

Facts and Fancy about the Bible - 20

Among the erroneous criticisms levelled against the books of Moses by the Higher Critics is the treatment of the Genesis accounts of the career of Abraham and his descendants as untrustworthy and often unhistorical, even going so far as to deny the historical existence of Abraham altogether.

Abram began his life in Ur, a port city near the mouth of the Euphrates on the Persian Gulf. But the coastline has shifted and the remains of the city are now about 150 miles (240 km) from the south end of the Euphrates, and 10 miles (16 km) west of that river. Genesis 11 calls it “Ur of the Chaldees”, Hebrew *Ur Kasdiy*, which Strong renders as “towards the Kasdites”, meaning “the Chaldean Ur” which would differentiate Abram’s home town from any lesser city, further north, with a similar name.

The Higher Critics rightly pointed out that if Moses wrote Genesis it had to be written in the late 15th century BC. But recent discoveries show that the southern city of Ur was then ruled by the Kassites, members of an Elamite people from the Zagros mountains in Iran. It was not until late in the 7th century BC that Ur began to be ruled by the Chaldeans: so the term “Ur of the Chaldees” in the book of Genesis would be an anachronism. Therefore the critics said Moses did not write Genesis, and the story about Abraham must be “unhistorical.”

M.F. Unger in *Archaeology and the Old Testament* commented that the excavations in the ruins of Ur which the local Arabs called *Muqayyar*, “the mound of bitumen,” revealed that it was one of the largest and wealthiest cities of that area, particularly at the time Abram left it behind.

He also refers to the use of the gloss, where a word is inserted between the lines or in the margin of a text in order to explain a foreign or otherwise difficult word or expression. Provided as examples of scribal glosses in Scripture are -

“...they made war with Bera king of Sodom... and the king of Bela (that is, Zoar). 3 All these joined together in the Valley of Siddim (that is, the Salt Sea)...7 Then they turned back and came to En Mishpat (that is, Kadesh)” - Genesis 14:2. The archaic place names in Moses’ time, Bela, Valley of Siddim and En Mishpat are identified in the glosses by their centuries later current names of Zoar, the Salt Sea, and Kadesh.

And so, he suggests, “The qualifying phrase, ‘of the Chaldeans’ is not an anachronism as many critics hold, but as in the case of numerous archaic place names, is a later scribal gloss to explain to a subsequent age” ...that the city being referred to was that formerly wealthy port city in southern Babylonia, a reference that would be recognized by those living centuries after Moses.

Genesis 11:31 reports that “Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and together they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan. But when they came to Haran, they settled there.”

Terah, as head of the family had evidently made the decision to move out of Ur, and if Abram had any uneasiness about it, he was reassured after “the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. 2 I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you’...” - Genesis 12:1.

Remarkably, Hebrews 11:8 informs the reader that he set out, not knowing where he was going.