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Top Ten Discoveries Related to Abraham

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NOTE: Here is the video version of this blog, from Episode 141 of the TV show, Digging for Truth, by the Associates for Biblical Research:
<https://youtu.be/N4262VGxCYU>

Abraham was the first and greatest of the Hebrew patriarchs; his story unfolds over 15 chapters in the book of Genesis (from Gen. 11:26-Gen. 25:8). The Lord called him out of his own country to a new land and promised to bless the earth through him (Gen. 12:1-3).

In our next top ten list, we'll look at the top ten discoveries in biblical archaeology related to Abraham. Archaeological evidence is almost always fragmentary and incomplete, especially the father back in time one looks. That said, there are numerous finds which

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demonstrate that the patriarchal narratives of Scripture accurately reflect the time period in which they are set.

According to conventional chronology which interprets the biblical data (1 Kings 6:1; Ex. 12:40-41; Gen. 47:9; Gen. 25:26; Gen. 21:5) in a straightforward way, Abraham (then known as Abram) was born ca. 2166 BC.¹ If this is correct, Abraham was born in the Intermediate Bronze Age, but lived most of his life in the Middle Bronze Age, which began ca. 2100 BC.² Other Bible scholars interpret the numerical date in an honorific way, rather than as literal base-10 numbers, and believe Abraham lived later in the Middle Bronze II period (ca. 1900-1550).³

Here, for the most part, I've chosen items that would be generally agreed upon by both groups of scholars, regardless of their chronology. Thus, I have not included finds like Tall el-Hammam,⁴ whose identity is heavily dependent on one's chronology (some believe it is biblical Sodom, others do not).

Here then are the top ten sites and finds in biblical archaeology that related to Abraham.

10. City of Ur

Two ancient cities are the primary candidates for Ur of the Chaldeans (Hebrew: *Kasdīm*): Urfa in modern-day Turkey, the center of the Hurrian civilization, and Tell el-Muqayyar in modern-day Iraq, the Sumerian city of Ur. According to Mark Wilson, "The consensus of an earlier generation was that the Anatolian Ur was Abraham's Ur. When Leonard Woolley discovered the royal cemeteries at Sumerian Ur in 1927, he declared that his finds were 'worthy of Abraham.'"⁵ Ever since, the consensus has been that the Sumerian Ur was Abraham's birthplace.⁶ There are convincing reasons to believe the earlier

¹ Andrew E. Steinmann, *From Abraham To Paul: A Biblical Chronology*. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2011), 68.

² Steven Collins and Joseph M. Holden, Eds., *The Harvest Handbook of Bible Lands*. (Eugene: Harvest House Publishers, 2019), 34.

³ See "Chronology and the Patriarchal Lifespans" (p. 54-55) in *The Harvest Handbook of Bible Lands*.

⁴ For a discussion of Tall el-Hammam and its identification as the city of Sodom, see Dr. Steve Collins' explanation in "Is Tall el-Hammam really biblical Sodom? – Troweling Down Episode 1" here:

<https://youtu.be/fliRwnQiqL4> and Dr. Bryant Wood's explanation here:

<https://biblearchaeology.org/research/chronological-categories/patriarchal-era/3217-locating-sodom-a-critique-of-the-northern-proposal>.

⁵ Mark Wilson, *Biblical Turkey: A Guide to the Jewish and Christian Sites of Asia Minor*. (İstanbul: Ege Yayınları, 2020), 42.

⁶ It's interesting to note that Cyrus Gordon, an American Ancient Near Eastern scholar, who excavated with Leonard Wooley at the Sumerian Ur, never accepted Wooley's identification of the southern site as Abraham's "Ur of the Chaldees.;" he believed the Abraham's Ur was located in the north.

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generation may have correctly identified the Anatolian Ur as Abraham's hometown. Old Testament professor, Tony W. Cartledge, notes, "Some ancient sources, however, suggest that the Chaldeans' original home was in Anatolia, now a part of Turkey, before some of them migrated south [to Mesopotamia]."⁷ Moreover, when Abraham sends his servant to choose a wife for his son Isaac, he directs him to "go to my country and to my own relatives" (Gen. 24:10). His servant went to the city of Haran in Aram-Naharayim ("Beyond the River"), a region east of the Euphrates River, which fits the description of the northern Ur, but not the southern one. The ancient city of Haran in modern-day Turkey is 24 miles/44km southeast of Urfa, and it make sense that Abraham's servant would go here, the region of Abraham's birth, to find a wife for his master's son. Unfortunately, today a city of 2 million people covers the site of ancient Ur.



