

# **An Accidental God**



**Aleron Zemplin**

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With Commentary and Annotations

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with illustrations by **Aspen Anadore**

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*Through a fortuitous series of events a person who lived at the dawn of civilization became a god, then became God, and today is the focus of the thoughts and prayers of billions: Jews, Christians and Muslims. Given all the people who have lived and all of the random events that have occurred to each of them, the number of possible outcomes is staggering. Everything that could possibly happen has happened to someone, at some place, and at some time, including becoming God.*

## FORWARD

Look at the news on any given day; it is remarkable how much of it is driven by intolerance and fanaticism based on slightly different interpretations of the God of a Bronze Age nomad named Abraham. How ironic it would be if all of this human energy was being wasted on a long dead person, who had no idea that he would become God. If we discount the existence of magical beings, and I certainly do, then religious beliefs must have human rather than supernatural origins. Throughout the ages, humans have deified forces of nature (wind, rain, sky), geography (mountains, sea, rivers), and other people like rulers and dead ancestors. We cannot blame intelligent people three to four thousand years ago for seeing magic in nature, the landscape, and in death, since they had no better knowledge. Although the book of *Genesis* sometimes conflates Abraham's God with the Canaanite sky god El, and associates him with high places in the geography, the origins of this God are unknown, so it is possible that he was a deified ancestor.

Then it occurred to me that at the time of Abraham every other clan in the world had its own deified ancestors and family gods. How was it that the god of this one family out-competed those of every other to become the God of the Western World? The answer must be an evolution of religious thought, which is in many ways analogous to biological evolution. As people experience life's constantly changing and often seemingly random challenges, they develop new ideas and new solutions. Unworkable approaches are discarded, but people hold onto the best ideas, those that solve their problems or provide some advantage. They spread these ideas to others, and pass them on to their children. This process can be looked at as the mutation and natural selection of ideas, which led over time to one religious tradition's rise to dominance. Of course this process of religious evolution took thousands of years, but *An Accidental God* only looks at its very beginnings: The life of a boy named Yehhi, who would eventually become our God, and the thought-evolution of his descendent Abraham as Abraham confronts a life of challenges and

misfortunes. It seems to me the height of irony that modern-day religious people who deny the truth of biological evolution do so because of their belief in a God which is itself the product of an evolution in ideas. This observation is true independent of whether or not there is any truth to the fictionalized events in *An Accidental God*.

In the sections of the book focusing on Abraham, the dead ancestor Yehhi is presented as a disembodied presence contemplating the actions of Abraham and his clan. This would seem to contradict the secular point of view I have outlined above. However, Yehhi is present after his physical death only as the collective thoughts of all the living people who focus their minds upon him. The disembodied Yehhi character in *An Accidental God* is a symbolic representation of this dynamic. Yehhi's opinions and ideas evolve throughout history as the thoughts of those who think about him evolve. Why is it that the *Old Testament* God is wrathful and obsessed with sacrifices and ritual, while the New Testament God is a God of love and forgiveness? Could it be that it was the people who had changed, and they then dreamed themselves up a changed God? The mental energy flows from the people to the God and defines the will of the God. What the people interpret as the will of God is in fact the aggregate of ideas of the people regarding God. The people deceive themselves into believing that the will of the God originates with the God and He imposes His will upon the people. In fact it is exactly the opposite.

This volume includes a series of essays as well as extensive notes on the text. The essays discuss the philosophical underpinnings of *An Accidental God* in depth. The notes in some cases tell the reader the author's intended meaning or interpretation of parts of the text. Other notes give historical, archeological, or biblical commentary related to the text or identify sources of information. The casual reader might want to ignore the notes unless something really strikes them as interesting or troubling, or downright wrong. Then please look at the note and see what I have to say on that point. Otherwise, enjoy a good story and draw your own meaning from it. However, since *An Accidental God* includes some unconventional interpretations of topics many people hold as sacred, it is

bound to push somebody's buttons. If you find this work offensive, inaccurate or misguided and wish to criticize me, I welcome your feedback in the spirit of free and open discussion. I ask, however, that you first read the relevant explanatory notes and essays and make sure that your criticism is based on what I actually said and what I mean, and not based on a misunderstanding.

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# ABRAM [\[1.1\]](#)





## ONE

A soft natural light filtered through the doorway of the beehive-domed room, touching a small patch of the floor. In the semi-darkness beyond, Abram lay on a mat, tossing and turning and mumbling in his sleep. The night before, there had been a raucous party celebrating his upcoming wedding. The young man had wildly overindulged in drink and in the prostitutes that his brothers had brought to him. The guests had eventually gone home a few hours ago and his brothers had been able to stumble back to their quarters in adjacent wings of the compound. But, as the life of the party, Abram had passed out on the floor in the central room where the gathering had been held.

He dreamed that a giant hand had grabbed the side of the house and was lifting it up and down. He was annoyed. "Now stop that!" he said in his dream. "I'm trying to sleep." A sharp crashing noise woke him with a start, and he was confused by the bright beam of sunlight shining directly into his eyes.

Above his head a small, jagged crack let the morning light in through the beehive domed ceiling, but otherwise the dome remained intact. He sat up and glanced around the room. Various baskets and bowls had fallen over. Then he felt water; he was sitting in a puddle that had flowed out of a broken earthenware jar. There, right in front of him, was the niche with the altar to the family gods and ancestors, and all the figures had toppled over. Some had fallen on the floor; some had shattered. Abram stared wide-eyed at the one, the only idol that remained standing amidst the wreckage. It was the figure of Yehhi!

Cries from outside wrenched Abram around. He found himself peering out from the door of the central section of the house, which was the only part left standing. All the rest of the mud brick walls and buildings in their compound, and much the whole neighborhood as far as he could see, had crumbled due to the violent shaking of the earth. Abram dashed

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out among the toppled walls and began to pull away rubble where he heard cries or saw protruding arms or legs. He worked desperately and was soon joined by his brother, Nahor, who was battered but had escaped serious injury. They dragged sisters, cousins, children, elders, one by one from beneath the wreckage. Some were only stunned and shaken, most were injured to some degree, many quite badly. Those who could subsequently joined the search for others. Those who could not just sat or lay alone or in groups, some silent, some weeping or moaning. The few who had escaped serious injury were too busy searching for others to tend to those that had already been freed. Broken limbs, with bones protruding through the skin, crushed skulls—many lives had been extinguished. The scene was similar across all of Ur. Even the massive Ziggurat, the Temple of the Moon which dominated the city, had been badly damaged; a stairway ramp up its front had collapsed. [\[1.1\]](#)

Their grim toil continued throughout the day, and as the sun was getting low in the sky most everyone in the family was accounted for, living or dead, all except for Abram's older brother Haran. Then, finally, Abram was pulling back the bricks of another collapsed wall. He lifted away one more block and there beneath was the face of Haran, peaceful as in sleep. Abram knew immediately that he was dead. As he looked at his brother's face, tears welling up in his eyes, Abram sensed someone behind him. He turned and there was Terah, their father, ashen, utterly shattered at the loss of his first born son. [\[1.2\]](#)

Evening fell. All their lamps were buried, broken, lost; all their oil spilled. Earlier, Abram had pulled his bride-to-be, Sarai, who was also his half-sister, from the rubble. She had been scraped up but not seriously hurt, so he had left her and gone on to aid others. Now, they were together again, huddled in the dark. Abram was exhausted. He was a city dweller from a good family, accustomed to others doing the hard physical work for him. But those others were most likely dead now. Today he had used reserves of strength and endurance that he never realized he possessed. But, used they were; he had nothing left.

“Perhaps we can find a light inside,” said Sarai, gesturing toward the beehive-domed Old House, the only structure left standing.

Her words took a few seconds to register, but then Abram rose slowly and the two of them, arm in arm, labored across the uneven piles of collapsed brick and debris, back toward the beehive domes. Abram went through the door, and in the blackness stepped in the puddle of water. Ages had passed and the world had changed since he had last felt that water. By touch he found his way to the table he knew was in the corner; there was a small lamp with oil and the stone with which to light it. A few strikes, sparks, and the lamp was lit.

It was only a weak light. But in the deep shadows of the niche, Abram saw it glinting off the figure of Yehhi, standing resplendent among all the other toppled deities. All day, in a corner of his mind, even as he had been occupied with so much desperate struggle and so much grief, Abram had been turning over the memory of this image. And here it was again, practically the first thing to meet his eyes as the lamp pushed back the darkness. He shook his head, and leaving the lamp inside the room, he rushed to the door. Holding Sarai’s hand, the two of them went out into the devastated compound. They tried to gather the survivors and persuade them to take shelter, pointing to the dim light flickering from the door of the Old House. Many resisted for fear that the earth would shake again and they would be buried under more collapsing walls and ceilings.

But, Terah, sitting on a pile of bricks, weeping bitterly in the dark for the loss of his son Haran, looked up and realized what was happening.

“Yes, we should listen to Abram and go inside,” he said so that all could hear. “The Old House has not fallen, and it will not fall for its construction is of the ancient wisdom of Yehhi and of his far off town up the River. If we had been inside the Old House, this disaster would not have touched us. We must all go in now.”

Yehhi, from his vantage point hovering up under the domed ceiling, watched them all struggle back into the room, some under their own power and others helped or carried. They sat against the walls or lay on the floor. Now the able could begin to tend to the injured. Some jars were

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unbroken and so there was water, a bit of food, and enough oil to keep the tiny lamp going. Wounds were bound with strips torn from clothing and other linens. In the midst of this scene, Terah sat on the floor and contemplated the statue of Yehhi standing among the other, fallen idols. Abram came and sat beside him.

“What does it mean?” he asked his father in a soft voice. He did not want to alarm the women and children, but clearly the obvious physical destruction was just the beginning. Something more awesome and frightening was afoot.

“Yehhi has cast down the other gods. He, alone, now rules our destiny. But, he has also punished us with this great misfortune . . . How shall we regain his favor?”

Nahor came and joined them, and all three sat silently before Yehhi.

Exhaustion swept over Abram and he began to nod, his head lolling forward as he fell asleep sitting up.

A commotion over by the door woke Abram with a start. His brother and father were shouting and blocking entrance to strangers who were trying to force their way through the door.

“Give us your silver!”

“No, no! Go away!”

“Let us at your women! We will kill you and have them anyway!”

Abram jumped up, and grabbed a staff which was leaning against the wall. He was already swinging the heavy piece of wood as he bounded the few steps to engage the intruders. These men were hard-bitten and scruffy, marauders from less genteel wards of the city, perhaps criminals, out to take whatever could be had in the wake of the disaster. The vigor of Nahor and Terah’s defense and the ferocity of Abram’s counterattack caught them by surprise, as they had not encountered such stiff resistance from earlier victims. They quickly withdrew; there were much easier pickings to be had elsewhere.

The able bodied men took turns guarding the door throughout the night while the rest slept.

Yehhi, watching over them all, felt power flow through his being.

## TWO

The next morning, Abram and Nahor ventured out to gauge the extent of the damage around the city. After the previous night's episode, they realized that they were likely to encounter desperate and dangerous people, so they bought three of their strapping young cousins along, each caring a stout wooden pole. Most of the houses in their neighborhood had collapsed completely, and as they ranged further afield, they found this to be the case universally. They saw for themselves the damage to the Temple and to the Palace of the King. [\[2.1\]](#)

Sitting on a pile of tumbled down bricks that used to be part of the outer wall of the palace courtyard, an effeminate young man in a soiled and torn white robe was plucking a lyre and singing snippets of song over and over, improvising the words and the accompaniment.

*When I was grieving for that day of destruction . . . that day of . . . col-  
lapse . . . no, no . . . ruin.*

*When I was grieving for that day of ruin,*

*That day of ruin, destined for me, weighed upon me . . . no, no, laid upon  
me, heavy with tears,*

*That day of ruin, destined for me, laid upon me heavy with tears, on me,  
The queen.*

“Did he just say he was a queen?” snorted one of Abram’s cousins as they walked by.

“I lament for Ur,” the youth proclaimed importantly. “I sing in the voice of Ningal, wife of Nanna, the queen goddess of the City.” [\[2.2\]](#)

“Of course you do,” the cousins chortled.

“No use lamenting in my own voice, it is the lament of the goddess that will give listeners pause.” The youth huffed and continued with his song:

*Though I was shaking . . . no trembling, for that day of ruin, that day of ruin  
destined for me,*

*I could not flee before that day's unhappiness . . . fatality.*

*I could not flee before that day's fatality . . .*

His voice faded as they continued on. Even Ur's massive outer walls were falling down in places. The scenes of devastation rolled past Abram's eyes, but his thoughts were focused on the loss of his brother. He and Haran had been drinking together the night before, just hours before the catastrophe. Why was it that Haran had been crushed to death and he had not?[\[2.3\]](#)

They made their way back to what was left of the family compound by mid-afternoon, and found that Terah and the surviving elders from other branches of the clan were conferring, sitting on piles of rubble in front of the beehive-domed Old House. The women were doing the best they could with limited resources to wash and wrap the dead for burial. Some were digging through the piles of bricks to find remnants of cloth to be used for shrouds. After having witnessed similar sights in a hundred locations throughout the city, Abram wondered how the living would be able to bury so many dead. It was early spring and not yet too hot, but the smell would be overpowering soon enough.

Terah had already taken the other elders in to see the altar under the beehive dome. They had then come back outside to discuss the situation away from Yehhi's penetrating stare.

"Yehhi is ascendant!" declared Terah. "He has caused the earth to shake to punish us for squandering our attentions on other gods when we should have been focusing our worship on him alone. He has taken my beloved son, Haran, to punish me for not being true to him. We must redouble our devotion to Yehhi in order to regain his favor, so that he will let us live!"

"I don't know, Terah," interrupted Abiditan. "In our house all the gods fell down."

Terah was unwavering. "There is nothing more for me here! Yehhi has destroyed my house and my city. He is telling me to leave this place.

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He has taken my boy Haran as a sign and a warning. He is telling us to go up the River to his city, the city after which I named my son, the city of Harran. [\[2.4\]](#) There we can focus on the veneration of Yehhi. There we can appease Yehhi, and thereby save ourselves. Soon Yehhi will wipe what remains of this corrupted city of Ur from the face of the earth. We must get out, and get out now!”

Abram and Nahor approached their elders.

“Father, our Lord Yehhi is not punishing us!” Abram countered with passionate conviction. “He has protected us and saved us! I have been throughout the city, and I have seen how others have suffered far worse than we have. I grieve for my brother and for all the dead of our family. But, Yehhi is looking after us. We could have all been killed. In many houses, all were killed. Even the Temple and the Palace of the King have fallen. Our Old House has stood because Yehhi dwells inside of it, and those who dwell with Yehhi will be protected.”

“No! No! No! This is most certainly the wrath of Yehhi, not the charity of Yehhi,” sputtered Terah, gesturing at the destroyed compound with a slow sweep of this arm. “We must leave this place and go to the city of Harran, the city of Yehhi, there to regain his favor.”

“We will go also—”

“No, no! This is madness! We will stay right here!”

The elders and heads of families within the clan continued to debate their course of action but could not reach agreement. In the end, about one in five resolved to leave with Terah and his family, the rest would stay in Ur.

Abram did not agree with his father, that Yehhi was angry with them. At least it was clear to Abram that Yehhi had spared his own life. He would devote himself to Yehhi, and a pilgrimage to the city of Harran fit in well with this devotion. He would accompany his father there.



## THREE

After centuries of dimness and confinement, Yehhi was freed from under the beehive dome. He was drifting in the clear, bright sky, looking down on a procession of over a hundred men, women and children snaking its way through the ruins of Ur.

At its head walked Terah, solemnly bearing a golden and inlaid idol with both hands cupped under its base and its top resting against his chest. Next came the body of his beloved son Haran, borne by Terah's two surviving sons, Abram and Nahor, along with Lot, a son of Haran, and three other young male relatives. The body was shrouded in white linen and resting upon a board of wood. Then came the other folk of Terah's household including Sarai, daughter of one of Terah's lesser wives, who was betrothed to Abram. Also there was Milcah, a young daughter of Haran who was promised as a bride to her uncle Nahor. There were other wives and sons and daughters of Terah, living and dead. The injured hobbled along with the help of the able; the dead were carried on the shoulders of the living, resting on wooden planks salvaged from the wreckage. There were male and female servants, young and old, and donkeys bearing baggage, including wooden chests containing the family's considerable wealth in silver and gold. There were armed men, family members and retainers, to protect the persons and the goods of the house of Terah. After them came, in procession, the members of other houses of the clan who had decided to depart with Terah, along with their servants and their goods.

"Punish them! Save them! Yes! Yes, I have done all these things." Yehhi was pleased. He was pleased, but he knew that the other households following Terah also carried their own idols with them, out of sight so as not to perturb Terah, but not forgotten. He had even seen individual members of Terah's own immediate family surreptitiously rescuing favorite deities or ancestors from the wreckage and secretly including

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them in their private baggage. The figure of Yehhi had stood for generation after generation with all the other gods and important ancestors, an ever increasing cohort. But now he saw these others as intruding upon the devotion due him from his people. Even the figure of his own father Udish-ulak and his own personal god Ulak—both had stood by him for centuries—he could no longer tolerate. But no one bothered to pack Udish-ulak or Ulak. It was worse, far worse. Instead, Nahor had secretly added the figure of Kudiya, that vacuous pretender, to the gaggle of other unworthies tagging along in the baggage train. Yehhi wished that it was Nahor that he had smited rather than Haran.[\[3.1\]](#)

People on all sides looked up from their ruins, from their dead, from their misery to stare blankly at this noble family marching off to no-one-knew-where. Since the end of the world was most certainly nigh, it didn't make any difference to them what these crazies were doing.

“Look the queen is still there,” sniped Abram's cousin. Sure enough as they approached the broken down palace wall, the youth was sitting there playing his lyre, and he continued to sing and play as the whole procession labored past.[\[3.2\]](#)

*“May Ur not be destroyed!” I pleaded to Enlil.*

*“And may its people not be killed!” I said indeed to Enlil.*

*But, Behold, he gave instruction that the city be destroyed,*

*And its destiny was sealed.*

*On that day of shaking, Ur was made a ruin.*

*Oh husband Nanna, the town was left a ruin. The people mourn.*

*The walls were gaping; the high gates, the roads, were piled with dead.*

*In the wide streets, where feasting crowds once gathered, jumbled they lay.*

*In open fields that used to fill with dancers, the people lay in heaps.*

The procession passed and people of Ur returned to their ruins, to their dead, and to their misery. Terah who? Gone, he was, and forgotten before he reached what remained of the city gates.

## FOUR

The clan laid their dead in the family tombs outside the city walls. The traditional Sumerian practice of burial under the floor of the family home, so that all the living and dead generations could reside under the same roof, had been abandoned long ago. As members of a prominent family, the dead of the clan of Terah occupied their own section of the necropolis. The people lingered by the graves and wept. They wept for their dead and they wept because they would not see these tombs again. Terah was inconsolable at the grave of Haran, holding the idol of Yehhi, swaying back and forth, muttering.

Nahor and Abram pulled themselves away and went to arrange passage for the family upriver. The area of the market and docks was partially abandoned. But some boats and merchants remained. Desperate and increasingly hungry survivors from the city were greeted with spoiled goods and exorbitant prices.

