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# SOVEREIGNTY AND FREE WILL IN THE ACCOUNTS OF TERAH AND ABRAHAM

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Given the amount of space devoted to him, as well as how Paul uses him as *the* model of faith, especially in Romans, Abraham clearly seems to be the most significant character in the book of Genesis, if not in the entire Old Testament. Mathews hints at this when he asserts ‘the Abraham narrative [is] the center unit of the book.’<sup>1</sup> As such, it is then indeed strange that in a book structured around the Hebrew term *tôlêdôt* (see below) that there is no *tôlêdôt* section for him.<sup>2</sup> Rather, he is included as part of the *tôlêdôt* of his father Terah. Terah is a rather shadowy figure whose entire existence is covered in the first nine verses of his extensive *tôlêdôt* section (Genesis 11:27-25:11) while the remaining thirteen and a half chapters focus on Abraham. Moreover, the accounts regarding these two and their relationship exhibit several tensions. For example, was Terah a polytheist or monotheist? Joshua 24:2 suggests that Terah and Nahor ‘served other gods’ when they lived ‘beyond the river’<sup>3</sup> while Genesis 31:53 seems to maintain that Jacob, Abraham, and his father [Terah] served the same God.<sup>4</sup> Another tension point is the call to go from Ur of the Chaldeans

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26* (New American Commentary, 1B; Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2005), p. 85.

<sup>2</sup> For example, John Skinner states ‘Many writers on Genesis have held that the editor marked the headings of the various sections by the formula תְּלִדוֹת אֱלֹהִים [et], which occurs eleven times in the book. . . .’ *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis*, 2nd edn (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1930), p. lxvi.

<sup>3</sup> Unless noted otherwise, all scripture quotations are from the NASB translation. This passage is difficult. Bratcher and Newman note that the normal translation sounds odd and suggest ‘It may sound more natural to translate “This went on until the time of Terah.”’ Robert G. Bratcher and Barclay Moon Newman, *A Translator’s Handbook on the Book of Joshua* (Helps for Translators; London; New York: United Bible Societies, 1983), p. 301.

<sup>4</sup> This section is also difficult. While Mathews suggests that a plural interpretation is possible with respect to the God of Terah (their father; p. 535), it should be noted that the same wording describes the deity worshipped by all three. In this case, it seems that the NASB translation is best: ‘The God of Abraham and the God of Nahor, the God of their father’, although one might add a

to Canaan. The Genesis account presents Terah taking Abraham with him as they set out for Canaan (Genesis 11:31) while Stephen's recounting of the incident suggests that Abraham left Mesopotamia as a result of a vision from God (Acts 7:2).<sup>5</sup> Additional concerns derive from the fact that the group stopped at Haran 'and settled there' (Genesis 11:31), and there Terah died (Genesis 11:32). Subsequently, Genesis reports that Abraham finished the journey to Canaan as a result of God's promise to him, apparently made in Haran (Genesis 12:1-6). The tension here is whether Abraham left Haran while his father was still alive, or did he remain in Haran until his father had died, at which point God called him to leave? There are several uncertainties here including Terah's age at Abraham's birth.<sup>6</sup>

The purpose of this study is not to provide a definitive resolution to those tensions but to suggest that those issues demonstrate deeper theological tensions which the *tôl'dôt* structure of the book highlights. Drawing from this structure, it is suggested that this section of the Abrahamic narrative illustrates an intricate interweaving of God exercising sovereign control while allowing individuals within the account to exercise free will. To evaluate this, we will first look at the literary and historical context of this portion of the Abrahamic narrative.

## THE *TÔL'DÔT* STRUCTURE OF GENESIS

It is now generally accepted that Genesis is organized around the Hebrew word *tôl'dôt*, which is often translated generations or account. Actually it is more accurate to say that it is organized around the phrase *'elle tôl'dôt* (generally translated 'these are the generations of' or 'this is the account

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'that is' after Nahor. Howard cites Genesis 31:19 and 35:2-4 as evidence of Terah's polytheism although that passage really addresses Nahor's descendants; David M. Howard, Jr, *Joshua* (New American Commentary, 5; Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), p. 430.