9. City of Haran



The beehive houses of Haran. Photo: A.D. Riddle/Bibleplaces.com

⁷ Tony W. Cartledge, "Have We Erred on Ur?" *Good Faith Media*. Jan. 6, 2020. <https://goodfaithmedia.org/have-we-erred-on-ur/> (Accessed July 1, 2021).

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After Abraham left Ur, he settled in Haran for years, before making his way to Canaan (Gen 11:31; Acts 7:2-4). Tell Haran is located on the fertile plain of the Balikh River, a major tributary of the Euphrates River. In ancient times it lay at the junction of major trade routes. It was a major center for the worship of the moon-god Sin. Excavations have unearthed a large mudbrick building that dates to the end of the third millennium BC, which some believe may have been a predecessor to the Temple of Sin.⁸ Abraham's father, Terah, may have worshiped the god Sin here, as Scripture records, "your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods" (Josh. 24:2). Haran is famous for its conical beehive houses, a style that has been used in Mesopotamia for thousands of years; the ones seen today at Haran were only built in the last 200 years.⁹

8. Gate at Tel Dan



The Canaanite city gate of Leshem (renamed Dan after the Israelite Conquest) dates to the 18th century and is the oldest surviving archway in the world. Photo Credit: Bukvoed / Wikimedia Commons / CC BY 4.0

The famous Middle Bronze Age arched gate at Tel Dan has often been called, "Abraham's gate" because Abram once rescued his nephew, Lot, from his kidnappers near the city (Gen. 14:14). The imposing mudbrick gate was constructed in the 18th century BC by the Canaanites at Leshem (Dan) on the eastern side of the city. It survives today at a height

⁸ Todd Bolen, "Haran." <https://www.bibleplaces.com/haran/> (Accessed July 2, 2021).

⁹ Mark Wilson, *Biblical Turkey: A Guide to the Jewish and Christian Sites of Asia Minor*. (Istanbul: Ege Yayinlari, 2020), 38.

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of 47 courses, and at one time featured three enormous arches which framed the entrance to the city.¹⁰ A staircase led up to the gate from the surrounding plain and traces of the white plaster that originally covered the doorway can still be detected. Mysteriously, it was only used for about 50 years before it was covered over by an earthen rampart, which preserved it.¹¹ The gateway at Tel Dan was likely constructed a couple of centuries after Abraham's death; it is included in this list because of its association with him and because it is an example of the gate systems that would have been familiar to the patriarchs.

7. The Battle of Siddim

Genesis 14:1-3 records the Battle of Siddom: "In the days of Amraphel king of Shinar, Arioch king of Ellasar, Chedorlaomer king of Elam, and Tidal king of Goiim, these kings made war with Bera king of Sodom, Birsha king of Gomorrah, Shinab king of Admah, Shemeber king of Zeboim, and the king of Bela (that is, Zoar). And all these joined forces in the Valley of Siddim (that is, the Salt Sea)." During the battle, Abraham's nephew, Lot, is captured (Gen. 14:12), and Abraham sets out to rescue him Gen. 14:14-16. There are numerous elements of this battle in the biblical text which accurately reflect conditions in the patriarchal era, indicating its antiquity and not that it was invented over a millennium later, as those who hold to the documentary hypothesis suggest. First, names that are similar to the kings in this account have been found in other Mesopotamian texts from this period.¹² Secondly, after the fall of the Third Dynasty of Ur in the late third millennium BC, the area was not dominated by a single power; large and small city-states with ever-changing political



The Battle of Siddim (also known as the Battle of Nine Kings) from Genesis 14. Image: Taken from the ESV® Study Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright ©2008 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

¹⁰ "Mudbrick Gate," Tel Dan Excavations. <https://teldan.wordpress.com/mudbrick-gate/> (Accessed July 8, 2021).