The bargaining was long and difficult, but eventually they hired two barges for the journey and arranged for supplies to be brought on board. By sundown, the family and their goods were on the boats. They would set out the next morning. Only Terah remained at the tombs, weeping at the grave of Haran. Leaving the others asleep on the boats, Abram and Nahor set out to retrieve their father. They found him alone in the moonlight still rocking and mumbling, still holding the idol of Yehhi, still inconsolable at the tomb of his son. They dragged him back to the boats and prodded him to drink from a jug of wine. He took a mouthful, but then spat half of it out. Eventually, Terah fell asleep.

Early the next morning, the two barges got underway, heading out the canal to the Euphrates. The boats, the route, the men with long poles, the surrounding fertile planes of Sumer, it was all new to these city dwellers, but Yehhi recognized it. To Yehhi, it seemed as if he were a young man again on his trip up the River centuries before.

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By mid-morning, they encountered a fleet of hundreds of large vessels, jammed with soldiers, their helmets gleaming in the sun. The two boats of Terah's party cowered along the shore, the people just hoping not to be robbed or killed. But the big flotilla plowed on past; a few soldiers even smiled and waved. Women and children waved back, but Abram did not wave. He knew what this meant; it meant doom to what was left of Ur. News of the disaster which had befallen Ur would have reached her enemies by now. These soldiers were certainly from the rival city-states of southern Sumer. By the size of the fleet, it looked like a number of rivals had joined forces to take advantage of Ur's weakness in order to slaughter, conquer, pillage and subjugate. This realization seared like a hot poker in Abram's mind. Yehhi was his salvation, and the salvation of his family, for a second time. Not only had Yehhi delivered him from death when the ground shook, but by leading them out of Ur, Yehhi had delivered them from defeat and enslavement or death at the hands of their enemies. "Praise to Yehhi! Praise be to Yehhi!" thought Abram.

As the soldiers were sailing by, Abram once again felt the overpowering urge to urinate. He stole away to a secluded spot near the stern of the boat, and tried again. He pushed and pushed, but the flow would not start. A yellowish puss dripped from the end, and then finally the urine began to come, but oh, the pain and burning! Once it was flowing, however, he wanted to get it all out so he would have some relief for awhile. Abram gripped the side of boat tightly with one hand as he strained and winced to complete his business.[\[4.1\]](#)

In the late afternoon, of their third day on the river, as they sat on the deck of one of the boats, Abram entertained the children by reciting some of the old legends. He told the story of the Great Flood. Of course they all knew how it went, but the real entertainment value was in Abram's lively interpretation of this old standard.

*Near the head waters of this very River Euphrates on which we now  
journey,*

*Long ago in a city called Shuruppak, lived a good and just man named  
Utnapishtim.*[\[4.2\]](#)

*But all the other people of the world in that long ago time were wicked and displeasing to the gods.*

*Enlil, father of the gods, resolved to send a great flood to destroy all the discordant people in the world.*

*But Yehhi who protects the righteous,  
Yehhi who saves the good from disaster,*

*Yehhi did resolve to defy Enlil and did speak in whispers through the roofing straw of Utnapishtim's house.*

**When he told a story, Abram always brought a smile to the faces of his audience with his voice characterizations. After all they had suffered, they needed a reason to smile. Sarai sat among the children, watching Abram with big brown eyes full of admiration. Now he was attempting to portray the voice of Yehhi as simultaneously commanding and grand, but delivered as a whisper.**

*"Attend to what I say:*

*Build a boat and abandon what you have, for your riches cannot save your life.*

*Catch a mated pair of every living thing which in your boat do put.*

*Make watertight your boat.*

*Protect it from the flood which comes.*

*Make the boat wide and equally long, then tile the roof with slate."*

*And so Utnapishtim the righteous did heed the word of Yehhi.*

*He carried pitch, and he carried oil.*

*He carried timber, and he carried nails.*

*He cut wood, and he nailed wood.*

*Sixty lengths by sixty lengths the boat did grow.*

*Six deck below, six decks above, twelve decks in all.*

*Three times he pitched the outside in the seams.*

*Three times inside in the seams.*

*And on the seven day it was done.*

*Then like waters escaping from a dam above, came rain pushing down.*

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*Nergal from his underground home did break the posts and up water from below did come.*

*Watery chaos abound drowning cattle, trees, and all the people.*

**The audience shuddered.**

*The storm raged for seven days and then was still,*

*And then Utnapishtim did break open the hatch and in the daylight poured.*

**Standing on the deck of their riverboat, Abram was Utnapishtim on the deck of the ark, squinting in the sun after seven days of rain.**

*As the water subsided the boat did run aground.*

*Mt. Nishur was its stopping place.*

*On the seventh day, Utnapishtim let loose a single dove,*

*Which flew over the waters but could not land, and so returned to him.*

**To the delight of the children, Abram pantomimed the act of tossing out the bird and then retrieving it.**

*So after seven more days had passed, Utnapishtim let loose a single raven, Which flew out over the waters and found a place to land, and so it returned not to him.*

*Then since the land had dried out, Utnapishtim and his family and all the beasts he had saved from the Flood went out from the boat.*

*An offering did Utnapishtim make to Yehhi.*

*He built a fire. Smoke of cedar, myrtle and cane wafted heavenward.*

*He slaughtered a sheep, and roasted it for Yehhi.*

*So pleased was Yehhi that He said to Utnapishtim:*

**This time Abram portrayed the voice of Yehhi as grand and booming.**

*"I will establish my covenant with you,*

*That never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the Flood,*

*Never again shall there be a Flood to destroy all the Earth.*

*To symbolize this covenant between us, I send this sign."*

*And, a necklace of lapis lazuli, gold, and amethyst, which we now call the rainbow,*

*Did Yehhi cause to shine in the sky.*

Abram made a great sweeping arc with his arms, and everyone clapped. [\[4.3\]](#)

That evening Sarai and Abram sat hand in hand on the deck and watched the sun go down. Given the disasters and upheavals that had befallen the family, they knew that there would be no formal wedding feast. Where would they hold it? And, with so many family members and friends killed, a joyous celebration would be impossible. But they felt like man and wife and everyone treated them as if they were wed. So that was it, from then on they would be. They went below decks and consummated the marriage in a private space behind some baggage. This was painful for Abram, but a young man can endure much to achieve release of his desire.

The days passed slowly as they crawled upriver pole-stroke by pole-stroke. Over the course of two months, the flat lands gave way to low rolling hills, and the dominant color of the scenery changed from green to brown. Terah spent his days sitting with the figure of Yehhi on the bow of the first of the two boats, gazing off ahead in the direction of Harran. Terah had named his first son Haran after the city up the river that figured so prominently in the founding legend of their family, and in the unique domed architecture of their now abandoned home. No living member of the family had ever been to Harran, and contact with their relations, the family of the first wife of their patriarch and god, Yehhi, had petered out generations ago. But, Terah held a particular fascination for these old tales and to him the city of Harran was a semi-mystical ideal. Now he spent his days on the boat daydreaming about this place, his destination, imagining rolling golden hills with white-topped mountains in the distance. Terah had never seen mountains, but these also figured prominently in the founding tale of the clan.

Terah's mind drifted back to his first born son's wedding. Haran married in a ceremony held under the beehive dome. So many relatives and friends crowded into the room, and in his speech Terah had reminded them all that the groom's name was derived from the place where their

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great ancestor, Yehhi, had taken his wife and established the wealth of the clan. "Let us beseech our ancestor, Yehhi. Yehhi, of Ur and of Harran, we ask you to grant our son Haran prosperity and many sons of his own." Tears flowed gently down Terah's face; his favorite son's prosperity had been cut short. Sari approached to offer her father food and a cushion to sit on, but he shooed her away with a wave of his hand. He was eating less and less and not sleeping much either.

Terah's second son Nahor, on the other hand, often slipped off by himself to a cramped spot below deck at the back of the same boat where his father sat with Yehhi on the prow. There Nahor would open a trunk and take out the idol of Kudiya, and pay homage to him.

Abram's painful condition seemed to subside, and he and Sarai slept together every night. Something about Abram's flood story had stuck in Sarai's mind and continued to trouble her. Often when they were together, she asked Abram to repeat it. As they lay naked together on bundles of luggage, under a dirty blanket, he whispered it to her again and again during their months on the River. He thought her fascination with the tale a bit strange, especially since she requested it repeatedly, but never commented on it herself. But he was happy to oblige her since she was obliging him in other ways.

They made a brief stop at the city of Mari on the upper Euphrates to replenish their supplies. Mari was like Ur: mud brick houses, a wide outer wall and a tall ziggurat in the center, lush fields irrigated with river water all around. From there they continued upriver until they turned off to follow the smaller Balika, a tributary.



## FIVE

Then a day came when the boatmen moored the barges along the bank in what Abram thought was a particularly dusty and forsaken spot.

“Harran!” shouted the captain, pointing to a cluster of walls and buildings dominated by a small ziggurat, just visible in the distance at the top of a rise.

It took some time for it to sink in: their journey was over. They had finally reached the fabled city of Harran, the city of Terah’s daydreams, the city after which he had named his first born son. But, the hills were not green, nor were they golden. They were dusty, dull and brown. And, where were the white topped mountains in the distance? There were no mountains to be seen, just a brooding landscape that stretched uninterrupted to the horizon.

By the time all the people, animals, and goods were unloaded and sitting in a mass on the riverbank, the people of the town had noticed their arrival. A delegation, including armed men and leading citizens, approached the newcomers on foot. Terah, a little wobbly, stood up as they drew near, his long grey hair and beard wild and unkempt. He cradled the figure of Yehhi in the crook of one arm and held his other hand aloft, palm outward.

“I am Terah of the clan of Yehhi, from the city of Ur. These are my people. We have come peacefully to live in your city of Harran.”

“People of Ur? And, so many? Why would you come here? This is a dry and barren place. Life is difficult here,” responded a middle-aged man who clearly spoke for the group.

“Our revered ancestor, Yehhi . . .” Terah lifted the statue slightly. “Many generations ago, Yehhi, the founder of our clan, lived in your city of Harran, and He took to wife the daughter of a leading family of your city. He was an important scribe in the Temple of the Moon in Harran.

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Now Yehhi has spoken to us and commanded us to forsake the city of Ur and come with everything we have to settle in his blessed city of Harran.”

“I see,” replied the man flatly. He turned to confer with his colleagues, rolling his eyes. But one of the other men in the group tugged gently at the leader’s sleeve and discretely pointed off to the side, where Abram and Nahor were concluding their business with the boatmen. Out of the corners of their eyes, the townsmen watched Abram doling out weights of silver from a wooden chest as final payment for the journey.

“Welcome Terah! Welcome to Harran! A warm welcome to you and your family!”

The long procession of people, animals and baggage that had marched out from Ur now reorganized itself, legs wobbly after months on the boats. As they trudged over the sun-baked earth toward the gates of Harran, Abram noticed that most of the buildings in the town were of the same beehive-domed construction, which had made their home in Ur so unique in that city.[\[5.1\]](#) The spokesman for the men of Harran walked beside Terah.

“My name is Muknuk. I’m the one you need to know to make things happen in Harran. I am the trusted confidant of the king. Really. I advise him on most everything. And the Temple . . . I have the ears of the priestesses, and the scribes as well. Whatever it is you need in Harran, just ask old Muknuk and I’ll see that you get it.”

Once word got around, the newcomers found that of course the people of Harran remembered their “Yehho”—or whatever his name was—remembered him, knew him well, and loved him.

## SIX

The family established itself in Harran, occupying a cluster of beehive houses. Terah's body and mind continued to deteriorate. Daily he was called upon by residents of the town, claiming to be long lost relatives descended from the clan of the wife of "your most illustrious ancestor *Yahho*." Terah received them all warmly, and listened with great enthusiasm as they recited their genealogies. When these visitors then revealed that they too were devoted to the worship of *Yahho*, Terah would weep with joy. He made sure that each of his newly discovered *relatives* received a parting gift of silver.

"If this nonsense continues," observed Nahor to Abram, "it will not be long before he has given away all that we have to these swindlers."

The two brothers began trying to intercept the visitors and shoo them away before they could get to Terah. Sometimes a scuffle or a shouting match ensued, and Terah, hearing the commotion, would come out of the back room. While inviting the guest to enter, he would berate his sons for their lack of hospitality.

Then one day, Muknuk himself showed up to see Terah. Important business, no doubt, thought Abram, allowing him to enter. But, as soon as Muknuk was with Terah, he launched into the same speech about how he was a distant relative and a devotee of *Yahho*. As he listened from outside the room, Abram's anger built up and up. As Muknuk's oily-smooth pitch continued, Abram understood that these words had been originally devised by Muknuk himself and taught to the previous visitors who had come as his proxies to trick "crazy old Terah . . . filthy-rich, crazy old Terah." Either because the others were now being mostly blocked by Terah's sons or because he no longer wanted to share the proceeds with collaborators, or both, Muknuk had decided to try his luck in person. [\[6.1\]](#)

In a rage, Abram grabbed a grinding stone, burst into the room, and launched a furious attack on Muknuk, dragging him out into the street

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while pummeling him about the head and chest. Semiconscious, Muknuk was cast face down in the dust, and Abram kicked him in the groin.

## SEVEN

“Terah! Terah! Terah of Ur!”

That evening, twenty armed men showed up outside of the residence. And they called out to Terah and said, “Where is your son Abram? Bring him out to us so that we may do justice upon him.” [\[7.1\]](#)

Inside the house, Abram was sullen, and Sarai was hysterical with fear.

“Do not let them take him, Father!” She pleaded to Terah.

“Protect him, brother!” she implored Nahor.

“We cannot fight so many, and so well armed. Yet, maybe something can be arranged,” thought Nahor. He paused and touched Sarai’s hand for a moment and then launched himself out the door into the midst of the angry men.

“Here is Abram! Seize the scoundrel!”

“I am not! I am Nahor!”

“It is the brother.”

“Seize him anyway!”

“No! Let me speak! I come to talk.”

“What say you Nahor, brother of the criminal Abram?”

“I say that there is no need to shed blood here today. My brother Abram regrets his actions, and is ready to make amends.”

“The insult upon the noble Muknuk is too grave for amends. It calls out for blood!”

“Yes, yes. But, we have strong men and weapons ourselves.” Nahor gestured broadly back toward the family compound. “Although we cannot prevail against all the people of Harran, we will certainly spill some of your blood.” He looked hard into the eyes of the men surrounding him. “Which of you will be the first who is slain on account of my brother’s temper? Which of you will be slain on account of Muknuk’s pride?”

The men looked at each other, and none met Nahor’s gaze.

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“You know Muknuk was cheating silver out of my old, feeble-minded father? That is why Abram beat him. Has Muknuk shared this silver with you, those whom he sends to do the dirty . . . to do this dirty and dangerous business on his behalf?”

“Well—” Some of the men were shuffling their feet and looking down.

“I thought not. Let me propose a solution to our problem. Abram will leave Harran and never be seen in this town again. You can tell Muknuk that you have slain him, and Muknuk should be pleased. That way you don’t have to fight us and none of you will be killed.”

Most of the men were looking at their feet, kicking at the dust.

“Well . . . perhaps . . . But we would be taking a big chance,” one finally said. “Muknuk said he wanted Abram’s head. ‘Bring me the head of the upstart Abram, son of Terah.’ That’s what he said.”

“Yeah, Yeah.” The others nodded in agreement.

“We are going to need some proof of the deed even if it is not the head. And if Muknuk smells a deception we will pay the price, perhaps our own heads.”

“To take such risks we will require our own shares of that silver.”

“Yes! Yes! The silver!” they all gasped.

“I see . . . I’m sure that something can be worked out. Wait here.” Nahor went back into the house.

“Well, Abram, my foolish, hot-headed brother, this is quite a mess you have gotten yourself into. They were sent here by Muknuk with orders to bring back your head. That’s your head without the rest of you attached.”

“If they want my head they will need to fight for it!”

“I have already pointed that out to them, and I think that they will agree to something less drastic. But you, my brother, will need to leave Harran forever, and you will need to pay those gentlemen with silver.”

“Leave? Leave Harran? But where will we go?” wailed Sarai.

“I don’t know, but it’s better than Abram losing his head. Isn’t it?”

“Ok . . . ok, tell them that it is agreed,” sighed Abram.

Nahor went back outside to speak with the men. “My brother Abram will leave Harran before dawn, the day after tomorrow. He will not show himself on the street before he leaves, and he will not be seen as he leaves. He will forfeit to you his share of the inheritance from our father Terah. For this he asks that you spare his life.”

The men put their heads together to confer among themselves, but then their attention was jolted away by Sarai, who came running out of the house with bright red blood on her arms and splashed down the front of her dress. In her hands she carried a cloak of Abram’s covered in blood. She held it out to the men. They recoiled.

“Lamb’s blood,” she said. [\[7.2\]](#)

“Well perhaps we can put this over on Muknuk . . . perhaps. But we want the silver! Now!”

Abram appeared at the door of the house straining to carry a wooden chest of considerable weight. He set the chest down on the ground outside the door, took Sarai by her bloody hand, and the two of them went back inside.

## EIGHT

Sleep was hard to come by that night in the House of Terah.

“What will become of us?” moaned Sarai.

Abram just sat, with a scared look in his eyes.

“You gave them our silver, so how will we live?” she continued, raising her hand and shaking her bloody fist at him.

Without answering, Abram got up, went into the back room, and retrieved another chest, similar to the one he had surrendered to the men. He plunked it down in front of Sarai.

“The value of my inheritance? How do they know? They got less than half. So, we do have silver, plenty of silver. But, as for the rest of it . . . What to do? Where to go?”

Yehhi could see Abram sitting alone in the tiny, dim puddle of light produced by a single oil lamp. The rest of the house was dark, and the others were lying down, although apprehension kept them tossing and turning. Abram faced the idol of Yehhi, silently pleading for guidance and protection.

The next morning, Lot, accompanied by several of the household servants, was sent to the town bazaar with a fair piece of his uncle Abram’s remaining fortune and orders to obtain goods—provisions, animals, slaves—that would be useful to Abram and his household on their journey into exile. As he trudged through the streets, the intense nineteen-year-old realized that he was on a very important mission. But, it was rather loosely defined. What Abram would need depended upon where he was going and what he was doing, and Lot did not know the answers to these questions. Abram himself had said that he did not know either. Yet, at the same time, Lot knew that the survival of his uncle and his uncle’s household would depend upon him making wise choices on their behalf. As he contemplated the seriousness and urgency of the



situation, the knot it produced in his stomach almost made him nauseous. In an attempt to rein in these disturbing thoughts, he told himself, "At least I don't have to go with them. Whatever I do, so long as I give it my best, will be all right from where I sit, because I don't need to see how it all turns out in the end."

The merchants were perplexed by this young man. Where would a boy such as this get so much silver? And, he seemed dead set on spending it all in one day. Lot cut a broad swath through the bazaar, accumulating pack animals, male and female slaves, jars of oil, jars of dates, jars of grain.

Finally, one toothless old trader asked him what everyone was wondering. "What ya goin' ta do with all this stuff, boy? Goin' on a trip, are ya?"

"Well, yes I am. I am going on journey. A . . . a long journey."

"Where ya headin' ta?"

"I'm leaving Harran."

"Yeah, uv course ya are, but then where?"

Lot did not reply.