<sup>5</sup> Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles* (New Testament Commentary, 17; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), p. 240.

<sup>6</sup> Since Genesis 11:32 states that Terah was 205 when he died and Genesis 12:4 states that Abraham was 75 when he left Haran, then Terah would have been about 130 at the birth of Abraham if Abraham departed Haran subsequent to Terah's death. However, Genesis 11:26 states that Terah was 70 when he became the father of Abram, Nahor, and Haran, although that must be when the three began to be born (unless they were triplets). Even here, however, if Abraham was not the oldest, then his birth could have been any time in the next 60 years. For further discussion see Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1-11:26* (New American Commentary, 1A; Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), p. 499.

of').<sup>7</sup> The phrase *elle tôl'dôt* is used eleven times in the book.<sup>8</sup> Our present text tends to obscure the role of this phrase, especially for the English reader. First, the chapter divisions of the book (both in the Hebrew and in English translations) do not take into account any apparent structural role of this phrase. For example, Genesis 1 breaks the opening creation account at the end of day six of the seven day structure. Genesis 2 picks up with the seventh day in verses 1-3, and then gives the first use of the phrase *elle tôl'dôt* in the next verse, Genesis 2:4. As Kidner observes, the use of this term in 2:4 introduces 'a new stage of the book.'<sup>9</sup> But because the chapter division separates the seventh 'day' of God's rest from the rest of the introductory creation account, it is easy to gloss over the significance of that transition.

Second, inconsistent English translations tend to hide the consistent use of this phrase. While the KJV does consistently translate the word *tôl'dôt* as 'generations' (which is also the basic definition given by the Brown-Driver-Briggs lexicon),<sup>10</sup> this does not fit every context well. Consequently, modern translators generally use different words in different places. The reason is obvious—in most of the cases where *elle tôl'dôt* is used in Genesis the translation 'generations' is awkward at best. For example, in Genesis 6:9 the RSV and ESV both read 'These are the generations of Noah' (the same as the KJV). Here the NASB expands the text reading 'These are *the records* of the generations of Noah' (italics in original). In contrast, the NIV gives a more dynamic translation of 'This is the

<sup>7</sup> Cf. John Skinner's comment, above n. 2. Others who hold the same view include Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, revised edn (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977), p. 70; Allen P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), pp. 69-88; and Mathews, *Genesis 1-11:26*, pp. 26-41.

<sup>8</sup> The word *tôl'dôt* is used by itself in Genesis 10:32 and 25:13. In both of these cases, it is used in a manner that would support the normal translation, 'generations.' In Genesis 10:32, the writer sums up the *tôl'dôt* of Shem, Ham, and Japheth (see Gen. 10:1) with the statement that 'These *are* the families of the sons of Noah, after their generations....' (KJV, italics in original). Here, the word *tôl'dôt* is the object of a *lamedh* preposition following the phrase 'these are the families....' Likewise, in Genesis 25:13, after starting the *tôl'dôt* of Ishmael in v. 12, the writer amplifies his opening statement by noting, 'And these *are* the names of the sons of Ishmael, by their names, according to their generations....' (KJV, italics in original). Again, the word *tôl'dôt* is the object of a *lamedh* preposition.

<sup>9</sup> Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary* (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1967), p. 59.

<sup>10</sup> F. Brown, S.R. Driver and C.A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), s.v. תולדות (p. 410).

account of Noah.’ The NRSV reads ‘These are the descendants of Noah,’ which is puzzling because the following material is not a list of descendants. Rather, the statement is followed by the observation of how righteous Noah was and then a simple declaration that ‘Noah had three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth.’ The rest of this section is the rather extensive flood account which relates how corrupt the world was and the judgment that God was bringing on it. Not only does this section not include a genealogy of Noah, the next section presents what may be considered a genealogy of Noah (Gen. 10:1-11:9) although it is labelled the *’elle tól’dôt* of Shem, Ham, and Japheth, his three sons.

