Valley in the late eighth century B.C.E. King Piye's famous Victory Stele recounts the submission of several Egyptian rulers to him:

At dawn the next day there came the two rulers of Upper Egypt and the two rulers of Lower Egypt, the *uraeus* wearers, to kiss the ground to the might of his majesty [King Piye]. Now the kings and counts of Lower Egypt who came to see his majesty's beauty, their legs were the legs of women. They could not enter the palace because they were uncircumcised (*'m'*) and were eaters of fish, which is an abomination to the palace. But King Namart entered the palace

because he was pure (*w'b*) and did not eat fish. The three stood there while the one entered the palace.<sup>25</sup>



*The Art Archive/Dagli Orti*

**A puberty ritual, circumcision is performed on a youth in this relief from the tomb of Ankhma-Hor (2340–2140 B.C.E.) at Saqqara, ancient Egypt's major necropolis. Circumcision was mandatory for those expecting to take their seasonal turn in the temple priesthood. Since the Israelites also practiced circumcision, Joseph was already "pure" enough in that respect to visit the pharaoh.**

Those who were allowed to enter the palace were thus distinguished from those who were not allowed entry. King Namart could enter because he was pure (*w'b*), implying he was shaved. In addition, he was circumcised and did not eat fish.



**Keys to entry to the pharaoh's presence: circumcised, clean (that is, completely shaven), and a non-fish eater, as explained in King Piye's victory stele.**

The requirements for entering the palace to approach King Piye echo the requirements of those allowed to enter the temples to approach the gods. Both those who would enter the temples and those who would enter the palace needed to be circumcised and “pure” (*wa’ab*), that is, shaved. (Both needed to abstain from fish.) It seems possible, therefore, that, like the *w’b* priest entering the temple and like King Namart entering the palace, Joseph, too, would have to have had his entire body shaved in order to enter the inner reaches of the palace where the king held court. As for the requirement of circumcision, it was not a problem. Joseph had been circumcised when he was eight days old (Genesis 17:12).<sup>26</sup>

## Abraham's Ur: Did Woolley Excavate the Wrong Place? the Wrong Place?

By Molly Dewsnap Meinhardt



*Courtesy University of Pennsylvania Museum, Philadelphia*

Sir Leonard Woolley (1880–1960) bears aloft a small reconstructed lyre from the graveyard of Ur, in southern Iraq, where the British archaeologist excavated hundreds of graves from the third millennium B.C.E. A golden bull's head (at right) decorated a much larger lyre found by Woolley in one of the cemetery's richest graves. The 4.5-foot-long Great Lyre, as Woolley dubbed it, is part of a traveling exhibition of Woolley's finds now touring the United States.

Woolley's tendency to give grand names to his spectacular discoveries led him to claim to have found Abraham's hometown, Noah's Flood and the tombs of various kings and queens who ruled over Ur in its heyday—each of these identifications has since come under scrutiny.

Nevertheless, during his 12 seasons at Ur, the British archaeologist proved to be a skillful—and creative—excavator. While excavating in the so-called royal cemetery, Woolley found only the impression of the small lyre (shown at left) in the dirt; the wooden bars had disintegrated. So Woolley inserted wooden sticks and wires into the holes and then poured in plaster. When the plaster had hardened, Woolley cleared the surrounding soil and revealed his lyre, with a decorative copper cow's head and a shell plaque attached to the sound box. Even the lyre's ten strings were briefly preserved in plaster, although they quickly disintegrated.

The ancient woodwork has perished, the metal has been stripped from the walls," Sir Leonard Woolley wrote in 1936. "The ruins which excavation lays bare are but skeletons from which the skin and flesh have gone, and to re-create them in imagination we must use such evidence as the ruins may afford, eked out by descriptions in the cuneiform texts. A king will boast how he

overlaid the doors of a sanctuary with gold, and amongst the ashes on the threshold of a temple gateway there may be found shreds of gold leaf overlooked by plunderers who sacked and burned the building; a fallen scrap of painted plaster can give a hint as to the adornment of a ceiling.”<sup>1</sup>

The ruins of Ur are as lifeless today as Sir Leonard Woolley described them two years after his excavation of the site ended. But thanks to Woolley's discoveries, we may conjure up a vivid picture of life at Ur. The British explorer uncovered not just scraps of plaster and shreds of gold, but entire vessels, headdresses and bull figurines made of the precious metal, ancient lyres, copper weapons and tools, silver bowls, a stunning assortment of jewelry made of imported lapis lazuli and carnelian, and more than 400 cylinder seals. He also unearthed a temple and ziggurat dedicated to the local moon god Nanna; homes of the rich and the not so rich; nearly 2,000 burials, most of them simple, but 16 of them so elaborate that he identified them as the royal tombs of Ur; and, most famous of all, a 12-foot-thick flood layer that he identified with Noah's Flood.



*University of Pennsylvania Museum, Philadelphia*

**The ram of Abraham? Because it so beautifully recalled the offering made in Isaac's stead, Woolley identified this 17-inch-tall statue as “the ram caught in the thicket” of Genesis 22:13.**

**It probably served—along with its mate, now in the British Museum—as a stand for burnt offerings during funerary rituals. Both sculptures were found, badly damaged, in the “royal cemetery” tomb known as the Great Death pit, which contained more than 70 bodies. With a face of gold, ears of copper, horns of deep blue lapis lazuli, a fleece of shell and a belly of silver, the ram is one of the most stunning artifacts from the graveyard.**

Eighty years have passed since Woolley began excavating, on behalf of the British Museum and the University of Pennsylvania, at Ur, in Iraq, just southwest of the Euphrates and about 150 miles north of the Persian Gulf. But it is 150 years since the British Museum first showed interest in the site. At that time, in the 1850s, it was known simply as Tell el-Muqayyar, "The Mound of the Pitch." The tell was named for a ziggurat, an imposing temple platform made of mudbricks, held together with bitumen, or pitch, and approached by stairs on three sides. The ziggurat at Ur—the best-preserved example from ancient Mesopotamia (see photo)—had remained at least partially exposed ever since it was built during Ur's floruit around 2100 B.C.E.

In the mid-1850s, the British Assyriologist Henry Rawlinson, newly famous for having deciphered cuneiform, encouraged J.E. Taylor, the British consul in Iraq and an occasional archaeologist for the British Museum, to explore the impressive remains of Tell el-Muqayyar. Digging along the base of the second tier of the ziggurat, Taylor found cuneiform inscriptions (on what are called foundation cylinders) that recorded a sixth-century B.C.E. restoration of the ancient ziggurat by the Babylonian emperor Nabonidus (556–539 B.C.E.). The inscriptions identified the site as Ur. Popular imagination linked it with Biblical Ur, the home of Abraham (Genesis 11:31).

Despite Taylor's find, interest in excavating the site was slow to develop. A few minor digs were undertaken, but for the most part, Ur lay fallow while the British Museum directed its funds to excavations of the Assyrian palaces in northern Iraq. It was not until World War I, when British troops arrived in Mesopotamia, that serious thought was given to returning to Ur. In 1922 the University of Pennsylvania Museum and the British Museum agreed to co-sponsor an excavation. Any finds, they determined, would "be divided between the two Institutions by mutual agreement."<sup>2</sup> Leonard Woolley, who had excavated Carchemish (in northern Syria) for the British Museum and had dug in Italy and Nubia for the university, was named director. On September 26, 1922, Woolley set sail for Basra, the southern Iraqi port.