"Hum . . . I see." The merchant was sure he had Lot figured out. Clearly this boy had stolen his treasure from some nobles or from the Temple. He was trying to buy what he thought he would need to sustain himself in the wilderness before fleeing the town. Perhaps he would get away before the owner of the silver realized it was missing. The merchant cracked a broad grin. Best get his share of this loot and skip town himself before soldiers show up and the lad gets caught.

"M'boy, if you're heading off on a trip into the wilds, then you're not buyin' the right stuff. Trust ol' Namzu. We travels aroun' and we knows how ta live on the land. What ya have here's all wrong. These slaves are city slaves, house servants. They know nothin' of survivin' in the wilds. They'll be a burden, just slowin' ya down and eatin' up yer food. And this food? This'll not do. It's city food. It's heavy to carry; it'll run out; it'll go bad. What ya need is food thut walks for i'self; food that replenishes i'self; food that's always fresh."

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Lot nodded earnestly.

“M’boy, it is a good thang Namzu ’s here ta help y’out. With what ya have here, you and all yer slaves and all yer animals will be dead out there, dead in a month’s time . . . well maybe three months time. Anyway, dead is dead and that’s what you’ll be, just as sure as if the soldiers had got a hold of—”

“What?”

“Never mind. Ol’ Namzu will take this here city food and these city slaves uff yer hands and provide you with sheep an’ goats, and some shepherd boys ta tend ‘em. They’re good boys who know their way around the country . . . outside the city walls, ya know. They knows where to find good pasture for the animals and they knows where ta find water.”

Lot did not reply right away. He was thinking, thinking very hard. “Don’t mess this up,” he was saying to himself. There was some wisdom in what this old man was saying. City goods were the only goods he knew, the only goods Abram knew. Who knew what one needed outside of the city? Perhaps this old merchant did.

“Uf course I’ll need everythin’ ya gut here,” Namzu waved his hand at Lot’s previous purchases, “plus . . . um . . . thirty more weights a’ silver to close the deal . . . see?”

“What? That’s outrageous!”

“M’dear boy, ya havn’ yet seen da sheep and da goats . . . a ‘ole herd of ‘em, an’ fine animals th’are.”

“Well, I’m not sure. However, one thing is for sure, I am not able to give you all that you see here. These three I did not buy today. They are servants from the household of my uncles. And this slave girl, yes I did just buy her.” Lot indicated a particularly attractive girl in her mid-teens. “But, um . . . you know—”

The old man took a look at the slave girl, and then turned back and took a longer look at Lot’s face. Then he cracked a big toothless grin. “Ya fancy her. I see. Ok . . . Ok . . . It’s agreed. I’ll not take the three servants of your uncles or tha’girl. D’ we ‘ave a deal?”

“I have not yet seen these goats and sheep and shepherd boys. Show me, and perhaps we will have a deal.” Lot’s chest swelled with pride. He was negotiating like a man, shrewd and wise on his uncle’s behalf.

Lot left the three household servants to look after the newly acquired slaves and other goods while he accompanied Namzu on a one hour hike outside the city gates and over the hills. They arrived in a broad valley where a herd of sheep and goats, about one hundred animals, grazed, tended by three boys who appeared to range in age from nine to fifteen. An experienced and knowledgeable buyer would have inspected the animals carefully, but Lot was neither experienced nor knowledgeable.

“Fine lookin’ animals th’ are . . . aren’t they?”

Lot continued to soak in the broad scene before him. It did look idyllic to his city eyes.

“Is it agreed then?”

“Alright it is agreed.”

The oldest shepherd boy accompanied Lot and Namzu back to the market in Harran. The other two and the animals remained in the field. The goods and silver changed hands, the deal was done, and Lot was pleased with himself.

## **NINE**

“You idiot! You fool! I trusted you with my silver and with the most important of tasks and look what you have done,” bellowed Abram.

“Let me explain—”

“Explain what? You spent seventy weights of silver and all you brought me was one boy slave and one girl slave!”

“Actually, there are two more boys and a whole lot of sheep and goats.”

“Sheep and goats? What do I want with sheep and goats?”

“Uncle Abram, if you are heading off into the wilderness, then you need to make sure you have the right things to survive. What you need is food that walks for itself; food that replenishes itself; food that is always fresh. That is sheep and goats. And the shepherd boys know how to tend them.”

“Who said anything about heading off into the wilderness?” sneered Abram. “I was thinking of going back down river to Mari or perhaps taking the caravan road over to Carchemish. While I am sure it is not like Ur, or even Harran, I hear Carchemish is not such a bad town.”

Then there was a short silence, which seemed like a long silence to Lot.

“Where are these sheep and goats?” Abram finally asked, with a sigh.

“They are outside the city walls, being watched by the other two boys. This one here, his name is Ishmael, he will lead you to meet up with them on your way out of town.”

“And, why is this slave girl here?”

“Well . . . Ah . . . Her name is Salina. And ahh . . .”

There was a brief silence while Abram figured it out, then he lunged at Lot and began to beat him about the side of the head with a stick. “You little piece of shit! In my darkest hour, you used practically my last measure of silver to buy yourself a concubine? And for me you got a

bunch of flea-bitten, smelly goats! Well one thing is for sure, this pretty girl of yours is not yours at all. She is mine, and she is coming with me. I will leave you . . . No, no, no, I will *sell* you one of the goats to use in her place.”

## TEN

Before dawn the next morning, the household of Abram was assembled. The group included Abram's wife Sarai, as well as male and female servants, belonging to Abram, that had come with them from Ur. There was a baggage train of donkeys loaded down with the family's belongings. Additionally, the new boy, Ishmael, was there and the new girl, Salina. Abram, however, was not there.

Abram was in the house arguing with his father.

"No, my son, you may not take Yehhi with you into exile!"

"But Father, Yehhi has shown me favor by saving me from disaster thrice! This last time, when he saved me from Muknuk's men, Yehhi was showing me that I must not stay in Harran. He has protected me before and I am sure he will continue to favor me. However, I need him with me."[\[10.1\]](#)

"Yehhi has commanded me to stay right here. Since I am still your father and still the head of this clan, Yehhi stays with me!"

Agitated, Abram finally emerged from the house. "Let's go!"

As the small caravan of ten people and six donkeys began to move, Abram did not notice that Lot, who had been saying a heartfelt goodbye to his new friend Salina, did not let go of her hand. In fact, he began to walk along with the group. Abram covered his face with a hood as they made their way slowly and silently through the deserted streets in the predawn twilight. The guard at the town gate paid them little attention. His concern was the people who entered, not the people who left.[\[10.2\]](#)

Walking across the grassy hills outside of town, Ishmael took the lead to guide them to the rendezvous with his compatriots and the herd.

"Wait a moment," shouted Lot from the rear of the column. "This is not the way we went yesterday."

Abram wheeled around. "What is my asshole nephew doing here?"

Lot grinned sheepishly. Abram, seeing his nephew holding the girl's hand, shook his head and, despite himself, chuckled.

"Uncle, I was saying that this is not the way we went yesterday to the sheep and goats. I fear the boy is trying to trick us."

"No! No! No sir," protested Ishmael. "The herd has moved to a new spot. I am taking you there now."

"Moved? Why?"

"On account of old Namzu, our previous master. He went back out to the fields last night after concluding his business with you, intending to switch old animals for young, skinny animals for fat, sickly animals for healthy."

"How do you know that?" asked Lot. "You were with us last night."

"I know that because I know Namzu. Anyway, we are with you now. The flock you eat of, we must eat of also. There is a special hiding place. We will meet the boys and the animals there."

As the sun came up, Ishmael led them onwards. The Balikh River, a tributary of the Euphrates, was visible at a distance off to their right. They were heading upstream. Aware of the sharp looks he was getting from Lot and Abram, Ishmael kept turning and saying, "Just a little bit further sirs and we will be there. You'll see."

And, indeed, by the time the sun was full in the sky, they reached an eroded gully choked with brambles. Ishmael whistled three times in rapid succession, and was answered in kind from among the bushes, which began to rustle. Up a steep path and out of the *wadi* came over a hundred and fifty sheep and a handful of goats. Nipping at their heels was a sheep dog followed by the two younger boys. Seeing the sheep, smelling the sheep, Abram wrinkled his nose and looked sideways at Lot.

"Good morning. I am Zimran," said the elder of the two boys. Indicating the youngest boy he continued, "And that is Isaac. We call him that because he is always laughing."

Isaac cracked a broad smile. [\[10.3\]](#)

Abram and Lot stood together on the grassy plain beside the lip of the gully talking to one another and gesturing with their hands in all direc-

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tions. They looked back in the direction that they had just come; Harran was no longer visible in the distance. The others sat around them all morning watching, waiting for direction. But, direction was not forthcoming. The three shepherd boys squatting over in the dust next to the flocks were also talking among themselves.

Eventually, Ishmael got up and approached Abram and Lot, while the other two disappeared back down into the *wadi*.

“Sirs,” Ishmael whispered, directly meeting Lot’s eyes. “You will notice that Isaac and Zimran have lifted a few more animals out from under Namzu’s nose than were bargained for in the original deal. So we had better high tail it out of here before . . .”

Abram looked puzzled, but Lot smiled broadly.

“Anyway, we must move on to fresh pasture for the animals,” Ishmael continued.

“Yes . . . Yes, of course,” Abram whispered back. Then he announced to all, in a commanding voice, “We must move on for the sake of the beasts.” Everyone got to their feet, and just then Zimran and Isaac popped back up out of the *wadi*, each carrying a medium-sized bundle wrapped in cloth. They indicated to the servant in charge of the baggage train that they wished to place these on donkeys with the rest of the luggage, and he nodded his approval.

Then they were off. The three shepherd boys and their dog drove the flocks in front and the family of Abram with their servants and donkeys followed along behind. They walked at a leisurely pace for about two hours and then paused while the animals grazed for most of the afternoon. In late afternoon they continued on until they reached another gully, lined with bushes, with a babbling creek running along its bottom. Here they stopped for the evening. The flock was watered and a fire was built from dried scrub brush. The boys milked the goats and slaughtered a kid, which they dressed and roasted over the open coals. They had yogurt in their bags which they had made from the goats’ milk, and they shared it with Abram and his family.



“This shepherd’s life is not so bad,” thought Abram as he lay on his back by the roots of a twisted, stunted tree with the glowing coals of the fire in front of him. He listened to the gurgle of the stream and looked up at the stars. Pleasantly tired from the day’s walking, he was warm and his belly was full.

The next day, they continued on to new pasture, a new water source and a new campsite. Day after day it was the same, as they made their way slowly across the grasslands following roughly parallel to the main caravan route, but always keeping their distance from it. Sometimes from a rise they could see trains of pack animals moving along this track. But, they were a small party so it was best for them to stay out of sight lest they fall prey to bandits. Abram observed that, indeed, Isaac did laugh quite frequently. It was not silly laughter, but joyous laughter. It seemed to be the way he expressed his wonder at the beauty of the rolling golden grasslands, and the broad, deep blue sky. It seemed to be the way Isaac expressed his wonder at being a nine-year-old boy alive in the world.

They continued on, grazing and moving little by little, day by day. The servants and the womenfolk of Abram learned from the boys how to milk the goats, how to tend the sheep, how to make yogurt, how to cut the fleece of the sheep and spin yarn with a hanging bobbin. Sarai and Salina often spent the afternoon together twirling their yarn and chatting. Although Sarai was the mistress of the household and Salina was a servant girl, they were about the same age, perhaps Sarai was a year senior. Here in the wilderness, the social barriers that would have separated women of such different station were impractical. Anyway, Salina was sleeping every night in a separate tent with Lot, who was after all a blood member of the clan of Terah. Abram continued to insist that Salina was his property rather than Lot’s wife, but little by little, day by day Abram was losing that battle. The other servants began to show Salina the respect due a junior mistress. Sarai might have resisted this trend if she had not come to genuinely admire Salina’s pluck and enjoy her wit.

The shepherd boys seemed to know where to go, where to find water and good pasture, so Abram let them lead on, roughly following the

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caravan road, and every evening they found themselves facing the setting sun. Then the season of rains descended upon them and there was a chill in the air, a chill like Abram had never felt back in the lands of Sumer. They suffered because their clothes were not warm enough, and their tents, which they had brought with them from Harran, were not sufficiently proofed against the weather. The shepherd boys had with them warm tunics woven from rough spun wool and waterproof tents sewn together from sheepskins. They were happy to share what they had with the folk of Abram, but not all could be accommodated.

And so, the women folk and servants of Abram set about constructing frames of branches and weaving on them heavy cloth, from the wool of their own sheep. The work was laborious. Sarai cried because her fingers cramped from the cold and from the repetitive strain, and she quietly cursed Abram under her breath for bringing her to such a low station. Salina held her hands and rubbed blood back into Sarai's blue fingers, and Salina completed the job for both of them. [\[10.4\]](#) They made the cloth into crude but effective clothes and blankets. But these smelled strongly of sheep, and even soaking them in a rushing stream for two days did not remove the smell. And, their tents still leaked.

## ELEVEN

One afternoon as they drove the herd over a rise, they saw in the distance a shimmering ribbon of silver and beyond it a rounded hillock. There was more than the normal small trickle of traffic on the road, which crossed the silver ribbon beside the hill.

The next morning, they went down onto the road and proceeded toward the famous ford of the Euphrates at Carchemish, a walled town on the hill overlooking the river. [\[11.1\]](#)

“Finally!” thought Abram, “We are back in the civilized world. It will be good to sleep with a proper roof over my head.”

Since it was the rainy season, the river was a little high, although not as high as it would be a few months later when spring came and melted the snow of the Tarsus Mountains upstream. They waded through cold water, waist-deep in the middle. It was a struggle to keep the herd together, but they made it across.

As they approached the town gates, two guards armed with spears blocked their way.

“You nomads may pitch your tents outside the city walls. You may trade your wares outside the city walls. Your kind may not enter the city walls.”

“My kind?” scoffed Abram. “I am a Sumerian of good family, of Har-ran, and of Ur.”

“Yeah—” the guards snickered, and then burst out laughing. Abram protested, but they just kept laughing and indicating with their spears that it was time from Abram to move along.

And so Abram and his family set up camp outside the walls of Car-chemish. They traded some of their rough spun wool and spent some of their scant remaining silver to get warmer clothes and better tents. Once this business was completed, Abram moved his herd and his camp onto the grasslands further from town. He was stung by the rejection of the

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townspeople; he was stung by the realization of how fast and how far he had fallen.

That night, Abram, Lot, and Ishmael sat around their camp fire. Ishmael periodically turned a lamb on a spit.

“All this time I was hoping we might just go live in Carchemish,” lamented Abram.

Lot smiled feebly.

“Ah, you stupid, horny boy. You don’t care what becomes of us just as long as you can continue to spend your nights alone in a separate tent with my girl servant. This is all just a holiday for you. You just wait. The novelty will wear off, you’ll grow up, and what will you have? The same as me! Nothing! Shit! Sheep crap!”

“Sirs,” interjected Ishmael, “I know a good land, a beautiful land. We could head there. It has good pasture and plenty of water. There is much open space, not many people. You could settle there and life would be much sweeter than it is here.”

“Where is this land? How far?” asked Abram.

“It will take us some time to get there, but there is pasture for the herd all along. I know the way.”

Abram grunted his affirmation.

## TWELVE

As they left Carchemish and continued in the direction of the setting sun, the hills started to get higher. One morning, Abram woke in Sarai's embrace. He left her under the blanket, and gazing out from the tent flap, Abram found the land covered with a dusting of whiteness. The whiteness was all around him, and its beauty and purity overwhelmed him. Now he truly understood that he had left the land of Sumeria, had left his home, had gone into exile, for this white landscape could not be the work of Sumerian gods. He felt a strange exhilaration.

Abram sat a long time just looking, but eventually his pristine vision was disturbed by the figure of Ishmael trudging across the camp on his way to milk the goats.

"Boy, Ishmael! What gods hold sway in this land?"

"Baal," grunted Ishmael, without stopping or turning his head. [\[12.1\]](#)

Abram soon discovered that the clean white snow became a brown mushy mess under the hooves of the sheep and goats. "One more example of how nasty these creatures are," he thought.

Over some days, Ishmael led them down out of the hill country to get away from the snow. As they descended onto a broad plain, they saw a strange conically shaped hill rising in the distance. As they drew closer, they could see that there was another town on top of the hill. Abram was a bit apprehensive after their experience at Carchemish, but they continued on. There was no bustle of activity in front of the town gates as there had been at Carchemish, as there always was at Harran, and as there always had been at Ur. As they got closer, they still encountered no one and Abram and the others became uneasy. Then the hill, topped by towering walls of stone and mud-brick, stood imposingly above them, but still no people.

Abram, Lot and Ishmael went ahead alone, climbing the winding path up to the town gate. The gate was open and unguarded, so they

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continued on inside. And then they understood. In the streets of the town they came across men and boys, even some womenfolk, slain, their blood in dried-up pools and flies swarming on their swelling, purple bodies. Buildings were burned out, the doors and ceilings collapsed. They looked in some of the open doorways and found still more dead.

As Ishmael was looking around in one house he thought he saw a large woven basket in the corner move slightly. He went over to it and pulled open the lid. Inside, terrified and cowering, was a little boy about Isaac's age. Ishmael jumped back.

"Wha! Who . . . Who are you?" He stammered.

The child huddled down in the basket and did not speak.

"Sirs! Abram, Sir! Lot, Sir! Come quickly! See what I have found!"

When the other two arrived, they managed to coax the boy out of the basket. "What has happened here? What town is this? What is your name?" All he could muster in reply was one word:

"Hittites!"

Eventually more people came out of baskets, wells, cisterns, trap doors, and other hiding places. They were mostly women and children, a few elderly, over one hundred in all, and terrified. Their men had died defending the town and many other women and children, most of the inhabitants, had been carried off by the marauders. These people spoke with a strange accent,[\[12.2\]](#) but as far as Abram could gather, the town, which they called Yamhad,[\[12.3\]](#) had been sacked only a day or two before.

Sarai and Salina, with the help of their servants, milked the goats, and fed milk and yogurt to some of the children, who had had nothing to eat or drink for two days. [\[12.4\]](#) Survivors set about collecting their dead family members for burial, but many dead went unclaimed. These for the most part remained where they had fallen, and were increasingly set upon by rats, dogs, and crows. Abram and his family helped the townspeople search through the ruins for other survivors and for anything that could be salvaged. The Hittites had picked the place pretty clean, but not completely. There were hidden caches of grain, shekels of silver, gold

jewelry, valuables buried in hollowed out spaces under floors and within walls. The townspeople had an uncanny knowledge of where these hiding places might be in their dead neighbors' houses. They also rounded up quite a few sheep, goats and cattle which they found wandering around both outside and inside the town. Although the Hittites had intended to make off with all the livestock, a fair number of animals had been missed.

In all of the abandoned houses, Abram noticed the shelves with the statues of the family gods and ancestors. Some of them were knocked over, some still standing, but clearly none had been of any protective value. Yehhi had delivered him from disaster but these gods had clearly proved less potent. In the midst of this devastation, Abram longed for Yehhi's protection. But his father had kept Yehhi. And anyway, Yehhi was a Sumerian god and after Carchemish, they had left the land between the two rivers behind. Now they truly were in the wilderness, wild lands full of wild people, and governed by the whims of wild gods. One thing was for sure, Abram needed to find the protection of some deity, and quickly. But how would he know it was the right god, a god that could deliver the protection he needed? All these dead people believed in their gods, not suspecting how weak and ineffective they were until it was too late.