Consequently in recent years a number of scholars have proposed a different translation of the word. Ross explains it as follows: ‘The *tól’dôt* heading announces the historical development from the ancestor (or beginning point) and could be translated paraphrastically “this is what became of \_\_\_\_\_” ...’<sup>11</sup> But of the thirteen uses of the term *tól’dôt* in Genesis, commentators are agreed that it is only the eleven occasions when it is used within the phrase *’elle tól’dôt* that this seems to be the concept of the term. If this is the case, then the controlling factor for viewing the term as a structural indicator would be its use in the phrase *’elle tól’dôt*. Following that conclusion, it would seem then that the book uses the following pattern: In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth [which is then described as very good] ... and here is what became of the heavens and the earth [the fall of man demonstrated by the murder of Abel] ... and here is what became of Adam [a genealogy tracing the lineage down to Noah] ... and here is what became of Noah [the flood account] ... etc. This overall structure is laid out in Table 1.

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<sup>11</sup> Ross, p. 72.

TABLE 1: USES OF 'ELLE TÔL'DÔT IN GENESIS

	Text	Subject	Narrative
1	2:4-4:26	Heavens and Earth	Second creation account and the fall of man
2	5:1-6:8	Adam	Genealogy of Adam to Noah (plus intro of Noah)
3	6:9-9:29	Noah	Flood account
4	10:1-11:9	Shem/Ham/Japheth	Table of nations
5	11:10-11:26	Shem	Genealogy of Shem to Terah
6	11:27-25:11	Terah	Account of Abraham
7	25:12-25:18	Ishmael	Sons of Ishmael
8	25:19-35:29	Isaac	Account of Jacob and Esau
9/10	36:1-37:1	Esau	Double genealogy of Esau (1 in Canaan, 2 in Seir) <sup>12</sup>
11	37:2-50:26	Jacob	Joseph and his brothers

## ABRAHAM'S BACKGROUND

When we are introduced to Abraham in the text of Genesis, it is with his birth name of Abram. It is not unusual for Biblical characters to have their names changed by God, especially in the early chapters of the Old Testament. In the case of Abraham, this had a lot to do with God's promise. The original name, Abram means 'exalted father,' and theologians suggest that it is a reflection on the role that his father had in the city of his birth.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, Abraham means father of a multitude and it was given to him in conjunction with the Abrahamic covenant.<sup>14</sup>

He was born and lived as a young man in 'Ur of the Chaldeans,' the location of which is debated. Since Sir Leonard Woolley excavated Ur in Lower Mesopotamia, most scholars have identified that site with Abraham's Ur. However, other scholars have suggested that Ur refers to another site located north of Haran, generally either Urfa (or Edessa) or Ura. Hamilton explains the rationale and opts for the northern site suggesting that a city located closer to Haran would be more likely, although

<sup>12</sup> Genesis 36 tells what became of Esau, but is somewhat puzzling since the phrase 'elle tôle dôt' is used twice—in 36:1 and 36:9.

<sup>13</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary, Genesis*, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), p. 86. This study, like several others, is using the latter name, Abraham, throughout for the sake of consistency.

<sup>14</sup> Mathews, *Genesis 1-11:26*, p. 500.

he notes that most scholars still accept the southern site.<sup>15</sup> In support of the southern site, Mathews argues that the descriptor 'of the Chaldeans' was likely an explanatory addition.<sup>16</sup> This seems to be the more likely explanation in that a later audience in the Canaan region (whether from the time of Moses the traditional author, or later) would more likely have been familiar with an 'Ur' in north-western Mesopotamia and thus a more remote site might require a descriptor to differentiate it.