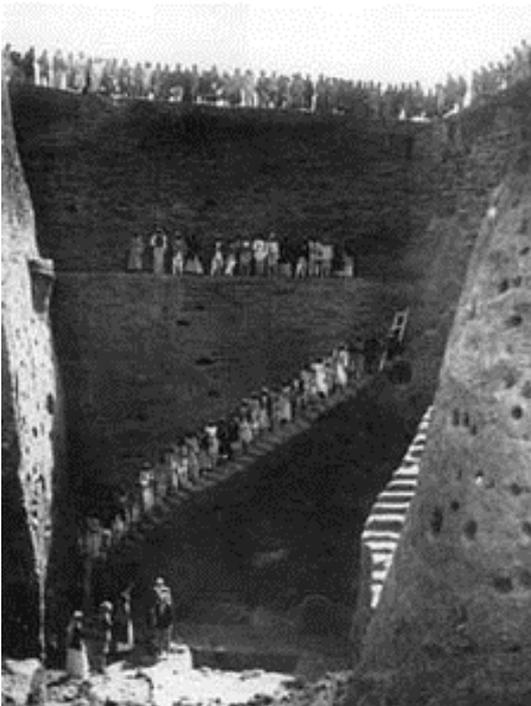
Woolley would spend 12 consecutive winters digging at Ur, from 1922 to 1934. His work resulted in a knighthood, a radio show on the BBC, a handful of popular books, a 19-volume technical report and, of course, the finds. The discoveries, he later wrote, "far surpass[ed] anything we had dared to expect."<sup>3</sup> The artifacts were divided among the museums of London, Pennsylvania and Iraq. Today, the famous Standard of Ur—four mosaic panels depicting a military victory and celebration—resides in the British Museum, along with statuettes, precious jewels, instruments, seals, gold vessels and game pieces. The artifacts sent to Baghdad have been in storage since the Gulf War, when the Iraq Museum's collection was put in hiding. Two

hundred artifacts from the University of Pennsylvania Museum are touring the United States through May 2001 (the exhibition schedule appears in the box on p. 25).

Rising 60 feet above the surrounding plain, the elongated Tell el-Muqayyar measures about 4,000 feet from north to south and 2,600 feet across. Occupied for almost 4,000 years, from the fifth to the mid-first millennium B.C.E., the city reached its zenith in the third millennium B.C.E.—the period of the so-called royal tombs, the ziggurat and other major buildings.

“The first thing I did,” Woolley wrote about his initial forays at Ur, “was to dig trial trenches which might give us some idea of the lay-out of the old city.”<sup>4</sup> One long trench ran east of the ziggurat; the second cut across what would later be identified as the cemetery.

Working with a team of 400, Woolley excavated extremely carefully for his day. When his trench struck gold beads from rich graves during his first season, Woolley stopped work in that area—for four years. “Our object was to get history, not to fill museum cases with miscellaneous curios,” Woolley wrote, “and history could not be got unless both we and our men were duly trained.”<sup>5</sup> Only after years of labor (and learning) at Ur did Woolley resume his excavation of the cemetery.



*University of Pennsylvania Museum  
Archives*

**Searching for early Ur, Woolley excavated several enormous pits. Arrayed along the edges and the stairs of the pit are the Arab workers enlisted to do the dirty work—in this case, removing 450,000 cubic feet of dirt. About 65 feet below the surface of the tell, Woolley found evidence of the earliest community at Ur: sherds of pottery with simple painted designs, mudbricks, stone tools, clay sickles, spindle whorls, and a handful of graves, dating to the fifth millennium B.C.E.**

In the meantime, Woolley concentrated on the ziggurat and the surrounding buildings, which he determined were part of a walled sacred precinct that filled much of the northern half of the mound. The surrounding wall had last been restored by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar (605–562 B.C.E.).

Woolley dated the ziggurat and other major construction in the sacred precinct to the city's heyday, around 2100–2000 B.C.E., when Ur was the capital of an empire, now called by scholars Ur III. King Ur-Nammu, the founder of the dynasty, initiated an ambitious building project to be completed by his son Shulgi. They dedicated the sacred precinct on the top of the mound (on the site of an earlier temple) to the Sumerian moon god Nanna and his wife Ningal, who were thought to reside in Ur. In return for the gods' protection, the kings of Ur built the ziggurat, which probably supported a temple to Nanna, dwellings for temple priestesses and what may have been a palace. An inscription from Ur records that the city walls built by Ur-Nammu were "like a yellow mountain"—presumably referring to the ziggurat, which loomed above the surrounding plain.<sup>6</sup> Ur-Nammu also refurbished the city's harbors and dug canals on three sides.

It is this city of about 2000 B.C.E. that Woolley identified as Abraham's home.

When the British mystery writer Agatha Christie visited the excavations at Ur in 1928, Woolley himself took her on a grand tour of the site. (Apparently Woolley's temperamental wife, Katharine, had just read—and enjoyed—*The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, one of Christie's Poirot mysteries.) Christie, who would later marry Woolley's then-assistant Max Mallowan, admired Woolley's ability to conjure up life among the dusty ruins: "Leonard Woolley saw with the eye of imagination: the place was as real to him as if it had been 1500 B.C., or a few thousand years earlier. Wherever we happened to be, he could make it come alive. While he was speaking I felt in my mind no doubt whatever that that house on the corner had been Abraham's. It was his reconstruction of the past and he believed in it, and anyone who listened to him believed in it also."<sup>7</sup>

Eric Burrows, a priest and epigraphist working at Ur, offered Christie a more sober, and perhaps more balanced, understanding of the site. Burrows's method as he guided the mystery writer around the site was "entirely different" from Woolley's. "With an apologetic air, he [Burrows] described the big courtyard, a temenos [sacred precinct], or a street of shops, and just as you became interested would always say: 'Of course we don't know if it is that really. Nobody can be sure. No, I think probably it was not.'"<sup>8</sup>

In a popular book, Woolley attempted to correlate the archaeological and historical evidence from Ur with the scanty description of the patriarch's life in the Bible: "Abraham," he wrote, "did

not come away from Ur empty handed. He brought with him a pride in his upbringing, in the greatness of his city ... He brought with him those stories of the world's creation and of the Flood which, moralised by his descendants, have been as history or as parable treasured by half the world for four thousand years. He brought with him the laws of Ur and, handing them down through the generations of his house, laid the foundations of that Mosaic code which is still the Law of the Jews and has been professedly adopted by most Christian nations as the basis of their own systems."<sup>9</sup>

Woolley tried to quell any doubts about his identification of Ur as home to Abraham. When his opponents claimed that Abraham would never have traveled so far and that the Biblical Ur should be identified with Urfa, in southern Turkey, Woolley took the opposite tack: "The proximity of Urfa and Haran was a strong argument against the former's being Ur. The migration of Terah's house becomes rather ridiculous if the move were but for a dozen miles or so and the new home was actually in sight of the old."<sup>10</sup>

But Woolley was not interested solely in Ur in the time of Abraham; he also wanted to find the city of Abraham's ancestors.

In 1927, having become more confident in his team and in his own understanding of the site's stratigraphy, Woolley returned to the cemetery he had struck in his first season. In all, Woolley discovered 1,850 graves: 660 from about 2600–2500 B.C.E. and the rest from about 2300 B.C.E. Most of the earlier graves were simple: a 5- by 6-foot pit containing a single body, wrapped in reed mats or placed in a simple wooden coffin. Clothing, a few personal accessories and simple vessels made of clay or stone were among the only grave goods.

Sixteen of these early graves, however, were spectacular. These Woolley identified as the royal tombs of Ur. Although the royal tombs differed in design, in most the body was placed in a vaulted or domed chamber at the bottom of a deep shaft. Surrounding the body (either in the chamber or in a pit outside) were the corpses of attendants (more than 70 in one case), the skeletons of oxen beside the chariots that they once pulled, and abundant grave goods. The wealth of imported goods attests to Ur's primacy in trade. The most abundant metal in the tombs was copper, believed to originate in the Oman peninsula, at the southern end of the Persian Gulf. There were vessels of chlorite and calcite, which probably came from Iran; beads carved from carnelian, known from western India; and seals, beads and other ornaments made of brilliant blue lapis lazuli, which came from southern Afghanistan.



*University of Pennsylvania Museum,  
Philadelphia*

A glimmering wreath crowned Queen Puabi of Ur in death. Woolley discovered this magnificent headdress clinging to the crushed skull of Puabi, a 5-foot-tall, 40-year-old woman identified by a cylinder seal found in her tomb. Made of hundreds of delicate pieces, the reconstructed headdress includes a long gilded ribbon that stretched across Puabi's forehead and looped over her ears, gold rosettes inlaid with lapis lazuli and white paste, rings of gold, and golden poplar and willow leaves dangling from strings of lapis lazuli and carnelian beads. Seven gold rosettes—called a “Spanish comb” by Woolley—sprouted from the back of the headdress.

One of the richest tombs belonged to a woman named Puabi (or Shubad, as Woolley read her name). On January 4, 1928, Woolley secretly notified his sponsors of his discovery by wiring them a telegram in Latin: “TUMULUM SAXIS EXSTRUCTUM LATERICIA ARCATUM INTEGRUM INVENI REGINAE SHUBAD ...” (“I found the intact tomb, stone built and vaulted over with bricks, of Queen Shubad adorned with a dress in which gems, flower crowns and animal figures are woven. Tomb magnificent, with jewels and golden cups—Woolley.”)