Abram started to think that he should leave this place. The smell of death hung heavy in the air, its gods were weak or uncaring, and the Hittites, or some other group of armed marauders, would no doubt return. When he informed the townsfolk of his intention, they were distraught. But it was clear to Abram that his small band could not help or defend these wretched survivors when all their well-armed men had failed. Some of the women pleaded with Abram to take them and their children away with him, but he resisted the idea. These were women, girls, and small boys. They would slow his progress, eat his food, and contribute nothing to the defense of his party. Abram had understood from the day he left Harran that they were in danger from bandits, or hostile tribes. That is why he had stayed off the main road. But, the sight of this ruined town focused his thoughts more intently. What he needed

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were strong boys and men, armed boys and men, like the ones being eaten by rats in the streets.

An old, toothless woman with a leathery face tugged on Abram's tunic, "You should take in some of these young women and their children. They represent future strength for you and your clan. The little boys will soon be big boys, able to work and able to fight. And, women and girls will bear more sons for your people. Look beyond today, look to your future. I have no future, only a past. Soon I will die with the rest of my people. But you must look to your future."

Abram grunted and walked off. But that night, as he lay awake in his tent, the old woman's words came back to him over and over again. Sarai, lying beside him, also could not sleep, for she was lost in her own unsettled thoughts. The scene at Yamhad—blotchy faced, bloated bodies danced in the blackness before her eyes—reconnected her to her earlier obsession with the story of the Great Flood, and with their own tragedy at Ur. How could the gods be so cruel and uncaring? Allowing so many innocents to perish? Abram had his Yehhi, or maybe he did not have him here in the wilderness, but Yehhi it seemed to Sarai was also part of this divine cruelty or at least divine indifference. Sarai longed for the protection of her own goddess of love and compassion. A goddess that listened to her, a mere woman, and also maybe to her friend Salina. Loving and compassionate yes, but strong enough to fight off the whimsical cruelty of other gods.

The next day, as Abram left the ruins of Yamhad behind, his tribe was doubled in number, and also increased in prosperity since the refugees brought with them food, silver, other goods, and animals salvaged from the wreckage. Abram and his men had also armed themselves with spears and swords taken from the hands of the slain defenders of Yamhad. The weapons felt strange in Abram's hands, the hands of the son of a scribe, but having them made him and everyone in the group feel more secure.



## THIRTEEN

Out of Yamhad they continued on, grazing their herds and moving a little further each day, in the direction of the setting sun. Then the hills rose again before them, and beyond in the distance, higher mountains still, mountains such as Abram had never seen before. They skirted the foothills, and continued their slow progress. Now the sun was setting to their right over the tops of the tall mountains. They passed a large town, way off in the distance in the flatter lands below them, to their left. The Yamhad survivors said it was a place called Ebla<sup>[13.1]</sup>; after his experiences in Carchemish and Yamhad, Abram decided to give it a wide berth.

The great mountains in the distance grew higher still, and they were crowned with white. One bright afternoon as they followed the herds, Abram found himself walking beside Ishmael.

“So, Ishmael, who is this god Baal?”

“He is an important god in this land,” Ishmael answered flatly.

“What kind of power does he wield and where is the seat of his power?” Abram persisted.

“Baal is powerful in many ways, but chiefly he rides among the clouds to provide the rain for the land—growing things—you know. And, he likes to scare the people with his thunder and lightning.”

“How do the people serve Baal?” asked Abram.

“There are priests of Baal whose work is to make sacrifices, for the benefit of all mankind. The people . . . Well, the priests . . . make the sacrifices and Baal sends the rain. If they neglect the sacrifices then Baal may not return and neither will the rain.”

“Return from where? Where did he go?”

“But the sacrifices are the job of the priests, so you and I don’t need to worry about it,” Ishmael continued.

They walked on in silence for some time. Then later, clouds began to roll in across the tops of the mountains.

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“See, look at that,” said Ishmael. “Baal lives in a great house high up on the mountain top. When it is time for him to ride the clouds and make rain, the clouds go to the mountain top so he can climb on.”

“Yes, I can see that,” replied Abram. “But, can Baal help us? Can he do more for us than making rain so the land does not dry out? I mean, it’s important making the rain—very important—but, can we rely on Baal to guide us and protect us from disasters and enemies? Yamhad, that sort of thing?”

“Pretty much he just makes the rain, at least these days. Legend has it that in ancient times, Baal fought mighty battles to defeat the evil god of turbulent waters, Yam. Then he also did battle with Mot, the god of famine, disease, and death. At first Mot defeated Baal, killed Baal, took Baal into the underworld. With Baal gone from the land, Mot held sway and there was drought and disease. Death came to plants, animals, and people alike. But then Baal rose from the dead, and defeated Mot. The return of Baal brought back the rains and the fertility of the land. Now, every year Baal dies and goes to the underworld and his absence causes the dry season when the plants wither. But if the sacrifices are good and pleasing to him, then he will be resurrected. With his return comes the wet season, the season of growing things and of life.”

The sky had begun to darken as Baal made ready to do his work.

“Sounds to me like Marduk,” mused Abram.

“Marduk?”

“In Sumer, Marduk is a great and goodly god. He slew the sea monster, Tiamat. And, among other things, he is the god of the thunderstorms that bring fertility to the land. And, every new year begins with his death and resurrection. Yes, Marduk!” [\[13.2\]](#)

Ishmael rolled his eyes upward to look at the gathering storm clouds; he put a finger to his lips, indicating to Abram that he should hush up. Then in an urgent, forceful whisper: “We are not in Sumer. We are in Canaan now. Here Baal is the lord of the rains, and he might be angry if anyone suggested otherwise.”

Ishmael was shuffling to the side to open up a little more distance between himself and Abram. He jumped as a boom of thunder echoed out of the distant hills.

“All right, all right,” said Abram quickly, trying to reassure Ishmael, and perhaps Baal as well. “I really am more concerned about our own safety and prosperity. That we don’t get killed by some Hittites.”

Looking up at the dark sky Abram continued. “Clearly the priests of Mar . . . I mean Baal, are doing a plenty good job on behalf of all of us with the rains. The god of my own clan, Yehhi, has protected me and helped me in the past, but I needed to leave him behind in Harran. Yehhi stayed with my father.”

“Your god does not hear you in the land of Canaan?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so. How could he? Yehhi . . . Yehhi is a figure, an idol, and he is far away in the house of Terah, my father. Even if he could hear me, how could he aid me from so far away?”

They stopped, set up camp, and got under their tents just as the downpour hit them.

## FOURTEEN

Now they were in a long valley with good grazing, hemmed in by tall mountains on either side. [\[14.1\]](#) The season of rains had passed and it was hot and dry, so they were glad to linger by the cool stream that ran along the valley floor.

One day, Abram was sitting on a boulder watching the herds. Isaac was off running about with the dog and laughing, as usual. Ishmael approached Abram.

“You know, I’ve been thinking about your problem.”

“What?”

“I mean your problem with your god, Yahew.”

“Yehhi.”

“Right. As I was saying, I’ve been thinking. I used to live in a village, in my father’s house, with my mother and little sister. Of course we had our own family gods, they were idols just like your Yahew. When I was about the age Isaac is now, I was a ways outside of the village tending our family’s sheep.”

Ishmael looked at Isaac, with the dog, over by the sheep.

“Like that. Yes, pretty much like that. My older cousin was with me. Some men approached; I think they were from the bigger town, a day’s walk away. We could tell their intentions were evil. My cousin hurled stones at them with his sling, but they came on. Then they were upon my cousin, and he fought them with his stick and with his hands. He told me to run, and I did run, but not before I saw them smash my cousin’s head in with a rock. They ran after me, and since I was just a small boy I could not outrun them. They took me and the sheep also. They left my cousin’s body there in the hills for the jackals.”

The anxious look on Abram’s face suggested that Ishmael’s story was not easing his persistent fears.

“They bound my arms with ropes and took me off to the slave market. Of course I was terrified, but I called out in my heart to Kirta for help. Kirta is a familiar god of my village and of my family. I did not have a figure of Kirta, I dared not even speak aloud, but I called out to him in my heart.”

“So, you see,” interjected Abram. “You had the same problem as I do. You did not have your god with you. And look! It did not work out so well for you. You are still a bondsman.”

“Yes, I am your shepherd boy, but this is not such a bad life, about the same as it would have been for me at home. I do miss my mother sometimes. Haven’t seen her for six or seven years . . . but—”

“What?”

“Never mind. What I wanted to say was that things could have been worse, much worse. The priests of Baal were in the market that day buying boys for their holocausts, their burnt offerings to the god. They were wearing fine purple robes[14.2] and they had golden arm bands and golden headdresses. I knew exactly what they were there for. Well some boys do need to be burnt to satisfy Baal, that is for sure. I do not disagree with that. Baal gets his burnt flesh and the land gets its rain. I just never thought it would be me that got sacrificed. But then again, I had never thought much about how they got the boys. Now I knew. They were boys stolen from their families. I cried out to Kirta in my heart with all my might, cried out for deliverance. And the priests of Baal walked right past me and chose some other boys.”

“Some rich, fat old man could have bought me to satisfy his desires, but that did not happen either. Kirta must have heard me, because the man who did buy me put me to work herding his sheep. The one after him, who bought me from him, did the same. I would not say that they were kindly masters, and I certainly would have preferred to be at home with my mother. Nonetheless, things could have been much worse. And, here I am still, herding sheep. I believe that your god can hear you and help you even if you do not have an idol, even if you only speak to him in your heart. You should try. Can’t hurt.”

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Doubtful and hesitant at first, Abram, in his heart, tried to speak to Yehhi for the first time since leaving Sumer. “Yehhi! Yehhi! My god, do you see me here in this strange land? Yehhi! Do you hear me crying out to you from the wilderness?”

And Yehhi did hear Abram’s cries from that wild and distant land.

## FIFTEEN

Abram and his band continued along the valley day after day, grazing their flocks. The stream disappeared up into the mountains, but it was soon replaced by another flowing with them, in the direction of their slow migration. Abram had been speaking to Yehhi in his heart as Ishmael had suggested. He would be walking along, looking at the light on the mountains and the beauty of the land, and he would tell Yehhi of his hopes and fears. “Yehhi how I long to find a land where I can settle down and be secure. Yehhi make me prosperous. Yehhi make me a chieftain in my own land, a land where I do not need to fear men like Muknuk. Yehhi send me children to live with me in my land, for Sarai and I so far have none. Ishmael, Zimran, and Isaac, are good boys but please Lord Yehhi, honor your servant with sons of his own seed, my own flesh and blood.”

Eventually the flat valley flanked by high mountains gave way to a rugged country. The hills were not so high, but they were relentlessly up and down. Not a level piece of ground to be found. And trees, more trees than Abram had ever seen, in dense stands across the countryside. But there was also plenty of good pasture land, and so they continued on as the rainy season came around again.

One afternoon as they climbed a steep hill, they saw a gathering of men robed in purple, in the distance, at the top. As they got closer, they saw that the men were around a platform made of stones with a large flat stone for a top. Closer still and they saw that the men had a young boy of about eight bound with ropes; he was squirming and struggling. The men piled bundles of wood on the top of the platform, and then one of them smashed the boy across the head with a boulder. His body fell limp. They tossed him on top of the kindling, and a torch was thrust into it. As the offering burst into a torrent of flame, the purple-clad men chanted in unison. They were just barely inside Abram’s range of hearing so he could not really understand the words of the strange incantation, but his

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attention was focused on what he thought was the repeated invocation of one name, “Baal.” During the chant a few of the men in purple took metal cleavers, axes and knives and made cuts in their own arms, drawing blood.

Abram, Lot, Ishmael, and the others stood at a distance, staring at the proceedings. Sarai and Salina pulled their shawls down over their eyes and turned their heads away. Abram, recalling Ishmael’s story, was struck by the stoniness with which Ishmael stood and watched.

As the fire burned down and the chanting subsided, some of the purple-clad men noticed the sizeable party of onlookers. Three of them approached. Abram, Lot, and Ishmael stood at ease but with weapons in hand just in case.

“Greetings, hebrews, [\[15.1\]](#) we are the Priests of Shechem.” [\[15.2\]](#)

Abram leaned over and whispered in Ishmael’s ear, “He called us hebrews? What are hebrews?”

“It is an expression used in this land,” Ishmael whispered back. “It means a wanderer, someone from elsewhere.”

“How can they tell?”

“It is not so hard to tell,” Ishmael whispered back.

Abram smiled awkwardly at the priests. “I am Abram and this is my family. Indeed we are wanderers from the land of Sumer, from Harran and Ur.”

The priests smiled as if amused. “We have heard that Sumer is a great land of high culture, learning . . . wealth. We have heard that Harran and Ur—oh yes, Ur—are great cities, vast cities. But look at you! You are just nomadic sheep herders—hebrews.”

Abram’s face flushed red with anger. “Why do you insult us so? We have no quarrel with you.”

“Rightly so. Rightly so,” replied one of the priests, smiling warmly and extending his hands toward them with palms upraised. “We have made a sacrifice to our Lord Baal. We would be happy to make a sacrifice for the welfare of you and your people as well.”



“I thought Baal just brings rain and fertility to the land. What can he do for the welfare of my people?” asked Abram.

“You and your people do not rely on the rains and the fertility of the land?” asked the priest, cocking an eyebrow.

“Yes, of course we do,” replied Abram.

“But, it looks to me as if you have that covered,” Lot interjected.

“But,” said Abram, with a gleam in his eye, “I am very interested in seeing whether you can do anything to help me reach another god . . . I mean our own special god.”

The three priests looked puzzled and briefly conferred among themselves.

“We are priests of our Lord Baal; we are devoted to honoring him. What is this god that you wish to make sacrifice to?”

“My god is Yehhi.”

“Yahweh?”

Abram winced at what their accent did to the name. “No, no! Yeh-hi. Yeh-hi!”

“That’s what we said, ‘Yahweh’.”

“All right, all right. I would like to make an offering to him.”

The priests conferred again. Then they smiled warmly. “Yes of course we know your Yahweh. He is a great and important god. He is a brother of our Lord Baal. Both are sons of El, the master of all, the father of the gods.” [\[15.3\]](#) The priests gestured reverently toward a high pile of stones to the right of the altar, [\[15.4\]](#) where a charred leg bone was still discernable among the glowing embers. “Sons of El and his wife Asherah,” they gestured toward a small twisted, terebinth tree to the left of the altar. [\[15.5\]](#)

“I really don’t think so,” said Abram. “Yehhi is a god of Sumer, and the founder of my clan.”

“Of course he is,” countered a priest. “You must understand. El, the master of all, and Asherah, the lady of the sea, had seventy children, gods and goddesses all. We are quite sure, very sure in fact, that your Yahweh is one of them. A son of El and Asherah. Yes!”

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“Yes, quite sure,” added one of the other priests. All three smiled warmly.

“Maybe so,” mused Abram. [\[15.6\]](#)

“And the really wondrous thing,” continued one of the priests, “is that Yahweh and Baal are friends. They do not battle one another like Baal battled with Yam or with Mot. They love each other and support each other. Yes, we know this for a fact. Therefore, we would be happy to lend our services to the honor of Yahweh. Baal will not mind at all. What will you have for a sacrifice to your Lord Yahweh?”

“Well, I hadn’t really thought about it beforehand.”

“The best sacrifice, the sacrifice that will please your god the most, is of course a nice young boy.” The priests once again gestured toward the smoldering altar. “After that, the second best thing is a nice young girl.” [\[15.7\]](#)

“That boy there,” one of the priests gestured towards Isaac. “Baal . . . er . . . I mean Yahweh would be most pleased. Favor would surely be upon you and your clan from such a sacrifice.”

Abram clamped his hands on the shoulders of a horrified Isaac, and held him tight. Then Abram looked into Ishmael’s eyes, and Ishmael met his gaze. Abram loosened his grip on Isaac.

“Ah,” said one of the priests with a knowing smile. “No bother, no bother. We have a boy for your sacrifice. We can let you have him for ten weights of silver.” [\[15.8\]](#)

Abram looked relieved, and was about to strike the bargain when Ishmael caught his eye again.

“What else would be an appropriate sacrifice?” asked Abram.

“Paahhh—” the priests gasped, shaking their heads. “Well, you could sacrifice an animal, a ram or a sheep, such as that.” They gestured towards Abram’s flocks. “It’s not the same. But . . . I suppose it might be worthy of your Yahweh if some of my priests added their own blood to the sacrifice. Yes, yes. For five weights of silver you can have four priests cutting their forearms, but you supply the animal. What do you think?”

Even more relieved, Abram jumped for it. “Yes of course. Ishmael, Lot! Fetch a ram for the sacrifice to Yehhi.”

And, Yehhi beheld the blood of the ram. Yehhi smelled the burning flesh of the ram, and Yehhi beheld the blood of the priests. And, he knew that it was good. Never before had Yehhi received blood sacrifices, burnt sacrifices, and so he favored Abram above all others. But, Yehhi did not love Baal and he was fairly sure that he was not Baal’s brother. He was jealous that Baal received the sacrifice of a nice young boy and he, Yehhi, only received an animal—an animal and some priest blood.

## SIXTEEN

Abram and his people moved on from Shechem, continuing their trek through the hill country, grazing their flocks as they went. There were some small villages here and there and a few other people in the countryside, but Abram avoided them. Overall, the land seemed empty compared to the teeming populations back in Sumer. He turned what Ishmael had told him over and over in his mind during these days: *A good land, a beautiful land. Good pasture and plenty of water. Much available land, not many people.* “I could settle here,” Abram thought. “A place in this land is mine for the taking. Once taken, this place will belong to me and after me to my sons.”

They came to a valley with good grazing and rugged hills all around, and here they stayed for many days. While the herd and the rest of his people stayed in the valley, Abram often wandered off by himself to spend the afternoon on the top of the highest surrounding hill, looking out at the land in all directions. One day, Abram asked Lot and Ishmael to join him on the hilltop. With their help, he began to drag, arrange and pile some of the many rocks and boulders that were available in the stony ground.

While the men stacked their rocks up on the hill, Sarai and Salina worked at a weaving frame set up in front of Sarai’s tent.

“I still can’t stop thinking about all the innocent people killed at Yamhad, killed at Ur,” said Sarai.

“Killed at Ur?”

“Oh yes, I forgot you did not come with us from Ur. But, that’s why we left Ur and went to Harran in the first place. The gods did cause the earth to shake so violently that all the buildings fell down on top of the people, so many were crushed to death.”

“Well that is terrible, but at least you escaped.” Salina touched Sarai’s hand.

“That’s not the point. The point is I am very troubled. So troubled I lie awake at night thinking about it. I am troubled by the cruel and capricious ways of the gods. You can do everything right, honor the gods, be a good person, and still they might just come and smite you for no good reason. It really scares me.”

“Mistress,” Salina began.

“Why do you call me mistress? Call me sister,” said Sarai.

“Every slave girl knows something that her mistress does not.”

“What’s that?”

“That life is not always fair or just. In fact, it is mostly unfair,” said Salina.

“So then what are we to do? Perhaps sacrifices?” Sarai turned her head and looked up toward the men working on the hilltop.

“Oh, I am repulsed by those horrible purple priests,” spat Salina. “And that boy they burned up was as innocent as any we found slain on the streets of Yamhad.”