Following the traditional chronology, Abraham would have been born in 2166 BC.<sup>17</sup> That would have been a short time before the Gutians conquered Sumer and the city of Ur, which is dated to the collapse of the Old Akkadian Empire, conventionally dated to c. 2150 BC.<sup>18</sup> The Gutians are a little known people group who lived in the Zagros Mountains to the east of Mesopotamia (although the exact location is unsure).<sup>19</sup> They were viewed by the Sumerians as uncouth barbarians and historically they left 'very little mark upon Babylonian history.'<sup>20</sup> This period is very poorly documented, and it is not clear how long the Gutians ruled Sumer nor the exact nature of that dominance. Records indicate that the Gutians were expelled by Utu-khegal of Uruk. However, following a brief reign, he was replaced by Ur-Namma of Ur. After the Gutians were expelled, Ur enjoyed a period of prosperity which today is called Ur III or the Third Dynasty of Ur. The establishment of Ur III is normally dated to c. 2112 BC.<sup>21</sup> More recently several scholars have done a reappraisal of the second-millennium chronology and based on archaeological, textual, and astronomical data would move that date to 2018 BC, approximately 100 years later.<sup>22</sup> Saggs notes that the Sumerian King List suggests the Gutians

<sup>15</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), pp. 362-5. For example, Saggs presents cogent arguments against the evidence used to support a northern location: H.W.F. Saggs, 'Ur of the Chaldees: A Problem of Identification', *Iraq* 22 (1960), 200-209.

<sup>16</sup> Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, p. 100.

<sup>17</sup> Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1987), pp. 78-79.

<sup>18</sup> Amélie Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East c. 3000-330 BC*, Vol. 1 (New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 44-6.

<sup>19</sup> C. J. Gadd, 'The Dynasty of Agade and The Gutian Invasion', in *The Cambridge Ancient History*, Vol 1, Part 2A, ed. by I.E.S. Edwards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 444.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 457.

<sup>21</sup> Gadd, p. 595; Marc Van De Mieroop, *A History of the Ancient Near East, ca. 3000-323 BC* (Malden MA, Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 282.

<sup>22</sup> H. Gasche, J.A. Armstrong, S. W. Cole, and V. G. Gurzadyan, *Dating the Fall of Babylon: A Reappraisal of Second-Millennium Chronology* (A Joint Ghent-

ruled 91 years, although there appears to be overlaps in the data we have of the various city-states suggesting the actual period of dominance may have been somewhat less.<sup>23</sup> Overall, however, the accounts we have indicate that this was a rather chaotic period. As Gadd expresses it, the domination of the Gutians was ‘always partial and impermanent.’<sup>24</sup>

The departure of Abraham and family from Ur is another difficult issue. We are not told in Genesis why they left, nor are there any date indications. Given the conventional chronology, it is tempting to tie their departure to the Gutian incursions. In that case, however, the probable birth year of Abraham would suggest that he would have been in his mid-teens at that time. Further, the text indicates that Abraham married Sarah while still in Ur (Gen. 11:29). While it is feasible that he was young when he married, Sarah would have been maybe 5 or 6 at the time. This suggests that the departure from Ur was some time after the Gutian incursions began.

At the other end of the journey, Abraham was 75 when he went to Canaan (Gen. 12:4) which would have been about 2091 BC.<sup>25</sup> Given that this was after Terah settled in Haran, Abraham’s journey to Canaan would probably have been at least 5 years or so after they left Ur. Thus it seems likely that we are looking at a window of about 25-30 years for the migration from Ur, that is, somewhere between 2125-2095 BC. Under the conventional dating, this would put it somewhere around the rise of the Ur III dynasty, while under the revised dating of Gasche, *et al.*, it would be several decades in advance in it. Either case might suggest a divinely appointed pre-emptive removal of this family in anticipation of an increasing paganization of the local culture (see below).

