

Where Is Abraham's Ur?¹

By Cyrus H. Gordon



The notice in the December 1976 **BAR** (“The Promise of Ebla,” **BAR** 02:04) that a new Ebla tablet refers to “Ur in Haran,” reopens the discussion of where Ur of the Chaldees, Abraham’s birthplace, was located. While we would welcome the full publication of the Ebla tablet, the Biblical evidence is by itself conclusive in placing Ur of the Chaldees in the Urfa-Haran region of south central Turkey, near the Syrian border, rather than in southern Mesopotamia where it is located on so many “Biblical” maps.

Genesis 11:31 relates that “Terah took Abram ... and they went out ... from Ur of the Chaldees to go to the land of Canaan; and they came to Haran and dwelt there.” Then Terah died (Genesis 11:32) and Abram went on to Canaan (Genesis 12:15). This means that Haran was en route from Ur of the Chaldees to Canaan. By no stretch of the imagination would anyone go from Sumerian Ur (in southern Mesopotamia) to Canaan via Haran. A glance at the map shows that Haran is much too far out of the way.

The location of Haran is fixed, because its ancient name has clung to the place down to the present, and discoveries on the site have confirmed the correctness of the tradition.

¹Hershel Shanks Editor, *BAR* 03:02 (June 1977) (Biblical Archaeology Society, 2004; 2004).

Ur of the Chaldees, like many other northern Urs (mentioned in the Nuzu, Alalakh, Ugaritic and other cuneiform tablets), was directly or indirectly named after Sumerian Ur which was excavated by C. Leonard Woolley in southern Iraq and which is sited on Biblical maps. But Sumerian Ur is never called “Ur of the Chaldees” in any of the numerous references to Ur in the cuneiform tablets. The designation of Abraham’s Ur as “of the Chaldees” distinguishes it from the other cities called Ur, including Sumerian Ur located about a thousand miles from Haran.

About an hour’s drive from Haran is the city of Urfa which was called Orhai in Syriac Christian literature. Local tradition still insists that Urfa is where Abraham was born. Whether “Orhai” is related to “Ur” phonetically and whether Abraham’s birthplace lies under some specific spot in or around Urfa need not be settled here. What is of interest is rather that the new Ebla reference to “Ur in Haran” is in keeping with the Biblical evidence that Abraham’s birthplace is to be sought somewhere in the Urfa-Haran region. Genesis 24:4, Genesis 24:7, Genesis 24:10, and Genesis 24:29 tells us that Abraham’s birthplace was in Aram-Naharayim where Laban lived. From there “The River” (= The Euphrates) had to be crossed before proceeding to Gilead (Genesis 31:21). Sumerian Ur is west of the Euphrates and does not have to be crossed to reach Gilead or any other part of Canaan.

I have shown in the *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* (Vol. 17, p. 28, 1958) that Ur of the Chaldees must be in the Haran area and has nothing to do with Sumerian Ur. This was, as a matter of fact, the consensus of opinion until the name of Sumerian Ur began to turn up in the cuneiform inscriptions deciphered during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Finally, the identification of Ur of the Chaldees with Sumerian Ur in the south took firm hold as a result of C. Leonard Woolley’s glamorous finds at Sumerian Ur, which finds were “worthy of Abraham.”

An Akkadian cuneiform tablet from Ugarit which is of special interest to this discussion mentions a city spelled *Ura* in Akkadian, but which would come into Hebrew as *Ur* without the final vowel. This tablet, published by Professor Jean Nougayrol in his important collection of Akkadian tablets from the south palace of Ugarit, is a letter from a Hittite king (Hattusili III, c. 1282–1250 B.C.) to his Ugaritic counterpart. The tablet mentions merchants of the Hittite king who have come from the city of Ura. The Hittite kingdom was of course centered in Anatolia. We learn that Ura was a city that specialized in foreign trade. In response to a complaint which had been lodged against the Ura merchants operating in Ugarit, the Hittite king attempts to regulate the activities of his Hittite merchants and recounts these efforts in the tablet recovered from Ugarit. Perhaps this northern Ur in the land of the Hittites is Abraham’s Ur.

My views regarding Ur were criticized, but I defended and expanded them in an article entitled “Abraham of Ur” in *Hebrew and Semitic Studies* (= the *G. R. Driver Festschrift*), Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963, pp. 77–84.

In retrospect our discussion is an object lesson. The Biblical evidence is clear: Ur of the Chaldees is in northern Mesopotamia (now Turkish territory), far from Sumer. Once

Sumerian Ur came to light, it distracted Biblical scholars, and, as a climax, the sensational finds at Sumerian Ur led the archaeologists to rename that city “Ur of the Chaldees.” The latter has become official and it is hard to divest oneself of an error that has been repeated so often that it is accepted as a fact by professional scholars. Thus S. N. Kramer, *The Sumerians*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963, p. 292) writes of “Abraham’s birth in Ur of the Chaldees”, by which he means Sumerian Ur, even though he surely knows that Sumerian Ur is never called “Ur of the Chaldees” in the countless cuneiform tablets that mention Ur.

The excavations at Sumerian Ur threw us off the track. Ebla is putting us back on it.