*University of Pennsylvania Museum, Philadelphia*

Woolley was so excited by his discovery of another massive tomb, belonging to a woman named Puabi (he misread the name as Shubad), that he informed his sponsors in a telegram written in Latin so that it could not be intercepted.

Later, Woolley tried to envision the ceremony that would have accompanied such a mass burial:

“Down into the pit, with its mat-covered floor and mat-lined walls, empty and unfurnished, there comes a procession of people, the members of the dead ruler’s court, soldiers, men-servants and women, the latter in all their finery of brightly-colored garments and head-dresses of carnelian and lapis lazuli, silver and gold, officers with the insignia of their rank, musicians bearing harps or lyres, and then, driven or backed down the slope, the chariots drawn by oxen or by asses, the drivers in the cars, the grooms holding the heads of the draught animals, and all take up their allotted places at the bottom of the shaft and finally a guard of soldiers forms up at the entrance ... The musicians played up to the last; then each of them drank from their cups a potion which they had brought with them or found prepared for them on the spot—in one case we found in the middle of the pit a great copper pot into which they could have dipped—and they lay down and composed themselves for death. Somebody came down and killed the animals ... and when that was done earth was flung in from above, over the unconscious victims, and the filling-in of the grave-shaft was begun.”<sup>11</sup>



*University of Pennsylvania Museum, Philadelphia*

**A golden dagger—the metal too soft to be functional—was among the burial offerings in the “royal cemetery.” Small round nail heads decorate the restored wooden handle and the original blade—in imitation of the metalworking technique known as granulation.**



*University of Pennsylvania Museum, Philadelphia*

**Woolley discovered this six-inch-tall tumbler resting beside the hand of Puabi. Made of electrum (an alloy of silver and gold), the fluted vessel was created by hammering sheet metal. The grave goods of Ur suggest that the city's inhabitants were sophisticated metalworkers, despite the region's paucity of natural ores, which are generally found in more mountainous regions.**

Royalty, mass suicide and gold—only Howard Carter's discovery of King Tut's tomb could rival the sensation caused by Woolley's find.



*© 1928 New York Times, reprinted by permission*

**Headlines in the New York Times proclaimed that Woolley had found a queen's tomb bearing "marvels of artistic work."**

But Woolley was not content with having found what he identified as the city of Abraham and his ancestors. He also wanted to uncover evidence of Noah's Flood. Having dug down 30 feet in places to clear the cemetery, Woolley decided to continue digging in this area, hoping to find the earliest civilization at Ur. He cut a pit, 75 by 60 feet in area, which eventually extended 64 feet deep. The first 41 feet down contained the remains of cities—mudbrick walls, pottery, graves. Directly beneath these occupation layers, however, Woolley detected a 12-foot layer of silt that had been deposited all at once, sometime in the mid-fourth millennium B.C.E. Woolley identified it as the Biblical Flood. During the Deluge, he speculated, the overflowing Euphrates had deposited the soil here. Scholars today suggest that the deposit may well have been wind-swept sand or the

silt from any one of the numerous floods of the Euphrates, which may or may not have inspired the Biblical and Sumerian Flood stories.<sup>12</sup>

Beneath the thick silt appeared a layer of mudbricks, ashes and potsherds, which Woolley identified as a prehistoric, pre-Flood community. Beneath this, about 3 feet below sea level, all traces of human occupation ended.

The year that Woolley dug his Flood pit was also the year the stock market crashed—1929. By the early 1930s, funds for Woolley's dig were drying up. The "possibilities of the site were nearing exhaustion, at least for our generation," the director of the University of Pennsylvania Museum diplomatically informed Woolley in 1933.<sup>13</sup> On February 25, 1934, the dig ended.

One year later, Woolley was knighted by King George V. In 1936 Woolley published a popular account of his findings at Ur, named not for the site, but for the man he considered its most famous resident: *Abraham: Recent Discoveries and Hebrew Origins*.

## **Abraham's Ur—Is the Pope Going to the Wrong Place?**

By Hershel Shanks

We inadvertently printed an incorrect draft of this article in our January/February 2000 issue. The correct text follows:

Pope John Paul II is planning a millennium pilgrimage in 2000 that will take him to Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Sinai—and Iraq! Why Iraq? Because that is where the patriarch Abraham was born—at Ur.

But wait a minute. The Pope may be going to the wrong Ur. Perhaps he should be going to Turkey.

More than 40 years ago, Cyrus Gordon, the eminent Biblical scholar and Near Eastern polymath who recently celebrated his 91st birthday, argued that the commonly designated Ur, on the west bank of the Euphrates River in southern Iraq, is not the Ur where Abraham was born.<sup>1</sup>

I talked to the still-very-much-with-it scholar in a telephone interview at his Massachusetts home. Gordon told me that before the middle of the 19th century, everyone located Ur in the north, based on the only evidence then available, the Biblical text.<sup>2</sup> With the decipherment of cuneiform, a southern Ur was identified in Iraq, an Ur that ultimately produced fabulous finds. As a result, scholars changed their focus to the southern Ur. As Claus Westermann has remarked, "After Leonard Woolley's work at [southern] Ur, the idea that this great and ancient center of civilization must have been 'Abraham's homeland' captured the imagination."<sup>3</sup> But in the Bible, "there is no trace of any connection with Ur in the south; there is only the name."<sup>4</sup>

One thing seems clear: There was more than one Ur. Places named Ur, or something linguistically close enough to it to be a candidate for Abrahamic Ur (such as Ura), have turned up in numerous ancient inscriptions—at Ugarit (on the Mediterranean coast in modern Syria), at Nuzi (in northeastern Iraq), at Alalakh (in Turkey about a hundred miles north of Ugarit) and, most recently, in the extraordinary archive from Ebla (in northern Syria, east of Ugarit). The Ebla tablets include references to places called Ur, Ura and Urau. Unfortunately, none of these references can be located with precision,<sup>5</sup> but the findspots of the tablets indicate the cities were most likely somewhere in central or northern Syria or southern Turkey—relatively near Haran.

And Haran is where Abram, as he was then called, went with his father, Terah, after they left Ur (Genesis 11:31). There is no dispute regarding the location of Haran, where Terah died (Genesis 11:28–32).<sup>6</sup> The ancient name has stuck to the site.<sup>7</sup> It is about 10 miles north of the Syrian border, in Turkey, strategically located on the east-west highway that links the Tigris River with the Mediterranean Sea. It was a major city in the Middle Bronze Age (first half of the second millennium B.C.E.), the probable date of the patriarchal age, if we accept the position that there was such an age, and such a person as Abraham.<sup>8</sup>

Unfortunately, except for a small sounding, Haran has never been excavated. A major expedition was planned by Harvard professor Lawrence Stager, but bureaucratic obstacles laid by the Turkish government blocked the way. That was when Stager (and his financial backer, Leon Levy) moved instead to Ashkelon, in Israel. (Ashkelon is now the most prominent American excavation in the Holy Land.) What we know about Haran, therefore, comes mostly from cuneiform archives such as the Nuzi tablets, which provide a vivid picture of life in Haran during the Middle Bronze Age.

Perhaps the major objection to identifying Biblical Ur with the southern Ur in Iraq is that it is so far away from Haran—nearly a thousand miles. As the author (Yoshitaka Kobayashi) of the entry on Haran in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* notes, “The traditional site of Ur in S[outhern] Mesopotamia may be reexamined as some seek the location near Haran.”

Moreover, if Abram left for Canaan from the southern Ur, he certainly took an unnecessarily long route by going all the way north to Haran. As one scholar has remarked, “Haran is not normally on the way from Ur in southern Mesopotamia to Canaan.”<sup>9</sup> As another has stated, “Any route from the Ur excavated by Sir C. Leonard Woolley to Canaan would not go so far north or east as Haran.”<sup>10</sup> Traveling from Ur to Canaan, Abraham could have cut west long before reaching Haran—at Mari, for example.