¹¹ Todd Bolen, "Dan." *Bible Places*. <https://www.bibleplaces.com/dan/> (Accessed July 8, 2021).

¹² Randall Price and H. Wayne House, *Zondervan Handbook of Biblical Archaeology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 80.

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alliances controlled localized areas.¹³ Thus, this passage accurately reflects the geopolitical situation of the patriarchal era. Price and Holden conclude: “The antiquity of this account within the larger context of the patriarchal narratives indicates that there is substantial reason to regard the whole as historically accurate.”¹⁴

6. Domesticated Camels

Scripture records that Abraham had a caravan of camels; his servant took ten of them when he went north to search for a wife for Isaac (Gen 24:10). Some suggest this is incorrect, an anachronistic detail, since Camels were not domesticated until the late second millennium BC or later, centuries after Abraham lived. For example, Donald Redford suggests that, “camels do not appear in the Near East as domesticated beasts of burden until the ninth century B.C.”¹⁵ Recent research, however has demonstrated that camels were actually domesticated before the time of Abraham. Ancient petroglyphs from Egypt and the Wadi Nasib depict humans leading camels who are tethered in the third and late second millennium BC.¹⁶ A late third or early second millennium BC bronze statue of a two-humped Bactrian camel with what appears to be a harness is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.¹⁷ In addition to artistic representations, numerous excavations throughout the Ancient Near East have unearthed remains of camels in domestic settings. Titus Kennedy concludes, “Bones, hairs, wall paintings, models, inscriptions, seals, documents, statues, and stelae from numerous archaeological sites all suggest the camel



This bronze statue of a Bactrian camel with a harness dates to the late third or early second century BC. It is in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

Photo: Metmuseum.org/Public Domain

¹³ K. A. Kitchen, *On The Reliability of the Old Testament*. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006), 320.

¹⁴ Randall Price and H. Wayne House, *Zondervan Handbook of Biblical Archaeology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 81.

¹⁵ Donald B. Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 277.

¹⁶ Titus Kennedy, “The Date of Camel Domestication in the Ancient Near East.” *Associates for Biblical Research*. 17 February 2014. <https://biblearchaeology.org/research/contemporary-issues/3832-the-date-of-camel-domestication-in-the-ancient-near-east> (Accessed June 27, 2021).

¹⁷ “Bactrian Camel,” *Metropolitan Museum of Art*.

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/324256> (Accessed June 27, 2021).

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in use as a domestic animal in the ancient Near East as early as the 3rd millennium BC"¹⁸
In actual fact, domesticated camels gave their owners a great economic advantage, which is in keeping with the general portrayal of Abraham as a wealthy man.¹⁹

5. Asiatic Merchants in the Tomb of Khnumhotep II at Beni Hasan



A painting of Semitic merchants from Canaan arriving in Egypt from the Tomb of Khnumhotep II at Beni Hasan. Photo: Wikimedia Commons/Public Domain

The book of Genesis describes the nomadic lifestyle of the patriarchs, and reports migration between Canaan and Egypt (Abraham in Gen. 12:10; Jacob and his sons in Gen. 42:5, 43:11, 46:5–7). When there was a famine in the land, Abraham and Sarah went down to Egypt. A painting in the tomb of Khnumhotep II at Beni Hasan, dating to ca. 1890 BC, portrays a group of 37 Asiatics from Shut (the area of Sinai and southern Canaan) traveling to Egypt to do trade.²⁰ It is evidence of this migration pattern during the Middle Bronze Age and is a vivid depiction of what Abraham and his descendants may have looked like when they entered Egypt. Gary Byers notes, “Both the Biblical Patriarchs and the Beni Hasan Asiatics traveled from the same region (Syro-Palestine) to the same region (Egypt) during the same period (twentieth-nineteenth centuries BC). While no one proposes these are the Israelites, it is the right people, the right places and the right time to offer greater insights into the world of Biblical characters.”²¹

¹⁸ Titus Kennedy, “The Date of Camel Domestication in the Ancient Near East.” *Associates for Biblical Research*. 17 February 2014. <https://biblearchaeology.org/research/contemporary-issues/3832-the-date-of-camel-domestication-in-the-ancient-near-east> (Accessed June 27, 2021).