“Yes, but it is necessary,” continued Sarai. “We know that the gods are capricious and cruel, that they must be satisfied with blood. And, if we ourselves give them a little bit of innocent blood with a sacrifice, then perhaps their need will be sated for awhile. They will not come back for more blood quite so soon.”

“Do you think this approach, the sacrifices, is working?” asked Salina.

“Well I don’t know. Maybe . . .”

“No! They are absolutely not working,” Salina pounded her fist on the ground. “The world is as full of suffering and the spilling of innocent blood as ever. The sacrifices do not satisfy the gods. They do the opposite, they increase the gods’ lust for innocent blood. Perhaps in the beginning the gods did not have this desire for innocent blood. Then men came along with their sacrifices, and showed this bloodiness to the gods. Perhaps the blood lust of the gods was an acquired taste. People are not born liking the taste of olives or beer. You have to get used to these tastes. It’s the same with the gods. The more blood men showed them, the more

## **Abram**

they came to like it. I think we humans have brought more bloodshed into the world with our sacrifices.”

Sarai sat looking at Salina with a contemplative scow on her face.

The next day Abram, Lot and Ishmael were sore from the labor, but Abram led them to the hilltop and they continued for a second day. They built a platform of stones, and off to the right-hand-side, another high pile of stones. It was, as near as they could make, a replica of the altar used by the Priests of Baal, the altar on which they had made their first sacrifice to Yehhi. However, this site lacked the tree, Asherah, on the right hand side. What was to be done? El needed his wife.

“Ah, Ishmael! Such a bright boy,” thought Abram as he spied the lad dragging a log toward the hilltop. They scratched a shallow hole in the rocky soil, and erected their Asherah. It took a few extra rocks around her base to keep her stable. Then they piled more brush wood on top of their new stone altar. It was getting on toward mid-afternoon of the second day, but now they were finished and ready to sacrifice to Yehhi.

The three of them bounded down the hill full of purpose, full of excitement.

“Ishmael! Lot! Fetch a ram for the sacrifice to Yehhi!”

There were the herds spread out before them on the slopes of the hill tended by men and boys. There were the many tents of the camp; there were the womenfolk spinning, weaving, preparing food. There was Isaac frolicking with the sheepdog, laughing.

Lot and Ishmael had the ram, and Abram shouted, “Boy, Isaac! Come and join us.”

Isaac came running, overjoyed to be included in the doings of the grown up men, the leaders of the clan. The four of them marched purposefully back up to the hilltop, dragging the ram. When they reached the foot of the altar, they paused. Abram held Isaac firmly by the shoulders as he thought about the need to make a good sacrifice to Yehhi, the importance of pleasing Yehhi. Lot and Ishmael glanced at Abram. Abram hesitated.

Abram, after a short pause, without taking his hands off Isaac, nodded with his head toward the ram. Lot and Ishmael hoisted the struggling, bound animal on top of the piled wood. As the fire blazed up, Abram loosened his grip on Isaac, and the four of them watched the offering go up to the heavens, up to Yehhi, against the backdrop of a dramatic purple sunset. As Abram drank in the sight, he felt that by sacrificing to his god in this land, on an altar he had built himself from the stones of this land, that he was making his presence permanent.

“Yehhi, I am here! See me my Lord!” shouted Abram. [\[16.1\]](#)

Yehhi smelled the ram they were roasting for him, and he looked with favor on Abram and his clan.

## SEVENTEEN

“This is a goodly valley that Yehhi has led us to, and a goodly hilltop on which to make sacrifices to him,” thought Abram. “If it pleases Yehhi, we will stay here.” And they did stay there for some months, grazing the herds, and making more sacrifices.

Then the season of cold and rain was upon them, and Ishmael said to Abram, “We should go down out of this hill country to a place where the grazing is good in this season and the winds are not so chill.”

“But,” replied Abram, “I was thinking that we would stay in this valley . . . live here, grazing our flocks and sacrificing to our god. It may be the best life we can hope for.”

Ishmael shook his head. “No, we should move on. Give this valley, this grass, a rest. We can come back here in the dry season. In the rainy season, it is better to go down to the Negev.”[\[17.1\]](#)

“The what?”

“The Negev . . . not so far from here, ten days, about that. In the dry season it is very hot there and nothing can grow. But in this wet season, at least on the edges of the Negev, there is good grazing and a more pleasant climate than here. We should take advantage of the season to graze the flocks in different pasture.”

“Perhaps, but we have built the altar to Yehhi, worked so hard to build it.”

“It will still be here when we come back next year. And we can build another one in the Negev.”

“I suppose, but I was starting to think of this place as our own. I was hoping to raise children here and pass this land on to them and to all the future generations.”

“Ah,” replied Ishmael with a gleam in his eye. “Your descendants will someday be more numerous than the stars in the sky, and you will need far more land for them to settle in, more than this small valley. Best to



walk about the land, through its length and its breadth . . . see what is there.”[17.2]

Abram smiled wistfully, and looked up at the overcast sky. No stars in the sky tonight, he thought. Abram felt a growing sense of frustration at not yet having fathered a child with Sarai. Not for lack of trying! He shook his head. Then he recited aloud a passage, which was known to all educated Sumerians, from the *Epic of Gilgamesh* in which the hero Gilgamesh is asking the ghost of his best friend Enkidu what it is like in the land of the dead.



*“In the world below, have you seen the man with no son?”*

*“Yes I have seen the man with no son.”*

*“How goes it with the man with no son in the world below?”*

*“The man with no son sits by the wall in the world below and weeps.”*

The clan of Abram pulled up stakes and was on the move again. Fertility had not been a problem for the flocks of Abram, which had doubled in size, and doubled again, since they had left Harran. Ishmael led them down out of the high hill country to flatter lands, and indeed it was warmer.

One day, from a low rise, they spied another town in the distance, and Abram was apprehensive.

“That place is Gerar,” Ishmael informed him.[17.3] “That is where I was sold into slavery. Dangerous people there. We must give this place a wide berth.”

“Why do we need to go around it at all? Why not just head away from it in some other direction entirely?” suggested Abram.

## **Abram**

“The place we are going, a very good place, is beyond Gerar. We must pass Gerar to get there. We must get around Gerar without being noticed. If they spot us, we could all end up in the slave market, and my own luck might not be so good next time.”

Abram’s face was filled with consternation.

They stayed where they were until nightfall and then began to move down onto the open plain around the town. In the darkness, they struggled for over an hour to cross the uneven ground and to keep all the people and flocks together. Then, as they were passing about two bowshots from the town walls, the full Moon rose over the horizon, illuminating the plain almost like day. They were at the most vulnerable point of their transit and there was nothing to be done except to press forward with all possible speed.

When they heard shouts from the town, they knew that they had been discovered. Soon a large party of men, torches and spears in hand, came charging out of the gates. Abram, Lot, Ishmael, and several other bondsmen of Abram’s stood in front of the women, children, and animals, clutching weapons of their own. But they were not experienced fighters. Abram tensed his leg muscles to keep his knees from shaking, but this only made them shake more.

“Who is it that sneaks across my lands like a thief in the night?” demanded the leader of the townsmen, as his fighters arrayed themselves behind and on either side of him.

Abram did not know how to reply.

Finally Ishmael spoke up. “We are but hebrews, wandering shepherd people from afar. We are only passing through and we mean you and your people no harm.”

The leader eyed Ishmael with suspicion. “You speak with the accent of this region. I do not believe that you are from elsewhere.”

“My lord, you are correct. I was born not far from here in a small village and I lived there as a little boy. I am guiding these people back there now. But the rest truly are hebrews. I have guided them all the way from

the land between the rivers. We mean no harm. We ask for nothing but safe passage.”

“The land between the rivers,” said the leader with a glint in his eye. “That is a legendary land of great power, great learning, and great wealth. Why is it then that these would-be-Sumerians are not traveling in a rich caravan guarded by soldiers? And why is it that these proud Sumerians do not approach my city openly by day to pay respect to Abimelech, king of this land.” The speaker puffed himself up a bit as he said the final words. Apparently, he was Abimelech. “Instead they try to steal past in the night without offering Abimelech his due.”

“Perhaps they are spies . . . or . . . insurgents,” mused a tall man who stood at Abimelech’s right. He said this more for his own benefit than for that of the king. This was a quiet man of clear authority, who seemed to be surveying the situation for his own independent reasons. While Abimelech and his men were dressed in colorfully dyed tunics, this man wore fine white linen and a chunky gold signet ring shone on his right hand.

“What does Abimelech require?” asked Lot.

“Abimelech will have to see,” he replied as his men stepped forward, spears at the ready, and surrounded the men of Abram’s clan. While the strange man with the gold ring stood off to the side and watched, Abimelech and a few henchmen proceeded to quickly survey the herds of sheep. Then they headed toward the line of baggage-laden donkeys but stopped abruptly when their torchlight fell upon the womenfolk, huddled together. Abimelech stopped and walked up close to the women, who hid their faces from him with their shawls and scarves. He walked among them and one by one he pulled back their scarves, looked at their faces, and judged them with comments like: “Eh,” “Perhaps,” “Oh, no!” and finally, “Ah, so lovely!” Abimelech was looking at Lot’s young wife Salina. He came to the woman beside her, pulled back her scarf and just looked, not saying a word. Then he broke away and returned to where the bulk of his men were guarding Abram, Lot, Ishmael and the others.

## **Abram**

“Take the herds to my pens. Take the baggage to my storehouse. Take the pretty young girls and boys and the young women to my house. The old women and the ugly ones . . . oh, take them for yourselves, any of you. And, as for these assholes,” he indicated Abram and the other men with a curt wave of his arm, “Slay them!”

“No! My Lord! No!” shouted Lot. “Such an offense against defenseless people who meant you no harm is an affront to the gods for which you will bring down misfortune upon your town and your people.”

Some of Abimelech’s men exchanged concerned glances and a murmuring began among them. Abimelech went over to confer with the aloof stranger. Only snippets of the conversations were audible and understandable to Abram, Lot and Ishmael.

“Oh come on . . . need to have something for our trouble . . .”

The strange man cocked an eyebrow.

“But Phicol you cannot be suggesting—”

“Simply, watch.”

“Oh, very well,” sighed Abimelech, trudging back. “Take half the herds, and I only really want the one woman.”

“Which woman, my Lord?” asked several of Abimelech’s men together.

“You know which one. Go fetch her!”

They nodded and strode off toward the huddle of women. One of them pried Sarai from the others. Salina, wailing hysterically, would not let go of Sarai’s hand until she was brutally slapped to the ground. Abimelech’s men dragged Sarai kicking and screaming back to their leader. As a henchman held Sarai firmly by her arm, twisting it a little to keep her under control, Abimelech asked, “So who does this one belong to?”

They were silent, and Lot and Ishmael looked fearfully at Abram.

“Sh . . . Sh . . . She’s my sister,” stammered Abram.

“Well then, you will be happy to see that she is marrying so well.”

The stranger, Phicol, quietly shook his head, but did not intervene. Some of Abimelech's men had already cut out half of the herd and had begun driving the animals back towards Gerar.

"Move on, brother-in-law. And don't dwell on what you have lost. Think about what you still have." Abimelech and his men wheeled around and marched off with Sarai, who writhed in their grip, turning back and crying for Abram. Phicol disdainfully slapped the man who was twisting Sarai's arms across the side of the head with his gold ring. He shoved the man aside and took hold of Sarai himself, firmly but more gently guiding her. He bent over and whispered something in her ear. Her struggling subsided and she went with him. [\[17.4\]](#)

Ishmael turned to Lot, "Quick thinking!"

"Yeah. I don't know what gods they worship or what they believe, but I had to try something, anything."

Now, Abram realized that he had wet himself. Although urinating was still painful for him, in his terror he hadn't even noticed it happening. Then he collapsed.

Ishmael and Lot quickly dragged the distraught Abram to his feet and forced the whole party, and what was left of the herd, to press on through the night. Ishmael knew there were plenty of thugs in Gerar who would, once word got around, be eager to come out and collect any remaining booty that their king had left behind.

Just as the soft light of pre-dawn was creeping into the arid, reddish-brown landscape, they approached a village, a cluster of about ten squat stone buildings with no protective wall. All through their night-long, forced march, Abram's face had been strained and dour. Now, although bone tired and broken hearted, he somehow managed to summon the energy to be fully terrified again as they approached yet another strange settlement, no doubt filled with new dangers. He glanced over at Ishmael, and was surprised to see the lad bounding along with a spring in his step and a broad grin on his face. Abram let out a primal growl that in one syllable conveyed his fear, and his consternation on witnessing Ishmael's apparent levity.

## ***Abram***

“Oh, don’t worry Abram, Sir! This time we are safe.”

Abram looked unconvinced.

“Don’t worry. This village is my home! I have missed my mother all these years.” Tears streamed down his face.

Yehhi, seeing the scene, recalled his own boyhood, his long journeys in the wilderness and the joy of coming home to his mother, after a long absence

# YEHHI [III.1](#)







## EIGHTEEN

The clear, desert night sky vaulted all around me, and countless stars shone and twinkled. It was ages ago, and I was ten years old. I knew the lights above were the campfires of the ancestors and the gods, and I knew that they were beyond my reach. The soft rounded shapes of the dunes were barely visible in the darkness, and the other donkeys [\[18.1\]](#) in the train, laden with baggage and other riders, barely registered in my mind. It seemed that I was floating in the mist of the heavens. As the night wore on, the gentle swaying of the donkey I was riding must have lulled me into a trance. I must have been dreaming. I felt as if I was being drawn toward one star which hung low in the sky directly in front of me. If only I could continue on long enough, I would get there and then I would be among the revered ancestors and the gods. Greatly I desired it.

“Wake up Yehhi! We’re here!” shouted my father from the donkey just behind me.

“Where?” I wondered as I shook myself awake.

“At the camp of Shekki, our kinsman. This is as far as we go for tonight. It will be dawn soon and we need to get the tents up and some food into us.”

I saw that the light I had been following on the horizon had fragmented into the lights of ten or more fires in front of twenty tents pitched on dusty ground at the outskirts of an oasis. With a few sharp commands from the lead man in the caravan, our train of forty donkeys came to a stop on a bare patch beside the established camp. Men and boys quickly dismounted, and began to unload baggage, and pitch tents.

“Yehhi! Yehhi!” my father shouted at me. “Yehhi, you and your brother go water the beasts.”

I found my eight-year-old brother Dohash, and once the men had the baggage off the donkeys’ backs, the two of us accompanied the animals past a grove of date palms toward the large pool of water at the center of

## *Yehhi*

the oasis. The sky was glowing ever so slightly in the East, and this was easy work. The donkeys knew what they wanted and right where to go. We two barefoot boys followed on behind holding our sticks, just in case we actually needed to do a little herding.

In the grayness of predawn, the donkeys jockeyed for position, straining their necks, grunting and slurping the water. Dohash stood by, periodically tapping his long stick on the ground, but I wandered slightly away down along the edge of the pool. I squatted with my toes in the shallow water in a place where some reeds were growing. Just then the first rays of morning sun broke over a large dune and splashed vibrant color across the water in front of my eyes. The reeds were bright green, the deeper water was turquoise, and then I looked down. The shallow water was opalescent as the sun's rays skipped across its rippling surface, and beneath were the loveliest sparking gems. I reached to touch these jewels, but as my hand broke the surface of the water, the shimmering pattern vanished. I held up one of the gems between my thumb and forefinger, but to my disappointment it was only a dull pebble. I dropped it back into the water.

The donkeys had finally drunk their fill. My brother and I drove the animals back to the outskirts of the oasis where our camp was taking shape. I stooped slightly to enter our tent, carefully shaking the sand and dirt off my feet before I crossed the threshold. Inside was a shady space of six by eight paces with a floor of knotted carpet. Several boxes of goods were stacked in the back, but there was no furniture, not even cushions. A terracotta figurine of our family's own special god had been unpacked and set up atop the highest box. This was Ulak, who was worshiped as the originating ancestor of our clan. Dohash and I could stand fully erect in the tent, but my father had to stoop a little. The three of us squatted on the carpet and shared a stale disk of flat bread with water and dates. Then we lay down to sleep with our clothes on.

## NINETEEN

I slept soundly past midday. When I opened my eyes, my father was gone, but my brother was still sleeping beside me. Ulak was busy watching over us. My eyes must have drooped shut again, and for the next few hours I drifted in and out of a light sleep, alternating between vivid dreams and periods of half wakefulness in which I saw my father coming and going several times.

Strangely, I could fly. I was above our tent looking down. I drifted lower toward it and then floated up higher, and higher. How was I going to get back down? I was leaving the earth and now soaring in the blackness of the heavens, among the stars. It was as I had wished. But, the stars were pulling away from me; they seemed more remote than the night before in the desert. Then I could not see them anymore. I was in a vertical shaft of darkness. I was plummeting downward in this narrow blackness and seemed likely to do so forever, since there was nothing below me. There was no rush of air past me as I fell; I was falling in a void. Or was I falling? No, actually I was rising now, rising back up. It seemed I would rise forever since there was nothing above me. Then I was falling again; then rising. Up and down, endlessly in darkness, and the darkness was permeated by a deep pulsing that cut through me. I was not just rising a long way and then falling a long way. No, somehow I was actually falling forever and then rising forever, over and over, faster and faster.

Each time I shot up or down the dark shaft—I could no longer tell which was which—I passed a bright spot, the only light, at the middle. This was the door, the way out. But how to use the exit, when each time it just flashed by in less than an instant? Each time I reached for the door with my hand . . . with my mind. But, in the time it took to reach, to think, the door was gone again. I began to try to anticipate the door, to time my reach. It was impossible. As soon as the light from the door could first be

## *Yehhi*

glimpsed in the darkness ahead, it was out of sight behind. An impossible predicament, but forever is a long time to work at something, so I tried again and again to grasp the door.