Gordon points to another objection: The southern Ur lies on the west bank of the Euphrates. Here's why that matters: When Abraham was an old man, he sent his servant back to “the land of my birth”—Ur—to find a wife for his son Isaac (Genesis 24:4). Abraham's obedient servant went back to the land of Abraham's birth and there found Rebekah, Laban's sister. (Actually, Laban is the first person to greet Abraham's servant.) A generation later, Isaac's son Jacob went back, presumably to Ur, to work for Laban. After working for Laban for 20 years, Jacob fled back to Canaan. To do so, however, he had to cross the Euphrates (Genesis 31:21). If Ur was on the west bank of the Euphrates, as the southern Ur is, it would not be necessary to cross the

Euphrates to travel to Canaan. Ergo, the southern Ur cannot be the place that Abraham sent his servant.<sup>11</sup>

In addition, we are told that Laban lived in Paddan-Aram, in the Haran region (Genesis 28:2, 5, 6, 7). Scholars equate this with Aram-Naharaim, Abraham's ancestral home (Genesis 24:10). Both terms refer, although somewhat vaguely, to areas in upper (northern) Mesopotamia, as indicated in other Biblical references.<sup>12</sup>

What turned scholars' attention to southern Ur as the place of Abraham's birth were the remarkable excavations at the site. It was identified as Ur shortly after Henry Rawlinson deciphered cuneiform. In 1854, an Englishman named J. E. Taylor dug up at the site some foundation deposits containing clay cylinders with cuneiform writing all over them. When they were deciphered, they identified the site as Ur.

In 1922, Sir Leonard Woolley began a major excavation of the site that continued until 1934. He made a number of spectacular discoveries, including the so-called royal tombs, rich with grave goods in gold, silver and lapis lazuli. He also came upon a mud layer that he linked with Noah's Flood. Woolley was a prolific popular writer with a flair for publicity, which might account for the fact that he referred to his Ur as "the biblical home of Abraham" and to his finds as "worthy of Abraham." If his purpose was to connect the site to the Biblical patriarch, he was successful.

The southern Ur reached its zenith in what is called the Ur III period, about 2100–2000 B.C.E. In the two subsequent centuries it was a major port. The city expanded to 125 acres. As to whether this was Abrahamic Ur, the author (Jean-Claude Margueron) of the entry on Ur in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* notes "a certain contradiction in the closeness suggested by the Genesis text between a prodigious urban capital and a nomad clan."

The defenders of the southern Ur do so largely on the basis of their view as to what Ur the Biblical author had in mind (the Biblical author calls it "Ur of the Chaldees"), rather than the place where Abraham was born. This, for example, is the view of Harvard professor Peter Machinist, whom I talked to after reading his entry on Ur in the *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*. There Professor Machinist states that Gordon's suggestion of a northern Ur has been "largely rejected today in favor of the southern Ur." But as Machinist and I discussed the matter, he said that he was rethinking this statement and the whole issue. In his entry on Ur, Machinist said, he had not adequately distinguished between two kinds of questions: What Ur did the Biblical author or authors have in mind when they referred to "Ur of the Chaldees"; and where in actual fact was

Abraham's original home, assuming of course that there was a historical Abraham? Machinist called the first question a historiographic issue; the second, a historical issue.

On the historiographical issue, Machinist explained that he, like most critical Biblical scholars, would characterize Genesis 11:27–32 as composed of two authorial strands: P or the Priestly source (perhaps Genesis 11:27a, 32), which frames the passage; and J or the Yahwist strand (perhaps Genesis 11:27b–31), which forms the core of the passage.<sup>13</sup> Whether the reference to “Ur of the Chaldees” in verses 28 and 31 belongs to P or J or both is a matter of debate, but both would put the composition solidly in the first millennium B.C.E. and, if P, then likely in the sixth century B.C.E. This fits nicely with the reference to Ur as “of the Chaldees” or Chaldeans, who founded the Neo-Babylonian empire in Mesopotamia in this period (626–539 B.C.E.) and rebuilt Ur—the southern Ur—to fabulous heights after a millennium of decline.<sup>14</sup> Thus Machinist remains convinced that Ur of the Chaldees was, for the Biblical writer, the southern Ur. At the very least, he says, the burden of proof is on those who would argue otherwise.

But what of the Ur of the historical Abraham? Where did he come from, assuming that there was such a historical figure? On this level, Machinist states that he is not prepared to make a judgment. But he does say that he would now revise the statement in his *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary* article that Gordon's position is “largely rejected” today. Indeed, Claus Westermann has come to the opposite conclusion: “Many [scholars] took over Gordon's thesis ... The majority ... incline to a northern Mesopotamian origin.”<sup>15</sup> I have already quoted passages from the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* entries on Ur and Haran in which the authors express hesitations in identifying Abraham's Ur as the southern Ur. Machinist recognizes that today more people than he supposed would “hesitate or even reject” identifying the historical Ur of Abraham with the Ur of southern Mesopotamia.

Gordon points out that the southern Ur is never referred to in ancient inscriptions as “Ur of the *Kasdim* [in English, Chaldeans].” Moreover, the *Kasdim* (*Kalduin* Akkadian) never appear in any historical record before the early ninth century B.C.E., hundreds of years after Abraham's time, so this reference could not be a part of the original tradition, assuming there was a historical Abraham. In short, the reference to *Kasdim* is clearly anachronistic as applied to the patriarchal period, the first half of the second millennium B.C.E. As Roland de Vaux has stated, “The [southern] Ur could not have been called Ur of the Chaldaeans at that time [first centuries of the second millennium B.C.]”<sup>16</sup>

Gordon mentions two possibilities for the location of Abraham's Ur, both in southern Turkey near the Syrian border. One is Ura, northeast of Haran. Another is Urfa, about an hour's drive

from Haran. Urfa, called Orhai in Syriac Christian literature, may be related to Ur.<sup>17</sup> Even today, local tradition in Urfa insists that this is where Abraham was born. The chief mosque in Urfa is (or was) named the Mosque of Abraham and the pool with the sacred fish is called "The Lake of Abraham the Beloved."<sup>18</sup>

Another possibility is that Ur, as used in the Bible, refers not to a city, but to a region. In Genesis 11:28 we are told that Abram's brother died "in the land of his birth, Ur of the Chaldees." The text says that Ur is the land of his birth, rather than the city of his birth.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, in the early Greek translation of the Bible known as the Septuagint, instead of "Ur of the Chaldees," Genesis 11:28 says, "the land of the Chaldees." If we retroject the Greek word for "land" into Hebrew, we get *Eretz* (as in *Eretz Yisrael*, the Land of Israel). In early consonantal Hebrew, *Ur* and *Eretz* begin with the same two letters (*aleph, resh*); the two words differ only in that *Eretz* has a third letter, a *tsade*. It is therefore possible that the Septuagint preserves the original tradition; the *tsade* somehow fell out in the Hebrew text that has come down to us. The Bible thus refers not to a city but to a country. And at the time this passage was composed, the Chaldeans dominated the north as well as the south.

Still another possibility, of course, is that the reference to Ur is without any historical basis. For Westermann, "Ur of the Chaldees represents the pagan world from which Terah departed for Canaan. The name is not meant primarily to convey geographical information, but to indicate the old capital of the pagan Empire."<sup>20</sup> He calls the journey from Ur to Canaan a "secondary itinerary," as demonstrated by "the tremendous distances, the fact that Haran is not normally on the way from Ur in southern Mesopotamia to Canaan, and that the starting point is a city and the destination a country. It is certain that this itinerary did not arise immediately out of or after a journey described here. It is a later construction that originated a very long time after the event it intends to describe."<sup>21</sup> J. Alberto Soggin suggests that the itinerary from Ur to Haran to Canaan represents not Abraham's route, but the route of the exiles who returned from Babylonia in the sixth century B.C.E.<sup>22</sup>

We will probably never know for sure which Ur is Abraham's Ur, where it all began in response to God's call to "go forth ... to the land that I will show you" (Genesis 12:1). But there is at least a serious question as to whether the Pope will be going to the right place if he is looking for Abraham's birthplace in Iraq.<sup>23</sup>

## Where Was Abraham's Ur? The Case for the Babylonian City

By Alan R. Millard



*Nik Wheeler*

Hershel Shanks has reopened the debate raised long ago by Cyrus Gordon, about which Ur was Abraham's.<sup>a</sup> Was the patriarch born in some northern Mesopotamian Ur rather than in Babylonia? I believe the case for identifying the Ur (of the Chaldees) in Genesis 11:28, 31 (compare with Nehemiah 9:7) with Ur, now Tell el-Muqayyar, in southern Babylonia, remains strong, although the available information precludes certainty. For our purposes, I assume that there was a man named Abraham and that the stories about him are very ancient.

