

## INTRODUCTION

The story of Sarah and Abraham can be found in the book of Genesis in the Bible. This verse narrative, expanded by research and my own imagination, is from the viewpoint of Sarah, a woman of Ur, who was born sometime between 1750 B.C.E. and 2000 B.C.E.

It was a time of great civilizations and cities built on the ruins of previous cities. Ur, with a population of perhaps half a million, was one of those great cities, as were Babylon and Damascus. Since the Euphrates changed its channel, Ur, once on the river, is now located in a desert.

Laws had already been developed ruling the conduct of business and personal relationships. More than 300 of these rules, called "The Code of Hammurabi," were printed in cuneiform writing on a tall stone pillar (stele) about 1750 B.C.E. These laws gave males of the upper classes most of the power, though women had a few rights of their own. Slaves had almost none. Penalties for crimes varied with whether or not the act had been committed by one of the upper or lower classes, or against them.

People worshipped gods of nature and appealed to them for good fortune, fertile fields, and fertile wives. They placated with offerings the gods whom they feared would bring disaster. Large temples were built to the prime god or goddess of each city, and many smaller idols were made and worshipped. In addition to these, many families had their own household god. Some Jewish scholars believe that Abraham's father, Terah, was a maker of these idols.

In the cities the merchants lived in houses with workrooms on the first floor, with the family sleeping above. It is likely that some of the family living was done on the roof under awnings, where the air was cooler. Archaeologists have uncovered many of these dwellings and found pictures painted on some of the walls. The houses also included an extra room believed to be a sort of chapel where the family god was worshipped.

Great irrigation systems watered the fertile soil near rivers, enabling cities to thrive there. The entire land 4000 years ago was

probably not as denuded as it is now. Forests grew on hillsides, including the great cedars of Lebanon. Today, they are nearly destroyed.

In this narrative I have tried to convey a sense of what life must have been like for an intelligent woman, living two thousand years before the birth of Christ, in a developing patriarchal society where the unity of the tribe was paramount.

The ages of Abraham and Sarah recorded in the Bible have bothered many readers of Genesis. "How could Sarah have had a child at the age of ninety?" In lands irrigated by rivers that flood in the spring, such as the Nile, there were two harvests a year. This was also likely for the Euphrates. Nearly four millennia ago, a person's age was sometimes determined by the number of harvests a year. At the time of the announcement that she was to have a child, Sarah may have been only forty-five years old and Abraham, fifty years old.

Some of the stories Sarah tells Isaac can be found in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, which predates Ur. Tablets telling the flood story were found recently by archaeologists in the ruins of Babylon. The Hebrews, while in exile in Babylon, may have been familiar with the tablets.

When I think of Sarah, I feel the pulse of centuries, all the ages of both change and sameness. I wonder, how did Sarah feel as a child, ripped from her beautiful home in Ur where she walked with Ormi and Abraham down the streets of a city now deserted by the river that fed it, then left it to the wind and the sand? I think of all those centuries that have rolled between us, and I feel that, though I do not carry Sarah's genes, I carry her spirit.

— Evelyn Gathman Haines

## THE JOURNEY TO ARAN (Padan Aram)

Early each morning servants call our dogs,  
gather our flocks, and we leave before the sun  
enters the heavens, before that angry god  
begins to suck us dry as shriveled husks.

Heading north, we travel with our servants, goats,  
sheep, cattle and those who, before, had followed  
Terah in his many years of desert wandering.  
Our tribe is not large, but my father tells me

he has often traveled over the path to Haran.  
For many moons we will be nomads on the land.  
We would hurry on, but our flocks and herds  
must graze the young grass to sustain themselves.

Lot, mourning his father, follows Terah  
and walks among the sheep with a long pole  
to guide the flock. He seems to find a comfort  
in the sheep as they slowly move around him.

Our servants' children run ahead, but tire easily.  
One falls asleep on the ground, and I lift her up  
on my donkey. As I look back on our people  
and our flocks, I wonder how many will survive.