¹⁹ Stephen Caesar, “Patriarchal Wealth and Early Domestication of the Camel.” *Associates for Biblical Research*. 19 February 2009. <https://biblearchaeology.org/research/chronological-categories/patriarchal-era/3444-patriarchal-wealth-and-early-domestication-of-the-camel> (Accessed June 27, 2021).

²⁰ Randall Price and H. Wayne House, *Zondervan Handbook of Biblical Archaeology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 74.

²¹ Gary Byers, “The Beni Hasan Asiatics and the Biblical Patriarchs.” *Associates for Biblical Research*. Sept. 9, 2009. <https://biblearchaeology.org/research/chronological-categories/patriarchal-era/3978-the-beni-hasan-asiatics-and-the-biblical-patriarchs> (Accessed July 1, 2021).

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4. Mari Tablets



One of the Mari Tablets from Zimri-Lim, king of Mari.
Photo: M0tty/Wikimedia Commons/CC BY-SA 3.0

Mari was a thriving city for over a millennium (ca. 2800-1760 BC) and served as the capital of the Amorites from ca. 2000-1760 BC. Excavations, which began in 1933, have unearthed over 15000 clay cuneiform tablets from the city's final years which provide a fascinating glimpse into the social, economic, and legal practices from that period, as well as examples of letters, treaties and literary works. The Mari Archive is an important archaeological discovery that helps us understand Amorite history and the broader culture in which Old Testament events occurred. While dating to a period after Abraham, they reflect some of the longstanding cultural traditions from the Patriarchal era. For example, the Mari texts reveal that, if a concubine bore the first son, his birthright could be withdrawn if the primary wife subsequently bore a son.²² Several places related to Abraham are also mentioned in Mari texts: a city named Nahur is mentioned, which may

²² "The Rights of the Firstborn," *NIV Archaeological Study Bible* (ed. Walter C. Kaiser Jr and Duane Garrett; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 43.

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have been named after Abraham's grandfather Nahor (Gen. 11:22-25), as well as the city of Haran (Gen. 11:31).²³

3. Tomb of the Patriarchs at Hebron



The Herodian structure known as the Tomb of the Patriarchs at Hebron. Photo: HolyLandPhotos.org

When Abraham's wife, Sarah, died, he purchased the burial cave and field of Machpelah from Ephron the Hittite (Gen. 23:16-18). Scripture records that Sarah, Abraham (Gen. 25:9-10), Isaac (Gen. 35:27-29), Rebekah (Gen. 49:31), Leah (Gen. 49:31), and Jacob (Gen. 50:13) were all buried in this cave. Given its importance, the Israelites remembered its location throughout the ages, and a monumental structure was built over the site by Herod the Great.²⁴ Today, six medieval cenotaphs commemorating the burials of the patriarchs and matriarchs are inside the Tomb of the Patriarchs at Hebron. While the current political situation precludes proper excavation, several clandestine trips to the

²³ Bryant G. Wood, "The Mari Archive." *Associates for Biblical Research*. Feb. 6, 2006.

<https://biblearchaeology.org/research/topics/amazing-discoveries-in-biblical-archaeology/3470-great-discoveries-in-biblical-archaeology-the-mari-archive> (Accessed July 1, 2021).

²⁴ "The Cave of Machpelah," *NIV Archaeological Study Bible* (ed. Walter C. Kaiser Jr and Duane Garrett; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 38.

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hallway and caves below the structure have been documented.²⁵ Recently, four pottery vessels, which were taken from the caves during a clandestine incursion in 1981, were dated to the Iron Age, suggesting that the Cave of Machpelah was venerated by pilgrims during the First-Temple-era.²⁶

2. The “Enclosure of Abram” on Shoshenq I’s Topographical List at Karnak



A relief from the temple wall at Karnak of Pharaoh Shishak/Shoshenq I, along with a list of the places he conquered in his campaign into Canaan. Photo Credit: Olaf Tausch / Wikimedia Commons / CC BY 3.0

²⁵ “Inside the Caves of Machpela,” *The Hebron Fund*. Feb. 8, 2018. <https://www.hebronfund.org/inside-the-caves-of-machpela/> (Accessed July 8, 2021).