A number of cuneiform texts mention several places named Ur, or something very like it, but most can be dismissed so far as Genesis is concerned:

(1) The Ebla tablets from the third millennium B.C. name Ura and Uru among scores of places within Ebla's immediate neighborhood. There is nothing to show they had any particular importance, however.<sup>1</sup> According to an Alalakh text of about 1600 B.C., a village named Urê lay at the western edge of the Fertile Crescent.<sup>2</sup> Other Alalakh tablets from about 1450 B.C. attest to a place called Urê and a village named Ura.<sup>3</sup> The Nuzi tablets from about 1400 B.C. name a Great Uri and a Small Uri in Nuzi's vicinity.<sup>4</sup>

The places referred to in the Ebla, Alalakh and Nuzi tablets were all probably villages within the immediate environs of their respective urban centers.

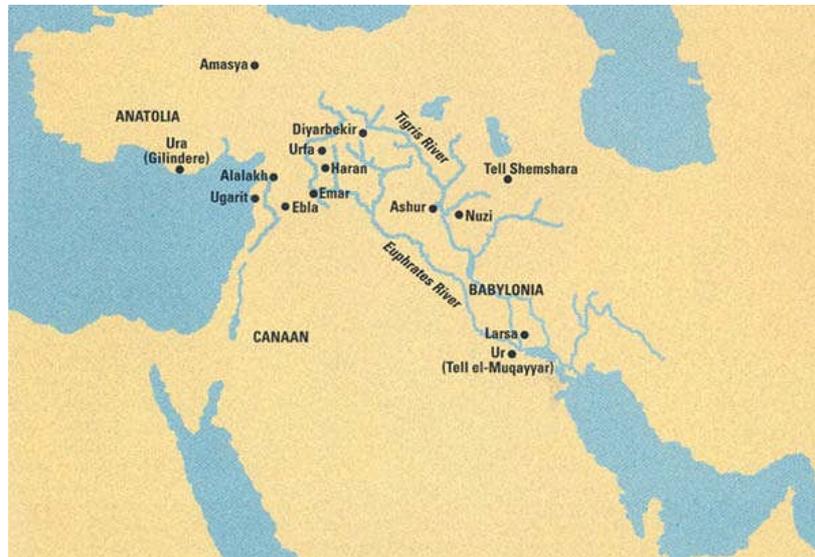
(2) In the 13th century B.C., merchants from a place called Ura had problems in Ugarit that were adjudicated by the Hittite overlord. This Ura figures prominently in Cyrus Gordon's case

against Abraham's origin in the Babylonian Ur.<sup>5</sup> The Ura in question is now identified as a port on the coast of Cilicia, perhaps modern Gilindere.<sup>6</sup> Another Ura lay within the kingdom of Ugarit.<sup>7</sup> Still another Ura existed at the same time, according to Hittite texts, and may be located near modern Amasya in north central Turkey.<sup>8</sup> In addition, Tiglath-pileser III of Assyria lists Ura among his eighth-century B.C. conquests in the Turkish foothills, perhaps northwest of Diyarbekir.<sup>9</sup>

Neither the Cilician port nor the sites in northern Turkey are likely candidates for Abraham's Ur. They are too far out of the way, and they are not known to have had a West Semitic populace.

(3) The modern town of Urfa, called Orhai in Syriac sources and Edessa in Greek, maintains a traditional association with Abraham, but it may not date to the pre-Christian era. The name Orhai is of unknown origin, but if related to the biblical Ur, it is surprising that the final syllable is not represented in Hebrew. The modern form of the name Urfa cannot be traced prior to Turkish times.<sup>10</sup>

(4) The best northern candidate is preserved on a 19th-century B.C. document found at Tell Shemshara, at the eastern edge of the Fertile Crescent, which names a place called Ura'u; it is associated with Khaburatum (a name connected with the river Habur; see 2 Kings 17:6) and so possibly lay west of the Tigris,<sup>11</sup> and therefore nearer than the southern Ur to Haran, to which Abraham moved after leaving his birthplace.



*Map of Mesopotamia and environs.*

On the other hand, none of the arguments arrayed against the southern Ur are conclusive:

(1) It is said that the southern Ur is too far from Haran, about a thousand miles. But merchants and others in the early second millennium B.C. routinely traveled long distances. The traders who went from Ashur to Anatolia between about 1950 and 1750 B.C. followed routes that ran up to the Black Sea coast and far across central Anatolia. Their business had southerly connections into Babylonia, and letters of Babylonian merchants in the same period report their activities far up the Euphrates, at Emar, for example.<sup>12</sup> Three tablets trace a route from Larsa, 25 miles north of southern Ur, to Emar, going via Haran. The route did not follow the Euphrates; perhaps to avoid hostile territory, it ran further east, up the Tigris, swinging west across Upper Mesopotamia.

(2) Another objection is that a route from southern Ur to Canaan via Haran is quite roundabout. There may have been reasons for this that we cannot discover, but Ur and Haran were the two main centers for worship of the Moon-god, Sin. The names Terah (Abraham's father) and Laban, and possibly Milcah and Sarah, may be linked to the moon cult. Terah may well have been associated with the worship of the moon (see Joshua 24:2).

(3) It is said that Abraham's nomadic lifestyle is inconsistent with the urban setting of the southern Ur. But living in tents is well attested for the early second millennium B.C. Urban scribes were well aware of tent-dwelling nomads, whom they despised. Moreover, there is nothing to say that Terah's family was nomadic; they may have lived in a house in Ur, as the excavator, Sir Leonard Woolley, imagined. Perhaps Abraham became a nomad only when he left Haran.

(4) Another objection is that the southern Ur lies west of the Euphrates, so it could not be described as "across" the river (Genesis 31:21). But the course of the Euphrates River near Ur in the second millennium B.C. is not well defined. Woolley stated that the "river washed the foot of the western rampart," taking a new course to the east during the mid-first millennium B.C.<sup>13</sup> For anyone living in the Levant, Babylonian Ur would have lain conceptually "beyond the river," whatever the precise geography.

(5) The Biblical text refers to Abraham's birthplace as "Ur of the Chaldees." No evidence exists for the term "Chaldean" earlier than the ninth century B.C. As Gordon observes, the term is never attached to the name Ur in Babylonian documents. Clearly someone thought it necessary to define Ur as "of the Chaldees" in the Genesis text. Following the common hypothesis that Genesis is an interweaving of three separate sources (Priestly, Yahwist and Elohist, the last not being involved here), the addition of the identifying phrase "of the Chaldees" could reflect the renewed eminence of this Ur under the Neo-Babylonian or Chaldean kings (626–539 B.C.), as Peter Machinist has suggested (in Shanks's essay). If we suppose that the Genesis text has a much earlier origin, then "of the Chaldees" could be an explanation added to the text at a time

when the location of Ur needed to be clarified. The phrase may not be part of a tradition reaching back to Abraham's time, but the information it preserves—namely, that Abraham came from Babylonia—could well be part of the ancient tradition.

Thus, there is no insurmountable objection to the southern Ur, Ur of the Chaldees, being Abraham's birthplace—as the Bible describes it.

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## Notes

### The Genesis of Genesis

a. According to the documentary hypothesis, the Pentateuch consists of at least four discrete textual strands that have been woven together to make one continuous narrative: J or the Yahwist (in German *Jahwist*), after the personal name of the God of Israel (YHWH, or Yahweh) used primarily in this strand; E, or the Elohist, who uses a more generalized term (Elohim) for God; P, the Priestly Code, which makes up most of Leviticus and much of Exodus and Numbers; and D, which stands for the Deuteronomist and consists of much of the Book of Deuteronomy. The first Creation account (Genesis 1:1–2:4a; see box) is credited to P; the second (Genesis 2:4b–24) to J.

b. The names of the “proto-divine” figures are not written with the divine determinative, in sharp contrast to all the other gods mentioned in the composition, indicating that although they give birth to gods, they are not divine in their own right.

c. See Bill T. Arnold and David B. Weisberg, “[Babel und Bibel und Bias](#),” *BR*, February 2002.

d. See Steven W. Holloway, “[Mad to See the Monuments](#),” *BR*, December 2001.

1. George Smith, *The Chaldean Account of Genesis Containing the Description of the Creation, the Fall of Man, the Deluge, the Tower of Babel, the Times of the Patriarchs, and Nimrod; Babylonian Fables, and Legends of the Gods; From the Cuneiform Inscriptions* (1876; photographic reproduction, Minneapolis: Wizards Book Shelf, 1977).

2. Nahum Sarna, *Understanding Genesis: The Heritage of Biblical Israel* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1966).