We follow the path near the river Euphrates  
and water our flocks in the cool streams  
that flow from the high western hills. Small  
flowers, yellow and purple blooms, spring up  
beside the path. I pluck a yellow one for my hair.  
Ormi gathers plants she will use as medicine,  
and I store away the memory of these plants.  
Palms spring up along our path and we trade



with a merchant, one of our lambs for the good  
sweetness of his dried dates and also apricots.  
The long walking gives us hunger and what we  
have from Ur may not last the long journey.

When we see towns, the many houses,  
I wonder, are they like my beloved Ur?  
But the thick-walls turn their backs against us  
and we must hurry on our path to Haran.

While Lot tends the flocks and herds,  
Abram goes ahead to search for grazing.  
I remain, watching the rumps of sheep.  
When he returns he tells us he has seen

Babylon, a city greater than Ur, its temple  
to Ishtar, a ziggurat mighty against the sky.  
But we must hurry on, and only see the city  
appear like a mirage in the shimmering east.

Farther on, near a place where the river narrows,  
a stench fills our nostrils, black tar boiling  
up from the bottom of the world. We hear  
that animals and men who ventured too close,

were swallowed whole, and still lie in its depths  
so we do not go near. Then ... the green gardens  
of Hit, where water flows, due to the goodness  
of the gods. Here my eyes fill with the beauty

of blossoming trees and flowers. Father stops  
a while and tells me that here he has seen  
pale red roses and all manner of flowers.  
For a moment we watch the women come

to fill their water jars, and the water wheels  
go around and around, dipping and lifting

their glistening loads. Here we also dip and fill  
our empty jars for the long thirst ahead.

I would linger, but he says we must leave,  
for we are still far from the plain of Padan Aram  
and Haran. We have yet many days of travel before  
the land ahead is baked too dry in the summer heat.

When the hills narrow the path, we clamber up  
their steep flanks. The goats have an easy climb,  
but we must urge our donkeys, our cattle,  
our sheep, upward to the drying land above.

Under a burning sky we press on, the rising sun  
on our right hand, the setting sun on our left,  
the earth already drying in the heat; and I long  
again for cooling waters and Ur's rooftop shade.

To spare the donkeys, I walk beside Abram  
over ground rough with stone and thorny bush.  
The heat rises through the soles of our sandals  
and even he wonders where our father leads.

Day after day we move on, dusty wolves stalking  
our flock. Eagles span the sky, watch for a lamb  
or a young kid. Our mouths are dry as the sparse  
and withered grass, dry as our empty water jars.

When the walled city of Mari appears in the distance  
we hope for water and trade, but men with swords  
forbid us entrance. As we leave, a shepherd tells us,  
for a piece of silver, he will show us a hidden place  
where water seeps up from the ground. The water  
comes slowly and by the time our jars are filled  
and our flock is satisfied, it is night. By the light  
from the myriad of stars we move to a safer place.

## CROSSING THE EUPHRATES

Though I find strength I hadn't know before,  
I am weary of the long and thirsty travel.  
Terah says we must hurry on. The animals  
grow lean and need the richer pasturing ahead.

My feet grow reluctant as they take me farther  
from my home in Ur, and I feel I will never return  
from this journey that has no end. Abram walks  
beside me a while and says he is eager to move on,

for somewhere in the distance he will find  
something, other than the gods of the priests,  
and a place where he need not bow to them,  
or think and move in their narrow ways.

At last we descend again to the river Euphrates,  
our flocks and herds so thirsty they almost  
tumble in. We wade after them, Terah, Lot  
and Abram guiding them to shallow places.

When they have had their fill and the water  
has cleared, I rush to delight myself in the cool  
water, lifting it up with my two hands to pour  
its blessing over my head, my face, my arms.

Ormi tells us stories of other rivers and floods,  
so, before crossing this river, we rest a day,  
for the river spreads far and it will take us all  
to get our flocks safely to the other shore.