²⁶ Bryan Windle, “New Study Analyzes Pottery Taken from the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron.” *Associates for Biblical Research*. Sept. 22, 2020. <https://biblearchaeology.org/current-events-list/4734-new-study-analyzes-pottery-taken-from-the-tomb-of-the-patriarchs-in-hebron> (Accessed July 8, 2021).

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The Egyptian Pharaoh Shishak (Shoshenq I), invaded the lands of Judah and Israel in 926 BC. When he returned to Egypt, he had a record of his victories inscribed on a wall of the Great Temple of Amun-Re at Karnak. He boasts of having conquered over 150 places, each "name ring" depicted as a bound prisoner with a cartouche beneath it on which a toponym is listed in Egyptian hieroglyphics. One of the ovals, located just below and to the left of Shishak's right foot in the relief, reads, "the Fort/Enclosure of Abram."²⁷ This place was located in the Negev, a region that Abraham frequented (Gen. 12:1, 13:1, 20:1), which would fit well with a place being named after him.²⁸ This is the only ancient, extra-biblical reference to Abraham.

1. Mt Moriah/Temple Mount

One of the most defining moments in Abraham's life was when the Lord called him to sacrifice his only Son Isaac. In Gen. 22:2 we that God said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you." The region of Moriah is now covered by the modern-day city of Jerusalem, and Mt. Moriah itself is the Temple Mount, the place David built an altar to stop a plague, and where Solomon later built the temple in Jerusalem (2 Chr. 3:1). Joel Kramer helpfully notes that neither Abraham, nor David chose the location for their altars; the Lord directed them (Gen. 22:2 & 2 Sam. 24:18-19,24).²⁹ Today, all that is visible of Mt. Moriah is the rock outcropping within the Islamic shrine known as the Dome of the Rock. Leen Ritmeyer has observed the remains of a foundation trench on this rock, which would have served as the foundation for the southern wall of the Temple. He has also calculated



The rock outcropping of Mt. Moriah within the Dome of the Rock.

Photo: Wikimedia Commons/Public Domain

a 20-cubit square flat space on this rock, corresponding to the measurements of the Holy of Holies in Solomon's temple (1 Kings 6:20), and noted a rectangular indentation in the

²⁷ Kenneth A. Kitchen, "Shishak's Military Campaign in Israel Confirmed." *Jewish History*.

http://www.judaicaru.org/rembrandt_rus/jh.php-id=Egyptian&content=content-shishaks_military_campaign.htm (Accessed July 8, 2021).

²⁸ Kenneth A. Kitchen, K. A. Kitchen, *On The Reliability of the Old Testament*. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006), 313-314.

²⁹ Joel Kramer, *Where God Came Down*. (Brigham City: Expedition Bible, 2020), 29.

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rock, in the middle of the square, which is likely where the ark of the covenant stood.³⁰ Mt. Moriah is the place God provided for Abraham a ram in place of Isaac, where God's presence filled the First temple during the days of Solomon (2 Chr. 7:1), and where the curtain of the Second Temple was torn when Jesus died (Mk 15:37-39), signifying that his sacrifice of atonement was sufficient and the Holy of Holies is now open for all people – both Jew and Gentile.

Conclusion

Despite the fragmentary archaeological record during the Patriarchal era, numerous finds demonstrate that the story of Abraham accurately records cultural elements and places from that time period. This affirms the antiquity of the narratives of Genesis, and contradicts claims that the story of Abraham was the fabrication of a group of priests living in Babylonian exile (or later) who created him to invent a glorious history for their people. Rather, Abraham was a real man who lived at a real time in history. His faith in God was credited to him as righteousness such that he became the father of all who believe (Rom. 4:3-11).

Cover Photo: The statue of Abraham by Gian Maria Morlaiter (1754) at the Gesuati Church (Our Lady of the Rosary) in Venice. Photo: Dick Stracke/Wikimedia Commons/CC BY-SA 3.0

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³⁰ Leen Ritmeyer, *The Quest: Revealing the Temple Mount in Jerusalem*. (Jerusalem: Carta, 2006), 246.