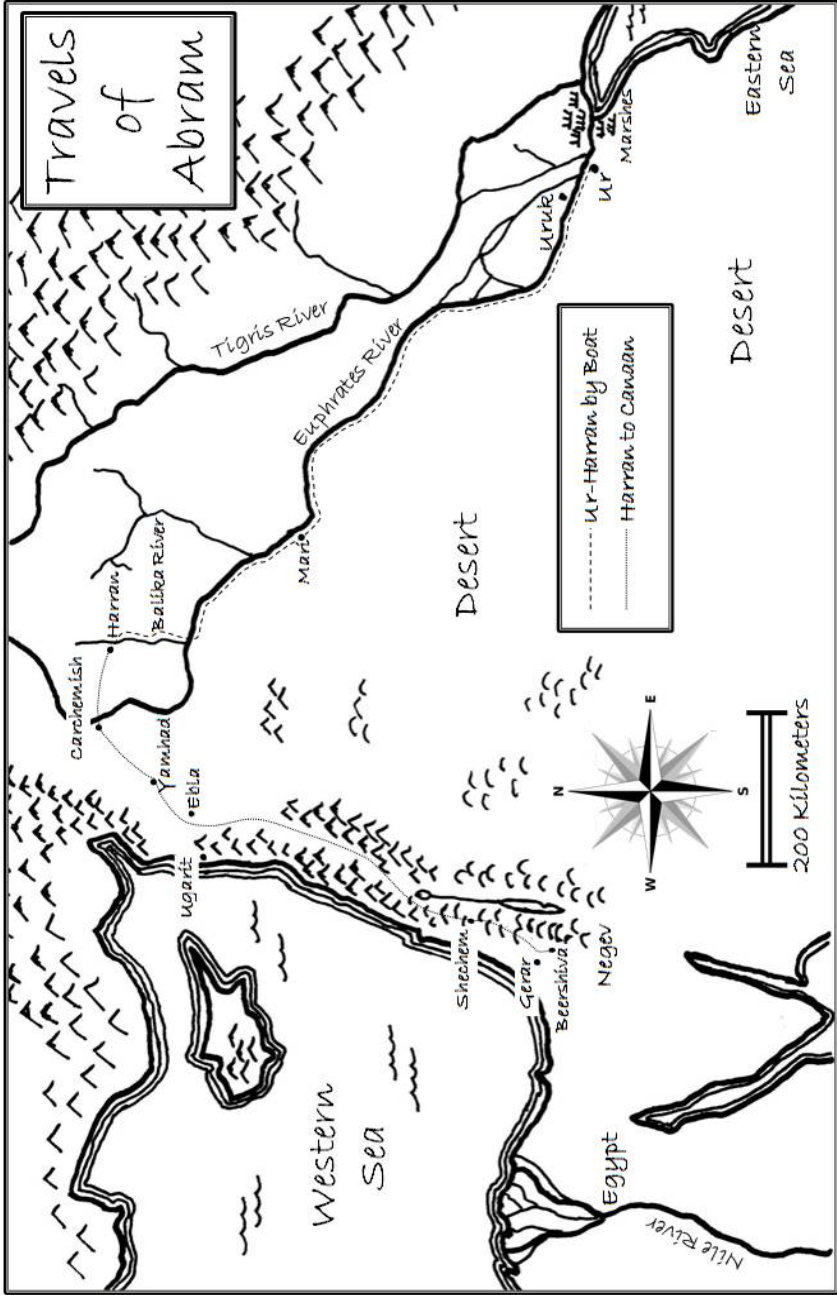
As I hurtled through the blackness, I reached out my hand. The light flashed and I had it. My father was shaking my shoulder.

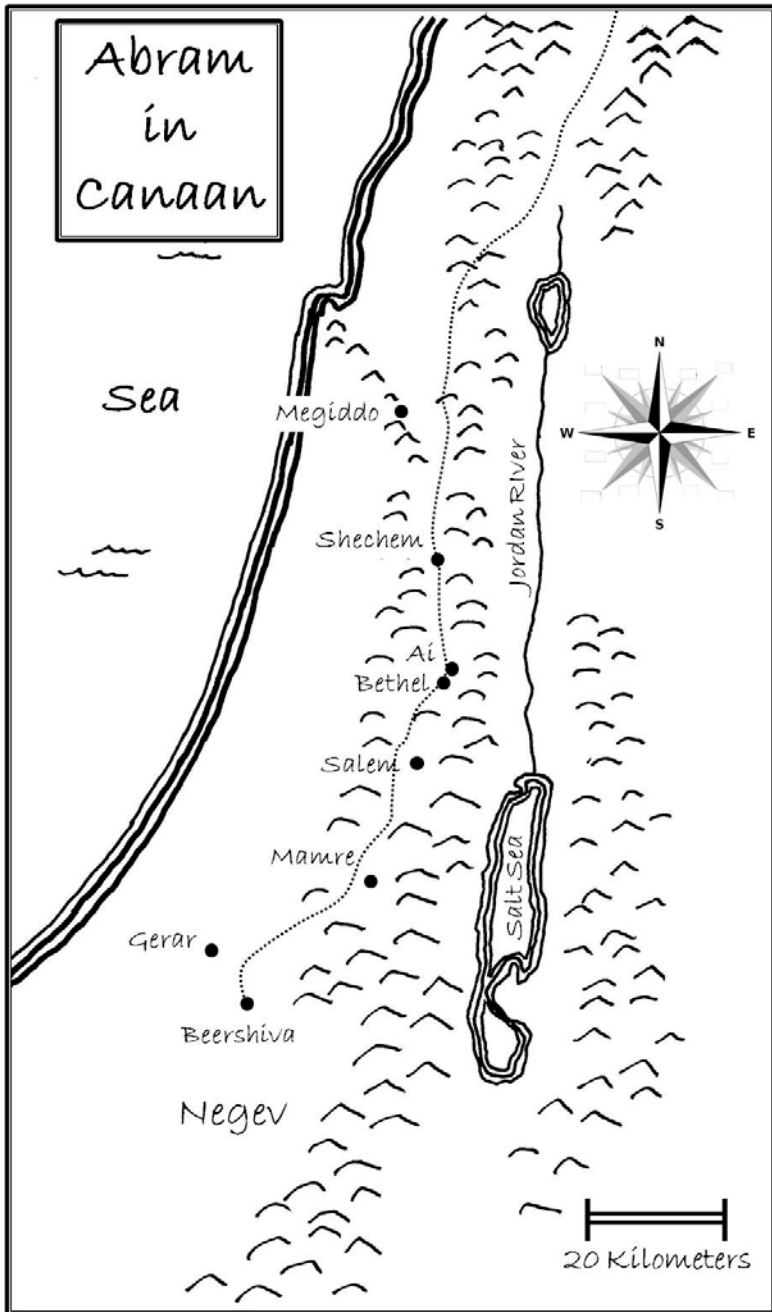
“Wake up. We must pay our respects to Shekki tonight.” [\[19.1\]](#)

The heat of the day had passed, and it was getting on into late afternoon. I lay there for a moment drenched with sweat, before hoisting myself up and wandering outside.



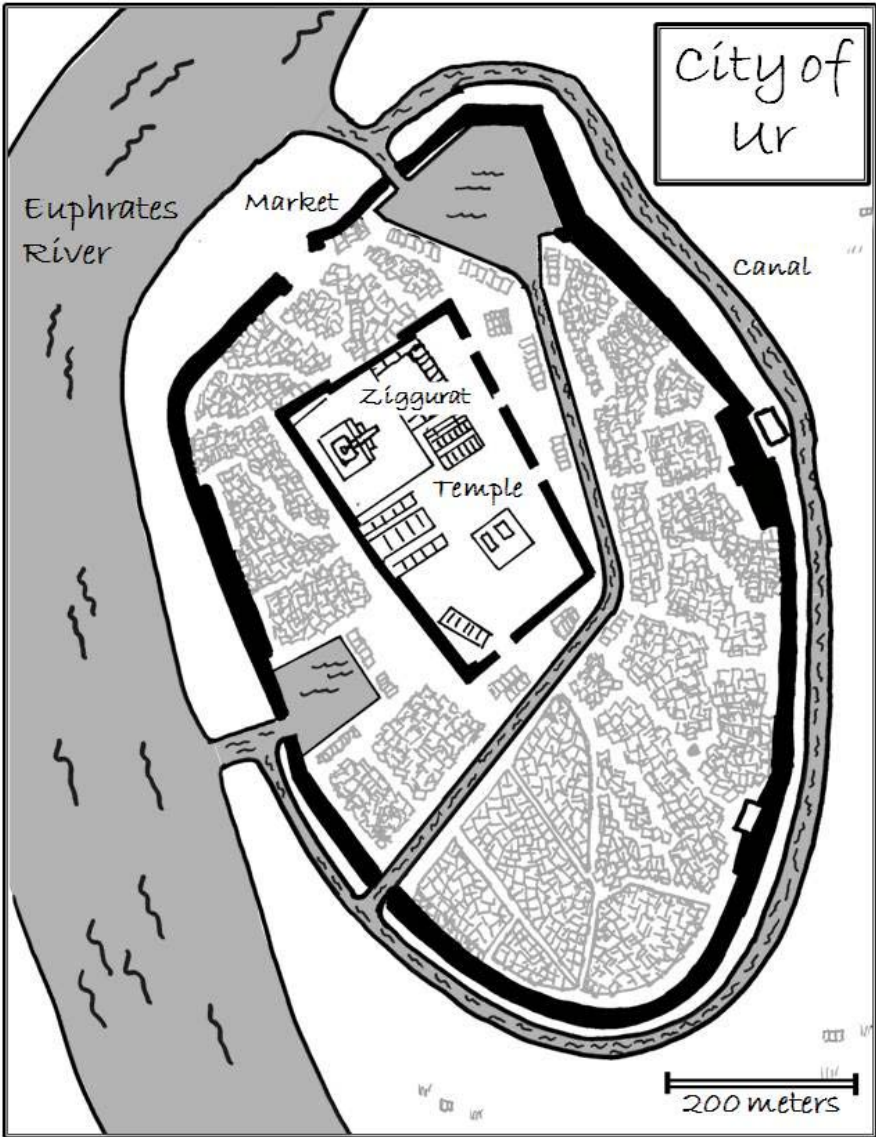
# MAPS











*Maps*

# ESSAYS

## FLUCTUATIONS

Random events, known as fluctuations, take everything from atoms, to genes, to people in unexpected directions. The vast majority of these fluctuations amount to little or nothing important, but a few have the potential to change the world. Given the vast number of these constantly occurring, random events, it is an absolute certainty that some of them will change the world.

Fluctuations have a specific, mathematical meaning in the descriptions used by science to understand the world. They are random deviations from average conditions. For instance, the trees in a pine forest collectively have an average height. However, any individual tree might deviate from this average, being taller or shorter. These are fluctuations. Most fluctuations are small; most trees are near the average height. Large fluctuations, trees twice as tall as the average, are very rare but do exist.

In a cup of water, the water molecules on a microscopic level are wiggling and zooming around. The speed of their motion is what we sense as the temperature of the water, faster motion equals higher temperature. However, the moving water molecules actually have a range of speeds and the observed temperature reflects the average of this range. Water molecules moving faster or slower than the average represent fluctuations. As the temperature is lowered, it is the slower than average molecules that initiate the transition from liquid to ice. As the temperature is raised, it is the faster than average molecules that initiate the transition from liquid to steam. Fluctuations from the average tend to initiate change.

Random fluctuations exert a profound influence on virtually all natural processes. For instance, atoms and molecules could not combine via chemical reactions to form the materials of our universe and our world, including living things such as ourselves, without random fluctuations. Without random processes the universe would have remained forever a featureless broth of non-interacting particles: no stars, no planets, no us.

## Essays

Fluctuations are instrumental in processes of nature ranging from human thought to the weather. The world, actually the entire universe, around us would be very different, and would not be suitable for life, if not for the randomness introduced by fluctuations.

Fluctuations are important to the biological world in an immediate sense since processes integral to life such as photosynthesis, metabolism, and genetic reproduction require chemical and physical change and thus would not be possible without fluctuations. However, random deviations from the average have a much more striking and visible impact on the biological world, over the very long term, by creating through natural selection the staggering diversity of life around us. Every structural difference amongst all the species of living things in the world from bacteria, to trees, to people arose from a random event, a genetic mutation, a fluctuation. In fact, there have been vastly more of such fluctuations or mutations than all the structural differences among all the species that currently exist since only a relatively few such mutations are amplified through natural selection and passed on to subsequent generations. Most genetic fluctuations disappear because they decrease survivability or, even if they are advantageous, because some other random occurrence such as a drought or the appearance of a hungry predator wipes them out before they can be passed on.

In the sphere of human activity, the fluctuations that permeate people's daily lives also play a prominent role. Chance meetings, unexpected events, and accidents have a profound influence in the course of our individual lives as well as the development and fate of civilizations, economies, and belief systems such as religions. The specific details of these events are random, but the fact that they are always occurring is a constant. And, as with the physical world of atoms and molecules and the biological world of genes, fluctuations in human events are necessary to keep civilization changing, evolving, and moving forward. *An Accidental God* is a hypothetical exploration of how random events can influence human religious belief. As with the *Bible* itself, the literal, historical details of many events are unknowable but the events themselves are only

significant to the extent that they bring out deeper meanings. In *An Accidental God*, these deeper meanings are concerned with the impact of randomness on the specific way people come to perceive and worship their God.

As in the physical and biological worlds, individual fluctuations are numerous beyond counting in human activity. As you go through your average day, you are constantly meeting other people and encountering situations that you could not have predicted beforehand. These include little details such as who sat next to you on a bus, whether or not you got caught in a traffic jam, and so on. Each of these individual happenings is unique and unanticipated, and thus, from your point of view, represents a fluctuation. To get some idea of the staggering number of possible random outcomes in human activity, consider that billions of people worldwide are simultaneously bathed in a constant, daily sea of fluctuations.

Most fluctuations are small and are forgotten almost immediately; they are unimportant and produce no lasting effect. *That car I just passed on the highway was red as opposed to some other color. But, it makes no difference, I have already forgotten.* To use the mathematical language which describes fluctuations in the physical sciences, they are small in *amplitude*, and are *damped*, i.e. their importance or strength diminishes rapidly. Some fluctuations are small, but chance *amplifies* their later importance to those involved. You find that the person who randomly chooses to sit next to you on a bus is an old classmate you have not seen in twenty years. Or, you strike up a conversation with the stranger sitting across the aisle from you on an airplane. You find that this person possesses complimentary interests or skills which lead the two of you to form a business partnership. In these cases a *resonance*, a match or fit, magnifies an initially small happening into something of greater amplitude or importance.

Most fluctuations in our lives are small in amplitude and damped. A very few small amplitude fluctuations resonate with us and our situation, but we tend to notice these resonances and ascribe to them importance far beyond the random events that they truly are. We are bombarded by

## Essays

thousands of random details of daily life. Yet, when one of these chance occurrences leads to something more, we tend to view this as *fate*, *providence*, or *luck*. These three terms all suggest a belief in a higher power which is directing these chance events. The workings of the human mind make such conclusions irresistible. Ten thousand small amplitude fluctuations sail by our senses in a blur like the faces of strangers we pass on a busy city sidewalk. We hardly notice them. When one thing resonates, we stop and focus on it; we marvel at it. Perhaps we even attribute it to the will of God. However, such coincidences do not require divine intervention. If one experiences enough small random events, statistics dictate that eventually one will hit upon something that resonates.

Recently, I was sitting in my office at work and a brief thought about a colleague passed through my mind moments before she knocked on my door. When I remarked that I had just been thinking about her, she became excited and told me of her interest in the writings of Carl Jung. Jung, she told me, believed that life was not a series of random events but rather an expression of a deeper structure in the Universe. This underlying order led to the coincidences he called "Synchronicity." What was my response? Such ideas are a load of romanticized, occultist, late Victorian nonsense! Ten thousand times I sat in my office and thought a thought about a person who did not promptly show up at my door and I didn't even notice. But the one time the person did show up, it is a sign of higher meaning, or of the forces of Synchronicity at work in the Universe? No, it's just statistics; it was bound to happen sooner or later.

Of course there are also randomly occurring fluctuations of a much stronger, higher amplitude variety. They do not need to find a resonance to profoundly influence events, for they are strong enough to dominate by themselves. Examples of such strong fluctuations include disasters, both natural and man-made: Earthquakes, floods, city engulfing fires, terrorist attacks, dinosaur-obliterating asteroid impacts. They also include unexpected important discoveries: Gold at Sutter's Mill in 1848, a New World rather than a new route to India in 1492, *etc.* Clearly, and perhaps fortunately, such strong fluctuations are rare. In fact, the stronger they are, the

rarer they are. The science of statistical mechanics, a fundamental underpinning of chemistry, physics and biochemistry, allows the probability of a particular event or fluctuation to be determined based on its strength, and indeed strong fluctuations are exceedingly rare while small ones are numerous beyond counting. This analysis holds rigorously in the world of atoms and molecules, but applying it in the arena of human interactions, which are much more difficult to quantify, may be hopelessly complex. However, common observation indicates that it is generally true.

The premise of *An Accidental God* is that a series of random fluctuations, most small and a few large, over a long period of time, turned a person into God. Some of these random occurrences are experienced by Yehhi himself, like the meeting with the gold toothed stranger that led to his education as a scribe. However, the vast majority of these fluctuations are random events that take place long after Yehhi's death, but resonate with the circumstances of others to change their feelings about Yehhi. An earthquake, for instance, which convinces Abraham that the statue of his ancestor has miraculous powers.

## CUBIST HISTORY

The reader who is familiar with the book of *Genesis* will notice that some episodes from *Genesis* have been rearranged in *An Accidental God*. For instance, the confrontation between Abram and the townsmen of Harran, in front of the house of Terah, is similar to the confrontation between Lot and the men of Sodom in *Genesis 19*. In *An Accidental God*, the confrontation in Sodom cannot occur because Sodom is only a memory of a place that was destroyed under mysterious and terrifying circumstances in the legendary past. The conversation between God and Abraham in *Genesis 18*, in which Abraham protests God's plan to punish the innocent along with the wicked, becomes a conversation between Sarah and Lot's wife, in Chapter 42, which is overheard by Abraham, while he is resting half asleep against a nearby tree. Perhaps a confused Abraham later recollected the exchange as divine voices in his head.

In Chapter 47, three visitors traveling to the region of the Dead Sea stop at Abraham's tent and tell him a well known local legend, an episode from the Ugaritic *Tale of Aqhat* in which a visiting god informs the character Dan'el that he will finally have a much desired son. The legend they recite is the original model for both their own visit to Abraham in *An Accidental God*, and that of the three heavenly strangers in *Genesis 18*: The visitors tell Abraham and Sarah that they will soon have a son. The parallels between the *Aqhat* legend and the *Genesis* account are quite close even including the preparation of a feast for the visitors by the host's wife and laughter upon receiving news of the impending birth.

*Genesis* Chapters 12 and 20 recount two apparently separate instances in which Sarah is taken to bed first by the Egyptian Pharaoh and then by Abimelech, the king of Gerer. In both instances, Abraham fails to defend Sarah's honor and instead claims that she is only his sister. In *An Accidental God* these two episodes are combined into a single abduction



which, nevertheless, results in a tryst with Abimelech and an attempted tryst with Pharaoh.

The relationship between events in *An Accidental God* and similar events in *Genesis* is intended to illustrate the relationship between real events and how humans remember those events and pass them on in legend. Memories get confused, and retellings tend to exaggerate or scramble the stories. Elements of other stories or legends may get incorporated. However, the scrambling often occurs in a block-wise fashion similar to a cubist painting. Blocks of truth get remembered and passed on intact, but they are sometimes put back together in different arrangements. So, a speech might be remembered more or less correctly but attributed to the wrong person. An event that happened at a certain time to a certain group of people might be later recounted accurately, but attributed to a different time and a different group.

*An Accidental God* represents a hypothetical series of events, a series at least as plausible as the events in *Genesis*, which could, through the processes of memory and legend, have given rise to the recorded *Genesis* account.

## **GOD'S WILL OR MAN'S?**

Yehhi's apparent continued consciousness after his death as he watches and comments on successive history is meant to represent the collective thoughts regarding Yehhi of all the living people who focus their minds upon him. Yehhi's thoughts and opinions evolve throughout history as the thoughts of those who think about him evolve. After physical death, the thoughts of others are his only continuing existence. The mental energy flows from the people to the god and defines the will of the god. What the people interpret as the will of the god is in fact the collective thoughts of the people regarding the god. The directionality of the relationship is deceptive. Both the people and the god believe that the will of the god originates with the god and he imposes his will upon the people. In fact it is exactly the opposite. The will of the people originates with the people, and the people thereby define their god.