3. Alexander Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1951).

4. Scholars have disagreed over the date of the composition. Some, like Thorkild Jacobsen, put it in the Old Babylonian period (early second millennium B.C.E.), when the city of Babylon first gained prominence in Mesopotamia, and others, like Wilfred Lambert, date it to the time of Nebuchadnezzar I (end of the second millennium), when Babylon was again in ascendancy and the statue of Marduk was returned from its captivity in Elam.

5. Making crucial decisions at parties while under the influence of strong drink is reminiscent of how decisions are made in the court of King Ahasuerus according to the Book of Esther.

6. Anne Drafkorn-Kilmer in a paper delivered at the 50th Rencontre assyriologique internationale conference, held at the Skukuza Wildlife Preserve, in South Africa, in August 2004, has compared this chariot and its movement with God's chariot in the Book of Ezekiel.

7. I associate the term *s?a<sup>-</sup>bitarka<sup>-</sup>ti*, “pinching the rear” with the Akkadian term *s?ibit appi*, “a pinch of the nose,” which means “sneeze” and Rabbinic Hebrew “sneeze from below” designating flatus.

8. An innocent reader of this passage will certainly break out laughing from the comic scene. But there is an additional dimension to this description, which be it primary or secondary is intentional. This dimension is revealed in an ancient Assyrian cultic commentary that reads: “The king who opens the barrel in the race is Marduk who captured Tiamat with his penis” (*s?a ina us?ari<sup>-</sup>s?u Tiamat ikmû*). It is reasonable to assume that Marduk's sexual organ is none other than the arrow mentioned in Enûma Eliš? as his weapon. The commentator has sensed the obscene nature of the original text and has been drawn to it, and we too should give it proper heed. As is well known, sexual and anal humor go hand in hand,

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and this applies to Mesopotamian humor as well. It seems, therefore, that the sexual humor of the commentary has been piqued by the anal humor in the text, the specific stimulus being the reference to the evil wind going behind Marduk.

9. See Victor A. Hurowitz, "Babylon in Bethel: A New Look at Jacob's Dream," in *Teshurot LaAvishur: Studies in the Bible and Ancient Near East, in Hebrew and Semitic Languages; Festschrift Presented to Prof. Yitzhak Avishur on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday*, ed. Michael Heltzer and Meir Malul (Tel Aviv-Jaffa: Archaeological Center Publications, 2004), pp. 103-109 [Hebrew]; English version soon to appear in *Orientalism, Assyriology, and the Bible*, ed. Steven W. Holloway (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, in preparation).

10. Tablet vii, lines 159-162.

11. Friedrich Delitzsch, *Babel and Bible: A Lecture on the Significance of Assyriological Research for Religion Delivered Before the German Emperor*, trans. Thomas J. McCormack (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company, 1902); and *Babel and Bible: Two Lectures Delivered before Members of the Deutsche Orient-Gesellschaft in the Presence of the Great Emperor*, ed. C.H.W. Johns (Oxford, UK: Williams and Norgate; New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1903).

12. In truth, Leonard King's *Seven Tablets of Creation, or the Babylonian and Assyrian Legends Concerning the Creation of the World and of Mankind* (vols. 1 and 2 [London: Luzac and Co., 1902]; see [www.cwru.edu/univlib/preserve/Etana/KING.SEVENv1/KING.SEVENv1.html](http://www.cwru.edu/univlib/preserve/Etana/KING.SEVENv1/KING.SEVENv1.html)), published the same year as Delitzsch's lecture, presented in even more detail what was known at the time, and integrated it into an all inclusive picture of the Bible's dependence on Babylonian culture.

13. According to Heidel, even the etymological connection between *Tiamat* and *Tehôm* cannot be taken to indicate dependence of Genesis on *Enûma Eliš?*, because the words are semantically different (one means "sea" while the other means "subterranean waters"). Had the biblical author borrowed from the Babylonian work, he likely would have used a different word. Heidel's (and also Lambert's) objections notwithstanding, an echo of Tiamat in the Hebrew *Tehôm* is, in my opinion, not to be ruled out. Isaiah 51:9-10, mentions the arm of YHWH which has (in the distant past) smitten Rahab, pierced Tannîn and (during the Exodus) dried up the sea (Yam) and the waters of *Tehôm rabba<sup>h</sup>* (the great Deep), mixing cosmic past, historical past, and impending redemption. One can maintain that the sea, *yam*, and the great Deep, *Tehôm rabba<sup>h</sup>*, in this verse are only natural phenomena, yet reference to the mythological monsters in the immediately preceding verse certainly imbue these "natural" terms with their original mythological connotations. If so, there seems to be a biblical "memory" of mythological Tiamat piqued by authors in various manners, and one should not rule out that the Priestly author also remembered it.

14. CAT 1.3 III 38-4. Mark S. Smith, *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*, ed. Simon Parker, Society of Biblical Literature Writings from the Ancient World Series 9 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), p. 111.

15. KTU 1.5 I 1. See Smith, "The Baal Cycle," in *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*, p. 141.

16. Lambert, "A New Look at the Babylonian Background of Genesis," *Journal of Theological Studies* 16 (1965), pp. 287-300; republished with two postscripts in "*I Studied Inscriptions from Before the Flood*": *Ancient Near Eastern, Literary, and Linguistic Approaches to Genesis 1-11*, eds. R.S. Hess and D.T. Tsumura, Sources for Biblical and Theological Study 4 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994), pp. 96-113. Moshe Weinfeld's transliteration and Hebrew translation of *Enûma Eliš?*, published by the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 1973, refers in its notes to numerous additional parallels between individual lines and specific biblical verses.

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17. Weinfeld has pointed out that in addition to *Enūma Eliš*? climaxing with divine rest, it actually ends with the building of Babylon and Marduk's temple Esagila, and this combination of motifs—Creation, divine rest, temple—is completed by the literary connections in the Priestly code between the account of Creation, the Sabbath, and the Tabernacle account contained in Exodus 25–31, 35–40. See Weinfeld, "Sabbath, Temple and Enthronement of the Lord—The Problem of the Sitz in Leben of Genesis 1:2–2:3," in *Mélanges bibliques et orientaux en l'honneur de M. Henri Cazelles*, ed. A. Caquot and M. Delcor (Kevelaer, Germany: Butzon & Bercker, 1981), pp. 501–512.

18. For a synthetic reading of the composition see Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1976), pp. 165–192; H.L.J. Vanstiphout, "Enuma Elish as a Systematic Creed: An Essay," *Orientalia Lovaninesia Periodica* 23 (1992), pp. 37–61. For an attempt at higher literary criticism, see A. Leo Oppenheim, "Mesopotamian Mythology I," *Orientalia* n.s. 16 (1974), pp. 207–238.

19. Jacobsen, *Treasures of Darkness*, p. 166; Guo Honggeng, "The Mysterious Four-faced Statue (OIM A719)," *Journal of Ancient Civilizations* 16 (2001), pp. 87–92.

20. Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1989), pp. 203–227; B. Foster, *Before the Muses* 1 (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 1996), pp. 461–485; A. Annus, *The Standard Babylonian Epic of Anzu*, State Archives of Assyria Cuneiform Texts III (Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2001).

21. Lambert, "Ninurta Mythology in the Babylonian Epic of Creation," in *Keilschriftliche Literaturen, Ausgewählte Vorträge der XXXII. RAI, Berliner Beiträge zum Vorderen Orient* 6 (Berlin: D. Reimer, 1986), pp. 55–60.

22. Ze'ev Yeivin, "A Silver Cup from Tomb 204a at 'Ain-Samiya," *Israel Exploration Journal* 21 (1971), pp. 78–81; Yigael Yadin, "A Note on the Scenes Depicted on the 'Ain-Samiya Cup," *Israel Exploration Journal* 21 (1971), pp. 82–85.

23. K. Oberhuber, "Eine Hymne an Nippur (UET VI 118)," *Archiv Orientalní* 35 (1967), pp. 262–270.

24. A. Livingstone, *Court and Literary Miscellanea*, State Archives of Assyria 3 (Helsinki: Helsinki Univ. Press, 1989), pp. 99–102 no. 39.

25. A. Livingstone, *Court and Literary Miscellanea*, pp. 95–98 no. 38.

26. Lambert believes that the Assyrian version did not consist of an entire new edition, and that the switch of names reflects only incomplete reworking. See Lambert, "The Assyrian Recension of *Enūma Eliš*?" in *Assyrien im Wandel der Zeiten*, eds. H. Waetzold and H. Hauptmann, Heidelberg Studien zum alten Orient 6 (Heidelberg: Heidelberg Orientverlag, 1997), pp. 77–80.