In the modern, largely secular world, where we understand much more about how nature works than the Bronze Age people who first conceived this God, the definition of God and God's will is unfortunately being left more and more to the most extreme, and ignorant religious elements, the few people who are left that do not understand that modern science has actually explained the forces of nature and the evolution of living things. This is because they are the ones focusing their thoughts on God while everyone else is thinking about worldly concerns. Thus the chanting students in Pakistani Madrassas and the fanatical, Middle Eastern, terrorist who literally cannot speak a single sentence without invoking the name of Allah have a disproportionately large influence on the will of God. Self-righteous Evangelical Christians who want to change civil law to represent their narrow minded views on social issues or replace the teaching of science with fantasy based pseudoscience have disproportionate influence on the nature of God. Yehhi is not a God of love, compassion or even justice. He is simply a God of whatever we

collectively think about him as being. He is a creature of our own misguided thoughts who has traveled far from his origins as the bright, innocent, and likeable son of an ancient incense peddler. Yehhi loves the September 11th suicide bombers, and the Waco Branch Davidians. He loves them because they were focused on Him while most of us were not. He loves them because their actions and the actions of others like them are driving people toward more intense religious devotion. No matter that that devotion is becoming more and more divisive and laced with prejudice, ignorance, and fear. From Yehhi's perspective, all that matters is that more thoughts are directed towards Him.

He was becoming less relevant in the modern world and thus perhaps in danger of once again starting to fade toward non-existence, like He almost did under the beehive dome back in Ur, before an earthquake brought Him to the forefront of Abraham's thoughts. But due to recent developments, He is back and stronger than ever. Religion is a human endeavor, which is likely imprinted on our brains and in our genes; it will likely persist hundreds or thousands of generations into the future. Thus we should support caring, responsible and inclusive religious beliefs in caring and responsible people so that God's will be defined by positive values. The alternative is to have a God defined by narrow minded, self-righteous people of prejudice, and ignorance.

## AN ABSTRACT GOD

Yehhi, five thousand years ago, was as far removed from the dawn of civilization as we today are from his time. Yehhi sensed the mind boggling age of his world as he marveled that the irrigation canals in Sumer and the vast girth of the cedar trees in the mountains, but he really had no idea of the true age of his world, or even of his species. As the product of eons of evolution and thousands of years of civilization he believed in a range of gods, big and small. Big gods like Nanna, Enlil, and Baal were venerated by whole cities or whole peoples. But these gods, like human rulers, held sway in their own localities. If one traveled to a different land, it was wise to find out what gods were powerful in that land and how to please them. Yehhi also believed in the existence of small gods and ancestor gods such as Ulak. Of course, Yehhi began his own career as a god, as a small god, a venerated ancestor. In Yehhi's way of thinking, a god was associated with an object: a statue, an idol, a mountain. If the object representing the god was missing, then the god was absent. This line of reasoning was typical of ancient Near Eastern belief in the time of Yehhi.

In *An Accidental God*, Abraham produced an advance in abstract religious thought. If he had simply lived out his life as a privileged citizen of Ur, he probably would not have had any new ideas. However, violent upheavals, strong event fluctuations, turned his life upside down, and he adapted. He came to believe that his family god, Yehhi, was portable and thus could protect and aid him in the foreign land of Canaan. Abraham also came to believe that he did not need a statue or idol of his god for his god to be present. Abraham was not strictly a monotheist, and he did not specifically reject the idea or the efficacy of idols. He would have liked to bring the idol of Yehhi with him when he was chased out of Harran, but his father would not let him have it. So, Abraham was forced to make mental adjustments, which led to a breakthrough in his understanding of

his god. It was only after Abraham's thinking on these issues evolved that Yehhi himself, somewhat to his surprise, came to understand that his reach extended to Canaan.

The more advanced concept of an abstract god, as developed by Abraham in *An Accidental God*, was no doubt a significant advantage for this particular god over other more primitively conceived gods, in the competition for hearts and minds throughout the ages. Eventual this abstract god supplanted all other deities in the Western World.

## CHINESE BOXES

Consider the fundamental essence of religion from the dawn of human consciousness to the present day: God, or the gods, always represent that which is beyond our knowing and our understanding.

For the earliest humans, the gods lived on the top of the mountain, because the people had never been to the top of the mountain. The top of the mountain was unknown to them. Later, after people had scaled the mountain top, they knew that the gods were not there. The gods were, in fact, in the sky and in the heavens. The sky and the heavens were unknown to them. Later, after people had observed the sky and heavens—and even flown in them—and had come to better understand their workings, they knew that the gods were not there either. Perhaps if we build larger telescopes and look far out into the universe and far back in time toward the ultimate moment of creation, the Big Bang, we can know the plan of God. Perhaps if we continue to sub divide the matter of the universe into atoms, and from there into protons, electrons, and neutrons, and from there into quarks, we can discover God's ultimate building blocks, God's ultimate structure for His creation. But, my guess is that we cannot discover these ultimate truths.

No matter how big a telescope we build and no matter how far out in space or back in time we look, we will never find the face of God staring back at us. Like the ancients building the Tower of Babel to reach the heavens; an attempt to gain ultimate truth in the vast reaches of space is doomed. We will always find just more unexplored real-estate and more unanswered questions. And, no matter how big a particle accelerator or atom smasher we build, we will always find finer and finer subdivisions of matter. Quarks will be made of smaller particles, and these will be made of yet smaller particles, and so on and on. We will never be able to discover the ultimate building block or the ultimate structure.

We are suspended in a seemingly infinite set of nested Chinese boxes. No matter how far out we look on the scale of the very large or how far down we look on the scale of the very small we cannot see the end. There is always just another box. No matter how far back in time we look or how far out into the future we project, we can never find the *alpha* or the *omega*. These are the true mysteries, and consistent with our human instinct to deify the unknown, it is here that we should look to find our God. We must of course also bear in mind, that if God is the keeper of the infinite Chinese boxes of space and time then God is completely unfathomable by the likes of us. Trying to fathom such a God will only lead us back into the age old trap of letting our imaginations create beliefs and images of the deity that are without basis. I have just done this myself by calling God the “keeper” of the infinite Chinese boxes. Being a “keeper” is a human activity and Chinese boxes are objects devised and constructed by people. Instead we should meditate upon the beauty of the undiscoverable nature of ultimate truth, not simply unknown, but actually unknowable.

## THE DOUBLE TRIANGLE



As symbolized by the Double Triangle figure to the left, each of us is truly the *alpha* and the *omega*, the beginning and the end. The family tree of an individual has the form of this Double Triangle, with the individual at the focus where the two triangular points meet. The upper triangle represents the ancestry of the individual which expands as one goes back in time: two parents, four grandparents, eight great grandparents, sixteen, thirty-two, sixty-four, and on and on. The lower point of the upper triangle is the culmination of this long ancestry in a single individual. The lower triangle represents the descendents of the individual which also tend to expand in number with successive generations. Each person is thus a singular gate between a vast past and an expansive future. We must revere our ancestors since they have made us what we are, both genetically and culturally. God is not our maker, our ancestors are.

We must treasure and educate our children since it is they that provide an afterlife for us in their thoughts, in their actions, and in their genes. The verses from the *Epic of Gilgamesh* that so obsessed Abraham in *An Accidental God* symbolize the reality of our afterlife.

*"In the world below have you seen the man with no son?"*

*"Yes I have seen the man with no son."*

*"How goes it with the man with no son in the world below?"*

*"The man with no son sits by the wall in the world below and weeps."*

*"Have you seen in the world below a man with two sons?"*

*"Yes I have seen the man with two sons in the world below."*

*"How goes it in the world below with the man with two sons?"*

*"The man with two sons in the world below sits on a stone and eats some bread."*



*"Have you seen in the world below a man with five sons?"*

*"Yes I have seen the man with five sons in the world below."*

*"How goes it in the world below with the man with five sons?"*

*"The man with five sons in the world below is treated like a scribe to a king."*

In *An Accidental God*, Abraham left no genetic descendents, but his intellectual and cultural afterlife was expansive, because the Double Triangle has a more profound meaning when it is applied to the evolution of human thought. The upper triangle represents the culture, history, and ideas that have come before. A selection of this vast amount of information converges into an individual's mind, and there the individual forms their own thoughts and ideas. Through the *mystery* of human consciousness we are able to draw in what has come before and sometimes we synthesize totally new insights, ideas, and understanding. These thoughts and opinions truly define the individual and form the most significant basis for their future legacy in the lower triangle. Our thoughts, unlike our genes, can draw broadly from a wide range of places, times, and cultures. And, unlike our genes, our thoughts have the potential for influence that goes far beyond our actual biological descendents. The Double Triangle represents the convergence and subsequent divergence of information—genetic, intellectual, cultural, as it flows from the past into the future through each individual human being.

*Notes*

# NOTES

## BIBLICAL TEXT

The main Biblical text referred to in the writing of *An Accidental God* was *The Five Books of Moses*, by Robert Alter (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004). This is a new English translation of the Torah, which strives to accurately convey the original meaning and the original “feel” of the ancient Hebrew text. In the frequently occurring situations, where no one actually knows for sure what the ancient text means, Prof. Alter provides extensive notes explaining the best available scholarly opinion. Quotes from scripture in these notes on *An Accidental God*, use the text of Alter’s translation.

The Bible (Torah) is an exceedingly sparse text almost completely devoid of descriptive language; there are very few adjectives or adverbs. No description of how Abraham looked, or felt are given. The very few utterances attributed to him provide no insight into his personality. Only the broadest outline is given of many crucial events. For instance, just a few lines (fourteen verses, Genesis 11:27 to Genesis 12:9) is all the Bible has to say about the events that compose the first third of *An Accidental God*, the section titled *Abram*. And, outside of the Bible, there is no other ancient information at all about these people or events. Abraham is really a legendary figure, like Gilgamesh, rather than an historical one. No one knows whether he really existed, and if he did, whether any of the events associated with his legend actually occurred.

Despite this vacuum of information, most people, certainly most religious people, have a pretty well developed mental picture of Abraham, of what he looked like, what he sounded like, and how he acted. Hollywood epics, Sunday school stories, and religious picture books for kids fill in the blank canvas with made-up images and details concocted by believers for believers.

In *An Accidental God*, an alternative set of details are used to fill in the large gaps in the Biblical narrative of Abraham. These alternative events have an alternative purpose, not to teach about faith or belief, but to explore the evolution of ideas about God.

## BOOK I: ABRAM, NOTES

### I.1:

Thanks to their extensive keeping of written records on clay tablets, the history of ancient Mesopotamia, including that of Sumer and Ur, is fairly well known. This knowledge even includes fairly precise dates for major events. By contrast, the historical record on Abram (Abraham) is practically non-existent and attempts to date his life, if he actually lived, are not definitive. Possible dates for Abram range from around 1500 BCE to earlier than 2000 BCE, quite a span of time, even if you believe, as the Bible says, that 175 of these years were occupied with his life. *An Accidental God* illustrates possible events in the life of Abram as occurring shortly after 1500 BCE, on the extreme recent end of the time range.

Given the lack of any direct archeological evidence or any biblical references to persons or events independently known to history, efforts to date the time of Abram typically assume a connection to some point of known history and then work backwards using ages of individuals and time spans quoted in the Bible. A standard approach is to assume that the Pharaoh at the time of the oppression of the Hebrews in Egypt was Ramses II. Adding to this the 430 year length of the sojourn in Egypt quoted in the Bible as well as all the impossibly long life spans of the line of patriarchs stretching back to Abram, one can easily arrive at a date of 2000 BCE or earlier.

The more recent date for the life of Abram in *An Accidental God* has been arrived at by assuming the general correctness of the innovative arguments made by Ahmed Osman [Osman 1987, Osman 1990], namely that the Egyptian mummy of a prominent 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty official, Yuya, is actually that of the patriarch Joseph. Osman establishes rough dates for Joseph's (Yuya's) death and using convincing arguments that the length of the Hebrews' stay in Egypt was about a century, rather than more than 400 years, he establishes the time of the Exodus to be at the very beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> Dynasty. Working backwards from the chronology established by Osman for the Hebrews in Egypt, and using reasonable ages and life spans for the patriarchs, Abram's birth is estimated to have occurred in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century BCE and the events of *An Accidental God*, involving Abram/Abraham, occur in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century BCE.

At this supposed time for Abram, the city of Ur was no longer an independent city state or the capital of its own empire, as it had been in various past ages, most recently about 500 years previous in the Ur III Period, which is postulated as the time when Yehhi lived. At the time of Abram, Ur was subject to the Babylonian Kassite Dynasty. However, Ur was still a vibrant center of culture, commerce and worship of the Moon God. By virtue of its previous prominence as the seat of vanished empires it was still a leading city of the region, much as London and Rome are today. [<BACK 1.1>](#)

## CHAPTER 1, NOTES

### 1.1:

Ancient Near Eastern cities such as Ur were repeatedly destroyed and then rebuilt upon their ruins over thousands of years, leading to the buildup of many layered mounds or *tels*. Earthquake was a main cause of the destruction of these cities, conquest being the other. The Zagros Mountains to the east of Ur mark a very seismically active zone where tectonic plates are colliding. This zone extends westward into the Tigris and Euphrates basin to Ur. Although the region of Ur is not nearly as earthquake prone as areas further east, earthquakes have occurred there, and there are geological faults running close to Ur. [Alsinawi 2003, Ghalib 2006] [<BACK 1.1>](#)

### 1.2:

The death of Abram's brother Haran is consistent with the Biblical account: *And Haran died in the lifetime of Terah his father in the land of his birth, Ur of the Chaldees.* [Genesis 11:28]. [<BACK 1.2>](#)

## CHAPTER 2, NOTES

### 2.1:

By the time postulated for these events, early 15<sup>th</sup> Century BCE, Ur was no longer independent; its rulers had been vassal governors under the Babylonian (Kassite) Empire for centuries. However, harkening back to its past as first an independent city state and later the seat of a regional

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empire, it is likely that the local ruler was referred to as the King of Ur. [<BACK 2.1>](#)

### 2.2:

Abram, Nahor and their cousins encounter a youth, obviously some sort of court musician from the ruined palace, who is composing a song about the destruction of the city. The *Lament for Ur* is a song of mourning, composed in the aftermath of the destruction of the city, which has come down to us from history. It is most likely that it was composed following the destruction of Ur by invading Elamites in 2004 BCE, thus ending the Ur III Dynasty. This was about 500 years earlier than the events postulated in *An Accidental God*. There was, in fact, a whole genre of “laments” for destroyed Sumerian cities. Over the two thousand year plus history of Sumerian civilization most major cities were destroyed at some point, usually multiple times. Thus it is reasonable to assume that the laments were rediscovered and recomposed multiple times. The laments were always sung in the voice of the patron goddess of the city in question. In the case of Ur, that goddess was Ningal, the wife of the moon god, Nanna. The snippet of the *Lament for Ur* that the youth is working on is modeled on a part of the actual ancient poem. [ETCSL 2006] [<BACK 2.2>](#)

### 2.3:

While viewing the devastation Abram thinks of his dead brother: “Why was it that Haran had been crushed to death and he had not?” These thoughts foreshadow an important theme in *Genesis*, which also then becomes a point of obsession for Abram’s troubled mind in *An Accidental God*: Why are the innocent so often caught up in the punishments meted out to the wicked? [<BACK 2.3>](#)

### 2.4:

Abram’s dead brother is named Haran. He is named after a city up the Euphrates River, Harran. The name of the city can be spelled either Haran or Harran. In *An Accidental God*, the choice was made to use two “r’s” in the name of the city in order to distinguish it from the brother. [<BACK 2.4>](#)

## CHAPTER 3, NOTES

### 3.1:

The fact that members of the departing clan of Terah secretly brought other idols and family gods along with them on their journey out of Ur, is a deliberate parallel to the story in *Genesis 31*, in which Rachel, unbeknownst to her husband Jacob, steals her father Laban's idols as they depart for Canaan. [<BACK 3.1>](#)

### 3.2:

The young singer accompanies the departure of Abram's family from the city of Ur with a selection from the *Lament for Ur*. This, however, has been heavily edited to condense and simplify relative to the original. In this song, Ningal the patron goddess of the city is pleading with Enlil, her father in law and the chief god, to spare the city.

No such luck! In the original *Lament*, Enlil sends a violent storm to destroy Ur, but this has been changed here to a shaking of the earth.

Enlil appears repeatedly in *An Accidental God*. As the head god, the equivalent of Zeus in Greek mythology, he plays important roles in the Sumerian version of the story of the great flood (Noah story in the Bible), and the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. [<BACK 3.2>](#)

## CHAPTER 4, NOTES

### 4.1:

This chapter sees the first indication that Abram has contracted a venereal disease, presumably from the prostitutes that entertained him at his bachelor party. His symptoms are consistent with gonorrhea, which has a typical incubation time of 4 to 6 days. At the time Abram first begins having symptoms during urination, it is 4 days since his party. Gonorrhea is known to have existed in the ancient Near East. [<BACK 4.1>](#)

### 4.2:

In modern translations of the Flood Story from the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the Noah character is usually referred to as Utnapishtim. This is the Akkadian form of the name; the Sumerian form is Ziusudra. The Akkadians were a culturally and linguistically separate, Semitic people

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who moved in and dominated Sumer, starting under Sargon who reigned from 2340 to 2284 BCE. The rise of the Akkadian Empire ended the city state of Ur's independence during the preceding Early Dynastic Period. Under the Akkadian Empire, the Akkadian language began to supplant Sumerian as the official language of commerce and of the scribal class that wrote the clay tablets from which we know the history and literature of ancient Mesopotamia. Later the Sumerians reasserted control of their lands, and revived the importance of their language, under the Third Dynasty of Ur. Ur III collapsed after about 100 years and the Akkadian language reasserted itself. Consequently, much of the literature of ancient Sumer has come to modern times in its Akkadian, rather than Sumerian form. If Abram lived in Ur in the early 15<sup>th</sup> Century BCE, about 500 years after the fall of Ur III, even if he identified himself as a resident of Sumer and thus a Sumerian, he could very well speak Akkadian. This would be consistent with the notion of Abram as the father of Hebrews and Arabs, both Semitic peoples. Akkadian is a Semitic language similar to later Hebrew, while Sumerian is not. [<BACK 4.2>](#)

### 4.3:

The version of the Flood Story told by Abram in this chapter is beginning its evolution from the Sumerian version included in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, which was recited to the boy Yehhi in Chapter 20 of *An Accidental God* (later in the book, but considerably earlier in chronological time), to the version found in the Hebrew Bible. The Sumerian version of the Flood Story includes a cast of 7 Sumerian gods and goddesses. The final version in the Bible has only one deity, God. Abram is beginning this transformation by substituting his new savior, Yehhi, for Ea, the compassionate god who saves Utnapishtim. In order to focus more on his devotion to Yehhi, Abram has also reduced the number of traditional Sumerian gods to just 2, Enlil and Nergal. Enlil, the chief of the gods continues to play the bad guy, and Nergal, the god of the underworld continues to make war. Abram has substituted a Covenant between Yehhi and the people, a promise not to flood them out again, for Enlil's act of atonement, granting Utnapishtim immortality. This, of course, also moves the story closer to the biblical version and foreshadows both Abram's Covenant with God in *Genesis* and his obsession with obtaining a covenant with Yehhi later in *An Accidental God*.