27. For a variant on the idea of divine rest, see Peter Machinist, "Rest and Violence in the Poem of Erra," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 103 (1983), pp. 221–226.

28. "Contrastive" study of ancient Near Eastern sources combined with "comparative" study to form a "contextual approach" has been advocated by William Hallo, editor of *Scripture in Context*. See for instance Hallo, "The Context of Scripture: Ancient Near Eastern Texts and Their Relevance for Biblical Exegesis," *World Congress of Jewish Studies* 11, A (1994), pp. 9–15.

### Why Did Joseph Shave?

1. For discussions of the sources and composition history of the Joseph story, see the commentaries. For studies of its Egyptian background, see, in addition to the commentaries, D.B. Redford, *A Study of the Biblical Story of Joseph (Genesis 37–50) Vetus Testamentum Supplements 20* (Leiden: Brill, 1970), pp. 189–243; J. Vergote, *Joseph en Égypte* (Louvain, 1959); idem. “Joseph en Egypte’: 25 Ans Apres,” in S. Israelit-Groll, ed., *Pharaonic Egypt: The Bible and Christianity* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1985), pp. 289–306; W. Dietrich, “Die Josephserzählung als Novelle und Geschichtsschreibung: Zugleich ein Beitrag zur Pentateuchfrage,” *Biblisch-Theologische Studien 14* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1989), pp. 60–69. None of these works mention the Egyptian background of Joseph’s shaving.
2. David Ussishkin, *The Conquest of Lachish by Sennacherib* (Tel Aviv: The Institute of Archaeology, 1982), Fig. 71, pp. 88–89.
3. A.M. Blackman, “Purification (Egyptian),” in A.B. Lloyd, ed., *Gods, Priests, and Men: Studies in the Religion of Pharaonic Egypt by Aylward M. Blackman* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1998), pp. 3–21, esp. p. 6.
4. S. Sauneron, *The Priests of Ancient Egypt*, tr. David Lorton, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 2000), pp. 35–40.
5. For a discussion of the types of Egyptian priests and their ranks, see my *The Priest and the Great King: Temple Palace Relations in the Persian Empire*. Biblical and Judaic Studies from the University of California, San Diego 10 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2004), pp. 56–59.
6. M. Weinfeld, “Instructions for Temple Visitors in the Bible and in Ancient Egypt,” *Scripta Hierosolymitana 28* (Egyptological Studies) (1982), pp. 224–250. The populace at large could not enter, only the priests Sauneron, *The Priests of Ancient Egypt*, pp. 35–40.
7. M. Alliot, *Le Culte D’Horus Á Edfou au Temps des Ptolémées* (Cairo: Institut Français d’archéologie Orientale Bibliothèque d’Étude, Vol. 22, 1949), pp. 184–185.
8. Ibid.
9. Sauneron, *The Priests of Ancient Egypt*, pp. 35–40.
10. M. Andrews, “The Tomb of Foreman Inherkhau,” [www.touregypt.net/featurestories/inherkhaut.htm](http://www.touregypt.net/featurestories/inherkhaut.htm). Male beauty (as shown by the representations of Pharaoh) included a full head of thick, black shoulder-length hair (L. Green, “Beauty,” *Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt* [Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2001], pp. 167–171). Medical papyri show the concern for this standard of beauty. They provide numerous recipes for hair tonics, both to cover the grey in order to achieve the desired deep black, as well as to treat thinning hair and spotted or male-pattern baldness. See H. Kamal, *A Dictionary of Pharaonic Medicine* (Cairo: The National Publication House, 1967), pp. 213–214. On the use of wigs to achieve this standard of beauty, see below, note 14.
11. H. Junker, “Vorschriften für den tempelkult in Philä,” *Analecta Biblica 12* (1956), pp. 151–160. When the reference is to adult males, this is the only interpretation that is appropriate to all the occurrences. See W. Westendorf, “Noch einmal: Das Wort ‘m’ — Knabe/Jüngling/Unbeschnittener/Unreiner,” *Göttinger Miszellen 206* (2005), pp. 103–110; Pace E. Feucht, “Pharaonische Beschneidung,” in S. Meyer, *Egypt—Temple of the Whole World/Ágypten—Tempel der Gesamten Welt: Studies in Honour of Jan Assmann* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), pp. 81–94.

12. Male circumcision was common among the ancient Egyptians, boys being circumcised in groups when they reached puberty. See "[Circumcision—Who Did It, Who Didn't and Why](#)," *BAR* 32:04, and C. de Wit, "La Circoncision chez les anciens Egyptiens," *Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* 90 (1972), pp. 41–48, and more recently, W. Westendorf, "Noch einmal: Das Wort 'm'."

13. The Sixth Dynasty (c. 2340–2140 B.C.E.) tomb of Ankh-ma-Hor at Saqqara, [www.nocirc.org/symposia/second/larue.html](http://www.nocirc.org/symposia/second/larue.html)

14. Hilary Wilson, "The Priest," in Wilson, *People of the Pharaohs: From Peasant to Courtier* (London: Michael O'Mara Books Ltd., 1997), pp. 97–119, esp. p. 106. Priests were not resident in the temple, but were organized into phyles, taking their turn in the temple only every fourth month. The rest of the time they lived normal lives with their families. See Blackman, "Purification (Egyptian)," p. 10; D. Meeks, "Pureté et Impureté: Égypte," in *Dictionnaire de la Bible—Supplément*, vol. 9 (Paris, 1979), pp. 430–451, esp. p. 441.

The fact that most men rotated in and out of the priesthood meant that they were shaved bald one month out of every four—and this at a time when the standard of male beauty was deep black shoulder-length hair! (See endnote 10.) For those men (and this was most upper class men) the only way to achieve the standard of male beauty was the wig. Wigs were thus the fashion, and were worn on public occasions and at banquets, often woven into the existing short hair. See J. Fletcher, "Hair," *British Museum Dictionary of Ancient Egypt* (London: British Museum Press, 1995), pp. 117–118.

15. Alliot, *Le Culte D'Horus Á Edfou*, p. 186.

16. This is also true of "God's Wife", the daughter of either the high priest of Amun who ruled Thebes or (from the 23rd dynasty) of the king. After the fall of the 20th dynasty, these Wives of the God ruled Thebes themselves. See Blackman, "Priest, Priesthood (Egyptian)," pp. 125–126.

17. On the relationship between "cleanliness" and food prohibitions, see P. Galpaz-Feller, "The Stela of King Piye: A Brief Consideration of 'Clean' and 'Unclean' in Ancient Egypt and the Bible," *Revue Biblique* (1995), pp. 506–521.

18. Sauneron, *The Priests of Ancient Egypt*, p. 37, citing *Berlin Griechische Urkunden* vol. V, p. 76.

19. *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary*, "Gullubu," G, p. 129.

20. D.E. Fleming, *The Installation of Baal's High Priestess at Emar*, *Harvard Semitic Studies* 42 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), pp. 180–182.

21. On the shaving of Levites, see B.A. Levine, *Numbers 1–20, Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), pp. 273–274. On shaving rites in general, see S.M. Olyan, "What Do Shaving Rites Accomplish?"

22. S. Sauneron, *The Priests of Ancient Egypt*, 29.

23. A. Blackman, "Priest, Priesthood (Egyptian)," in Lloyd, ed., *Gods, Priests, and Men*, pp. 117–144, esp. pp. 117–118.

24. "Palast" *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*. Hrsg. von Wolfgang Helck und Eberhard Otto (Wiesbaden, O. Harrassowitz, 1972), p. 643.

25. Miriam Lichtheim, "The Victory Stela of King Piye," in Lichtheim, ed., *Ancient Egyptian Literature: Vol III—The Late Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), pp. 66–84.

26. This article has benefited immensely from conversations with Aakyo Eyma, Eugene Cruz-Urbe, Donald Redford, Joachim Friedrich Quack, and Penina Galpaz-Feller. In addition, Professor Eyma has read an early version of the manuscript and made invaluable suggestions. All remaining errors are my own.

### **Abraham's Ur: Did Woolley Excavate the Wrong Place?**

1. Leonard Woolley, *Abraham: Recent Discoveries and Hebrew Origins* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936), pp. 90–91.
2. C.B. Gordon, letter to Frederic Kenyon, June 12, 1922, University of Pennsylvania Museum Archives: Ur, box 1. Quoted in Richard L. Zettler and Lee Horne, eds., *Treasures from the Royal Tombs of Ur* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Museum, 1998), p. 12.
3. Woolley, *Excavations at Ur: A Record of Twelve Years' Work* (London: Ernest Benn; New York: Barnes & Noble, 1964), p. 13.
4. Woolley, *Excavations at Ur*, p. 52.
5. Woolley, *Excavations at Ur*, p. 53.
6. Woolley, *Excavations at Ur*, p. 123.
7. Agatha Christie, *An Autobiography* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1977), p. 363.
8. Christie, *Autobiography*, p. 363.
9. Woolley, *Abraham*, p. 187.
10. Woolley, *Abraham*, p. 60.
11. Woolley, *Excavations at Ur*, pp. 68–69.
12. See Susan Pollock, "Ur," in Eric M. Meyers et al., eds., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East*, 5 vols. (New York and Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997), vol. 5, p. 288.
13. Horace H.F. Jayne, quoted in Zettler and Horne, *Treasures from the Royal Tombs*, p. 19.

### **Abraham's Ur—Is the Pope Going to the Wrong Place?**

1. Cyrus H. Gordon, "Abraham and the Merchants of Ura," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 17 (1958), p. 28; "Abraham of Ur" in *Hebrew and Semitic Studies* (the G. R. Driver festschrift) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), pp. 77–84; and "[Where Is Abraham's Ur?](#)" *BAR* 03:02.

## Exploring Genesis: The Bible's Ancient Traditions in Context

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2. H. W. F. Saggs, although one of Gordon's critics, agrees on this point. According to Saggs prior to the decipherment of cuneiform, "the traditional and commonly accepted identification" of Abrahamic Ur was the northern site of Urfa; Saggs, "Ur of the Chaldees: A Problem of Identification," *Iraq* 22 (1960), p. 200. Nevertheless, there was, Saggs notes, "a divergent tradition, of equal antiquity, taking the city of Abraham as being in South Babylonia," citing T.G. Pinches, "Ur of the Chaldees," in *A Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. by James Hastings (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1902). But Pinches acknowledges that "much uncertainty exists as to [Abrahamic Ur's] identification" and Pinches even acknowledges his own doubts: "Notwithstanding the inherent probability of the identity of the ancient Babylonian Uru (Mugheir [the southern Ur]) with the biblical Ur of the Chaldees, the name is not so near as might be wished."

3. Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12–36: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985), pp. 139–140.

4. Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, p. 139. But cf. Roland de Vaux, *The Early History of Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), p. 191, who finds names in the patriarchal narratives that occur in Lower Mesopotamia from the end of the third and beginning of the second millennium B.C.

5. See, for example, the search for Cilician Ur: Richard H. Beal, "The Location of Cilician Ura," *Anatolian Studies* 42 (1992), p. 65.

6. One of Terah's sons (Abram's brother) was named Haran. Lot was Haran's son (and Abraham's nephew). But in Hebrew the name of the person Haran is spelled differently from the place Haran. The initial letter of the person is *heh*; of the place, *het*.

7. See Seton Lloyd and William Brice, "Harran," *Anatolian Studies* 1 (1955), pp. 77–111.

8. In general, see P. Kyle McCarter, "The Patriarchal Age: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob," rev. by Ronald S. Hendel, in Hershel Shanks, ed., *Ancient Israel*, rev. ed. (Washington, DC: **Biblical Archaeology Society**, 1999).

9. Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, p. 139.

10. Saggs, "Ur of the Chaldees," p. 201.

11. One answer to this argument is that "land of my birth" in Genesis 24:24 may more properly be translated "land of my kindred," which makes the place less explicit. The Hebrew word is *moladti*. There is no agreement among scholars as to this issue. The New Jewish Publication Society translation has "land of my birth." Others translate "my kindred." According to Saggs, "There is thus no objection to taking the phrase 'eres *moladti* in Gen. xxiv. 7 as denoting not 'the land where I was born' but 'the land where my kindred are currently to be found'" (Saggs, "Ur of the Chaldees," p. 201).

12. See, for example, "Aram-Naharaim" and "Paddan-Aram" in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*. The entry for Paddan-aram in *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary* (1996) states that "Haran and perhaps Ur were located in Paddan-aram."

13. This is the view of the majority of source critics. See Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, p. 134.

14. So Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, p. 139.

15. Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, p. 140.

16. de Vaux, *Early History of Israel*, p. 187.

17. In the ancient literature, it is also more commonly called Edessa.
18. See T.G. Pinches, "Ur of the Chaldees."
19. So Pinches, "Ur of the Chaldees."
20. Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, p. 136.
21. Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, p. 139.
22. J. Alberto Soggin, *An Introduction to the History of Israel and Judah*, 2nd ed. (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press, 1993), p. 100.
23. I am deeply indebted to Peter Machinist for his help in pursuing the research reflected in this article. His assistance does not necessarily mean that he agrees with all my reasoning.

### Where Was Abraham's Ur?

- a. Hershel Shanks, "[Abraham's Ur: Is the Pope Going to the Wrong Place?](#)" *BAR* 26:01.
1. Marco Bonechi, *I nomi geografici dei testi di Ebla. Repertoire Géographique des Textes Cunéiformes* 12.1 (Wiesbaden: Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 1993), pp. 310–312, Ura, Ura'u, Uram, Uri'um, Urru; A. Archi et al., *I nomi di luogi di testi di Ebla* (Rome: Missione Archeologica Italiana in Siria, 1993), pp. 44, 456–457, 463–465, Ura, Ura'u, Uri, Uru.
2. Donald J. Wiseman, *The Alalakh Tablets* (London: British Institute of Archaeology at Ankara, 1953), 56.8.
3. Wiseman, *The Alalakh Tablets*, 105.1 (Urê); 162.4, 16 (Urri); 142.13 and 154.10 (Ura).
4. J. Fincke, *Die Orts- und Gewässernamen der Nuzi-Texte. Repertoire Géographique des Textes Cunéiformes* 10 (Wiesbaden: Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 1993), p. 332.
5. Cyrus H. Gordon, "Abraham and the Merchants of Ura," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 17 (1958), pp. 28–31. For a new translation of the text see Gary Beckman, *Hittite Diplomatic Texts*, 2nd ed. (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1999), p. 177.
6. Richard H. Beal, "The Location of Cilician Ura," *Anatolian Studies* 42 (1995), pp. 65–73.
7. Beckman, *Hittite*, p. 175; M. Astour, "La Topographie du Royaume d'Ougarit" in M. Yon, M. Szyner, P. Bordreuil, eds, *Le Pays d'Ougarit autour de 1200 av. J.-C.* (Paris: Editions recherche sur les Civilisations, 1995), pp. 55–69, esp. p. 68.
8. Giuseppe F. del Monte, J. Tischler, *Die Orts- und Gewässernamen der hethitischen Texte. Repertoire Géographique des Textes Cunéiformes* 6 (Wiesbaden: Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 1978), pp. 457–458.
9. K. Kessler, *Untersuchungen zur historischen Topographie Nordmesopotamiens* (Wiesbaden: Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 1980), p. 179; H. Tadmor, *The Inscriptions of Tiglath-pileser III King of Assyria* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy, 1994), pp. 76, 126, 184.

10. See Judith B. Segal, *Edessa, 'The Blessed City'* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), pp. 3,255; A. Harrak, "The Ancient Name of Urfa," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 51 (1992), pp. 209–214, suggested that Urfa was the Admum or Adme of cuneiform sources.

11. B. Groneberg, *Die Orts- und Gewässernamen der altbabylonischen Zeit. Repertoire Géographique des Textes Cunéiformes* 3 (Wiesbaden: Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 1980), p. 247.

12. Mogens T. Larsen, *The Old Assyrian City-State and its Colonies* (Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1976); C.B.F. Walker, "Some Assyrians at Sippar in the Old Babylonian Period," *Anatolian Studies* 30 (1980), pp. 15–22; W. F. Leemans, *Foreign Trade in the Old Babylonian Period* (Leiden: Brill, 1960).

13. P. R. S. Moorey, Ur "of the Chaldees." A Revised and Updated Edition of Sir Leonard Woolley's Excavations at Ur (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1982), pp. 138, 263; see also H. W. F. Saggs, "Ur of the Chaldees," *Iraq* 20 (1960), p. 202, n.12.