The Flood Story as recited in Chapter 4 also continues the theme of divine punishment, and the evolution of the idea that this must be justi-



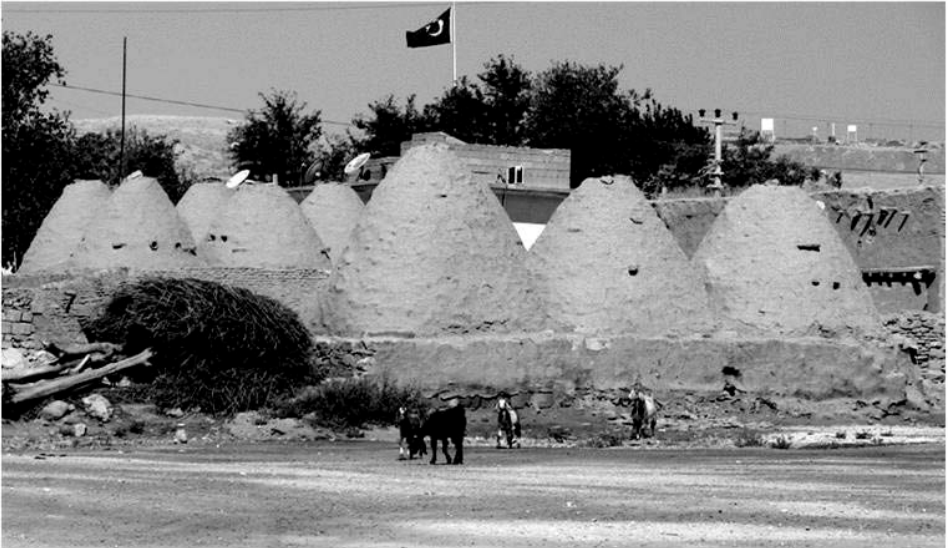
fied, even by God. In the original Sumerian version of the story, in Chapter 20, Enlil decides to punish humanity with total obliteration because they are noisy and annoying to him. By the time Abram tells the story on the journey to Harran, he feels the need to give the god (Enlil) a more justifiable reason for killing humanity: *They are wicked*. Of course, Enlil, in both versions of the story wants to kill everyone, the guilty as well as the innocent. Abram has taken the step of beginning to associate his new god, Yehhi, with the more just path of sparing the innocents. Christians tend to view the Hebrew God of the Old Testament as angry and cruel, compared to the loving and personal God of the New Testament. However, the Old Testament God can now be seen to fall in the middle of an evolutionary spectrum between ancient gods like Enlil, which were cruel just because they could be, and the modern concept of a God that actually spends His time thinking about our welfare.

This is not to say that ancient people did not enjoy the comfort of a personal relationship with gods that actually cared about them. This type of relationship was provided by the family gods, including the ancestors. But the big gods with jurisdiction over all of humanity or whole civilizations, had little connection to or regard for humans, whom they created as something of an afterthought, like we might acquire garden gnomes. Abram's Yehhi is perhaps unique among ancient "big" gods in that he began as a small family god, and was elevated to big god status by fortuitous events. Yehhi's origins as one of Abram's family gods leads Abram to attribute to Yehhi a greater level of concern for the welfare of his people, than would be expected from the likes of Enlil. [<BACK 4.3>](#)

## CHAPTER 5, NOTES

### 5.1:

Harran today is probably not much different than the sight that met Abram and Terah's eyes upon getting off the riverboat. Not very inspiring, but the beehive dome buildings are in evidence. [<BACK 5.1>](#)



## CHAPTER 6, NOTES

### 6.1:

The darker side of human nature has, no doubt, changed very little over the millennia. [<BACK 6.1>](#)

## CHAPTER 7, NOTES

### 7.1:

The scene in this chapter, of the men of Harran standing in front of Terah's house and demanding to get their hands on Abram, is an intentional parallel to scene in *Genesis 19*, where the men of Sodom surround Lot's house and demand to get their hands on Lot's two guests. The language used by the men of Harran in *An Accidental God* is deliberately parallel to that used by the men of Sodom: Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so we may know them! [*Genesis 19:5-6*]

The actual Sodom episode does not occur in *An Accidental God* because the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah was an old legend even to the people of Abram's time. What little archeological evidence there is from the ruins of ancient cities at the edge of the Dead Sea, suggests a possible date for the destruction which is at least about 500 years earlier than the early 15<sup>th</sup> Century BCE date *An Accidental God* uses for Abram. [BAR 1980] Given the evolutionary process of the oral transmission of stories and legends, which is a major theme of *An Accidental God*, one can imagine that the old Sodom story got combined with the recollection of actual events in Harran in later retellings by members of Abram's clan. [<BACK 7.1>](#)

### 7.2:

The use of one of Abram's cloak soaked in lambs blood as a ruse to make Muknuk think he had been killed is a deliberate parallel to the story in *Genesis 37* in which Joseph's brothers sell him into slavery and present his father, Jacob, with Joseph's coat of many colors soaked in lamb's blood as proof that Joseph was killed by a wild beast. There is no particu-

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larly important reason for this parallel except that it works well for the Abram story and it's interesting to mix and match Biblical episodes in a way that may have occurred during their centuries of oral transmission before finally being written down. [<BACK 7.2>](#)

## CHAPTER 10, NOTES

### 10.1:

Abram argues with his father over possession of the idol of Yehhi. The ancient notion of gods was far more concrete than the modern one. The idol was not just a representation of the god; the idol was the god. (In this sense, the present Catholic doctrine that the sacramental bread and wine is *truly* the body and blood of Christ can be seen as a throwback to ancient pagan superstitions.) Without the idol of his god, Abram would be without Yehhi's projection on his journey into the unknown. In *An Accidental God*, Abram's mental struggles to deal with the physical absence of his god will start him on the path of developing the more abstract notion of God which eventually characterized Hebrew religion and ultimately all the western religions that grew from it. [<BACK 10.1>](#)

### 10.2:

*And the Lord said to Abram, "Go forth from your land and your birthplace and your father's house to the land I will show you. Genesis 12:1-2.*

*And Abram went forth as the Lord had spoken to him and Lot went forth with him... Genesis 12:4.*

Although Abram was born in Ur hundreds of miles and months of travel time down the Euphrates River, Harran will still part of the Mesopotamian word and culture. It was still the land of his birth, but it was the frontier of this word. Once Abram left Harran and headed west, he was leaving all that was familiar behind. [<BACK 10.2>](#)

### 10.3:

The "sons" of Abram, Ishmael, Isaac, and Zimran come onto the scene in this chapter. In this version, none of them are actually the biological sons of Abram because he and Sarai are truly and permanently sterile as a result of venereal disease. In the Hebrew Bible, Isaac is predominant

because he is the legendary father of the Hebrew people. In the Koran, Ishmael is more important because he is the father of the Arabs. Poor Zimran is apparently the father of nobody significant because he is given short shrift all around, even in *An Accidental God*, where he will quickly fade into the background. Although Abram will come to love them both, the fact that neither Ishmael nor Isaac is his real son is the author's commentary on the state of things 4000 years on. In *An Accidental God*, Ishmael and Isaac are the best of friends, without a hint of rivalry between them. The rivalry will come into the narrative through the competition between their respective mothers: Sarai the adoptive mother of Isaac and Hagar the biological mother of Ishmael. [<BACK 10.3>](#)

#### **10.4:**

This chapter begins the development of the character Salina. In the Bible, Lot's wife has neither her own name nor her own voice. Her one mention, and one act, is to look back at the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and get turned into a pillar of salt (*Genesis 19:26*). In *An Accidental God*, the foolish Lot is nothing if not Salina's husband. In early drafts of the book, this character was called Iltani, an authentic ancient Sumerian woman's name, which I felt had a noble ring befitting this wonderful character. Later on I could not resist the pun inherent in naming her *Salina*, which would be pronounced like the Spanish name Selena, but which would presumably mean "salty girl," or something like that. [<BACK 10.4>](#)

## **CHAPTER 11, NOTES**

#### **11.1:**

Carchemish was an ancient city located at what is now on the frontier between Turkey and Syria. It was the sight of a Neolithic settlement as early as 3000 BCE, and Bronze Age artifacts dating from 2300 BCE have been found there. In the mid-second millennium BCE, around the time of Abram's visit, Carchemish was a major town in a region being fought over by the Mitanni and the Hittite empires. Although not a Sumerian town, Carchemish was an outpost of civilization that would have been known to the people of neighboring Harran. Carchemish was located on the west bank of the main branch of the Euphrates River, where it commanded a

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heavily used ford. In ancient times, it was an important center for trade in timber brought overland from Lebanon. [<BACK 11.1>](#)

## CHAPTER 12, NOTES

### 12.1:

Abram and his clan are now in what is today Syria, and at that time was part of the world of the Ugaritic culture, named after Ugarit, a city on the Mediterranean coast. Baal was a title that simply meant lord or master, and could be used to refer to any number of local gods. However, it was most commonly used to refer to Baal Hadad, the lord of the heavens and god of rain and thunder and the fertility of the land that the rain brings. [<BACK 12.1>](#)

### 12.2:

If these people are speaking Ugaritic and Abram is speaking Akkadian they would probably have some basis for communication. Both languages are part of the Semitic family. Possibly it would be like a Portuguese and a Spanish speaker having a conversation. [<BACK 12.2>](#)

### 12.3:

The ruined city of Yamhad that Abram and his clan come across is known today as Aleppo, and is the largest city in Syria. Yamhad was destroyed by the Hittites in the mid Second Millennium BCE, corresponding roughly to the time postulated for Abram's visit. Abram's group has trekked about 100 km to the southwest from Carchemish to reach Yamhad. [<BACK 12.3>](#)

### 12.4:

Legend has it that the Arabic name for Yamhad (Aleppo), Halab, comes from the Arabic word for milk, Haleeb. The legend tells that Abram came to the city in a time of great need and fed the inhabitants with milk from his flock. God miraculously caused the milk from Abram's livestock to flow in great abundance. *An Accidental God* plays homage to this tale. [<BACK 12.4>](#)

## CHAPTER 13, NOTES

### 13.1:

The location of the ancient city of Ebla is 55 km southwest of Aleppo. In the 1970's a library of thousands of clay tablets with cuneiform writing was discovered at this site, which has shed light on ancient Ugaritic and Canaanite culture. [<BACK 13.1>](#)

### 13.2:

There are parallels among the ancient pantheons of gods followed by the different civilizations of the ancient Near East. They all had a head god or father god: Enlil (Sumerian), El (Ugaritic), and Ra (Egyptian). They all had a god who died, and was resurrected from the dead: Marduk (Babylonian), Baal Hadad (Ugaritic), and Osiris (Egyptian). Of course, even today, many people believe in a God that died and was resurrected. Viewed in the context of the long religious history of the region in which it arose, the key belief of Christianity is seen to be just the latest incarnation of this enduring myth.

Marduk was the patron god of the city of Babylon, which by the time of Abram in the mid-Second Millennium BCE, dominated Mesopotamia, including Ur. Ur retained its worship of the moon god Nanna (Sin in Akkadian), but Marduk was replacing Enlil as the head god for the entire region. [<BACK 13.2>](#)

## CHAPTER 14, NOTES

### 14.1:

Abram's clan is now migrating south through the Bekaa Valley, in present day Lebanon. This 120 km long, 16 km wide valley runs north and south and is located inland between the Lebanon Mountains and the Anti Lebanon Mountains. [<BACK 14.1>](#)

### 14.2:

In this chapter Ishmael describes the priests of Baal as wearing purple robes. Tyrian purple, named for its source the city of Tyre on the Mediterranean coast, in present day Lebanon, was the only purple dye known in the western world in antiquity. It was extraordinarily expensive

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because it had to be extracted drop-by-drop from a particular type of sea snail, and it took thousands of snails to produce a tiny quantity of dye. Due to its great expense, the color purple was worn almost exclusively by royalty including Phoenician, Egyptian, Greek, Roman, and Byzantine, kings and emperors. If the priests of Baal were dressed in purple this would signify their great wealth and high status. [<BACK 14.2>](#)

## CHAPTER 15, NOTES

### 15.1:

The priests call Abram and his people “hebrews,” with a small “h.” As explained by Ishmael, this term comes from the local Canaanite language and simply means a stranger or wanderer. It is not yet the name of a specific people. [<BACK 15.1>](#)

### 15.2:

This chapter derives inspiration from *Genesis 12:6-7*, which describes Abram reaching a place called Shechem in the land of the Canaanites, and making a sacrifice to the Lord upon an altar. In Sumer, where Abram was from, sacrifices would have been made on behalf of the entire people by a professional priestly class, within a large temple complex, likely out of sight of normal citizens like Abram. Therefore, Abram may not have previously thought about making sacrifices to Yehhi or understood how one went about this.

In Canaan, the priests of Baal Hadad likewise make sacrifices on behalf of all the people. However, this is a smaller more backward civilization and the priests do not have access to a Ziggurat or a large temple complex. Instead they pile up rocks in the open on a hilltop to make a rough altar. In *An Accidental God*, Abram encounters these priests, obtains their assistance in his first sacrifice to Yehhi, and learns what he needs to do to make future sacrifices on his own. [<BACK 15.2>](#)

### 15.3:

The priests lecture Abram on the family tree of the Canaanite/Ugaritic gods. El, the sky god, is the head god and the father of most of the others. He is equivalent to Enlil in the Sumerian pantheon. In the Torah the name El appears as a name for God and as part of references to a god, which generations of the Judeo-Christian faithful have interpreted



as meaning their one true God. For instance, in *Genesis 14*, Melchizedek king of Salem, who is also a priest of “El Elyon” says:

*“Blessed by Abram of El Elyon, possessor of heaven and earth, and blessed be El Elyon who delivered your foes into your hand.”*  
*Genesis 14:20*

Who is this god “El Elyon” (God Most High)? Maybe not who we think he is.

In *Genesis 17:1*, the Lord appears to Abram and says “*I am El Shaddai (God Almighty). Walk in my presence and be blameless...*” Is this god, which is appearing to Abram, the Judeo-Christian God, or some Canaanite god, or are the two one and the same, at least at this early stage of development? [<BACK 15.3>](#)

#### **15.4:**

The pile or pillar of stones on the side of the altar is identified by the priests as representing the god El. Stone piles, or standing stones, beside Canaanite altars were used to represent the presence of deities such as El or Baal. [<BACK 15.4>](#)

#### **15.5:**

El’s wife, the mother goddess Asherah, was often represented as a tree or wooden post placed beside a Canaanite altar, and also an early Hebrew altar. The Biblical verse which describes Abram’s arrival at Shechem [*Genesis 12:6*] also mentions a terebinth, which is a kind of small scrubby evergreen tree that grows in the Middle East. This is the incarnation of Asherah beside the altar of the priests of Baal in *An Accidental God*. Hebrew altars continued to be adorned with Asherah symbols for hundreds of years, including in the First Temple of Jerusalem. [<BACK 15.5>](#)

#### **15.6:**

In *An Accidental God*, Abram has brought a belief in his god Yehhi with him from Sumer. Now that he is in Canaan, this belief is getting mixed up in his mind with local beliefs and local gods. After originally rejecting the idea that Yehhi is one of the many children of the Canaanite El, Abram eventually concedes “Maybe so.” [<BACK 15.6>](#)

#### **15.7:**

This chapter is deliberately a bit “Monty Pythonesque” as a commentary on the absurdity of religious rituals past and present. Worshipers of

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Baal apparently did sometimes engage in human sacrifice, particularly of children, and they also were known to sacrifice their own blood to the god by cutting themselves. [<BACK 15.7>](#)

### 15.8:

The money grubbing nature of the priests is an intentional commentary on organized religion past and present. [<BACK 15.8>](#)

## CHAPTER 16, NOTES

### 16.1:

*And he [Abram] pulled up stakes from there for the high country east of Bethel and pitched his tent with Bethel to the west and Ai to the east, and he built there an altar to the Lord, and he invoked the name of the Lord.[Genesis 12:8] [<BACK 16.1>](#)*

## CHAPTER 17, NOTES

### 17.1:

*And Abram journeyed onward by stages to the Negeb.[Genesis 12:9] [<BACK 17.1>](#)*

### 17.2:

This statement by Ishmael to Abram echoes God's words to Abram in *Genesis 15:5* about his descendents one day being as numerous as the stars in the sky. The second part about walking about the land echoes God's words to Abram in *Genesis 13:17*. Ruling out the possibility that a magical being actually spoke to Abram, we are left to postulate human origins for these words. This illustrates a mechanism by which religious beliefs may be generated. A real living person says something profound and these words are remembered. Later on, through the reshuffling and embellishment, that occurs in the retelling of oral traditions, or perhaps due to a shift in circumstances, the words get attributed to someone else, even God. If the words are important enough to a people and a culture, there is probably a tendency to empower these words by shifting their origins from human to divine. [<BACK 17.2>](#)

### 17.3:

Gerar was located in the Western Negev Desert, about nine miles southeast of Gaza and fifteen miles northwest of Beersheba. [<BACK 17.3>](#)

### 17.4:

This incident, in which Abimelech king of Gerar abducts Sarai, serves as the *Accidental God* equivalent of both “sister-wife” episodes in the story of Abram, *Genesis 12:10-20*, and *Genesis 20*. In these stories, Sarai, because of her great beauty, is grabbed first by the Pharaoh of Egypt, and then by Abimelech king of Gerar. Abram is too cowardly to defend her honor, instead in both cases claiming to only be her brother.

Even in that long-ago misogynistic time, and even in the face of overwhelming odds, as a married man myself, I cannot believe that Abram would have been able to get away with denying his wife twice in a row. The presence of the Egyptian advisor Phicol suggests that the two stories will be combined in some way.

In *Genesis 21:22* and *21:32* Phicol is named as captain of Abimelech’s troops, and is assumed to be a philistine like Abimelech. In *An Accidental God*, Phicol has been turned into an Egyptain advisor or perhaps a monitor of the somewhat irresponsible Abimelech on behalf of Gerar’s Egyptian overlords. At the time of Abram, about 1500 BCE, the inhabitants and lands of Canaan were part of the greater Egyptian empire. [<BACK 17.4>](#)

## BOOK II: YEHHI, NOTES

### II.1:

The time of Yehhi is imagined to be a little more than 500 years before the time of Abram, or about 2050 BCE, right at the height of the Ur III period, when Ur, having reasserted itself after the collapse of Akkadian rule, built an empire comprising much of Mesopotamia. [Van De Mieroop 2004, pp. 69-79] [<BACK II.1>](#)

## CHAPTER 18, NOTES

### 18.1:

Why, the reader may ask, is Yehhi's party crossing the dessert in a caravan of donkeys rather than a caravan of camels? The answer is that the ancient Sumerians did not have domesticated camels. Camels may have been domesticated about the time of Yehhi or even earlier elsewhere, but not in Sumer.

There is even a minor controversy over whether references to camels in *Genesis*, the first two of which are *Genesis 12:16*, throughout *Genesis 24*, are anachronistic, and were added by scribes over a millennium later who did not know that camels were not domesticated at the time of the patriarchs. This seems to be more of an open question with arguments being made on both sides. However, the preponderance of people arguing for camels in *Genesis* seem to be religious types, who are at pains to demonstrate that the Bible is literally true and historically accurate. Thus their analysis may not be fully objective.

Regardless of this controversy over what went on in a geographically different area and at a later time, it is fairly certain that ancient Sumerians did not use domesticated camels. [<BACK 18.1>](#)

## CHAPTER 19, NOTES

### 19.1:

The symbolic significance of Yehhi's dream is discussed in the essay:  
*The Double Triangle.* [<BACK 19.1>](#)

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