Taking the matter from another approach, the text states that Terah was 70 when he gave birth to Abraham, Nahor, and Haran (Gen. 11:27) and then he died in Haran at the age of 205 (Gen. 11:32). But this also gives us problems. If Terah was 70 when Abraham was born and Abraham was 75 when he went to Canaan, then Abraham left Haran before his father died which many scholars accept.<sup>26</sup> However, while not explicit, the tex-

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*Chicago-Harvard Project*), (Ghent, Belgium: University of Ghent and the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 1998), p. 91.

<sup>23</sup> H.W.F. Saggs, *Peoples of the Past: Babylonians* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), p. 83.

<sup>24</sup> Gadd, p. 458.

<sup>25</sup> This is based on developing the chronological date from an early date of the Exodus of approximately 1446 BC (Merrill, p. 35).

<sup>26</sup> Sarna, p. 88; C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament: The Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1976 = Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1885), vol. 1, p. 180; U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of*



tual sequence seems to suggest that Abraham remained in Haran until after his father's death at which point God called him, which is the view that Stephen presents in Acts 7:4.<sup>27</sup> This would mean that a good working date for Terah's death would be about 2093 BC which would allow time for Abram to bury his father and then to travel to Canaan arriving there in his 75th year. But that would mean Terah was about 130 when Abram was born. While this age seems high, the list of Terah's ancestors in Genesis 11:10-25 indicate that they had a number of children throughout their lives. This age would be within that range. While it seems unusual for that line that Terah apparently had only those three sons, the key anomaly would be that Terah did not father his first born until the age of 70.<sup>28</sup> Beginning with that figure, Genesis 11:26 should then be understood to indicate that Terah had his first son at the age of 70 and the other two came some time later.<sup>29</sup> Unless the sons were triplets, this would necessar-

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*Genesis: Part II, From Noah to Abraham, Genesis VI 9-XI 32* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1964), p. 283, among others. Hamilton notes how this perspective is difficult to maintain in light of Stephen's speech in Acts 7 and notes two other suggestions that harmonize the two passages in addition to the position taken here (pp. 367-8).

<sup>27</sup> Polhill (and others suggest) Stephen may have been following either Philo or the Samaritan Pentateuch which give the age of Terah as 145, although it seems unlikely he would have used either (especially the Samaritan version); John B. Polhill, *Acts* (New American Commentary, 26; Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), p. 190.

<sup>28</sup> Waltke asserts that in this case 'there would be nothing exceptional in Abraham fathering Isaac at 100 years of age,' alluding to Abraham's statement in Genesis 17:17; Bruce K. Waltke, with Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), p. 201. Likewise this does not address the issue of Abraham being 86 when Ishmael was born (Gen. 16:16). Also, Abraham's ancestor Shem is recorded as being 100 years of age when he fathered Arphachshad, and he and the entire line down to Terah's father (Nahor), are recorded as having other sons and daughters after the first born. What is not given is the ages of the wives, and it would seem the greater problem in the Genesis 17:17 passage would be the age of Sarah, 90. Key there is that she was explicitly labeled post-menopausal (Gen. 18:11). It should also be noted that Terah had at least two wives since Sarah was Abraham's half-sister (Gen. 20:12).

<sup>29</sup> A similar situation is evident in the case of Noah in Genesis 5:32 where the text states 'Noah was five hundred years old, and Noah became the father of Shem, Ham, and Japheth.' As Hamilton points out, '[t]he syntax of the sentence would allow for the birth of either three successive sons or triplets ....' (p. 259).

ily raise two questions, what was the sequence of sons, and what was the distance between them?

If the data above is correct, then Abraham was likely the youngest of the three brothers with a sixty year gap between the oldest and youngest.<sup>30</sup> It is then probable that Haran, who died in Ur before they left, was the oldest. When he died he was already married and had several children including Lot, Milcah, and Iscah who were adults. Milcah married Nahor (her uncle), and later she is seen as the grandmother of Rebekah.<sup>31</sup> Iscah (apparently a daughter) is not heard from again.<sup>32</sup> At the time of the emigration from Ur, Lot was apparently an adult who went with his grandfather Terah and uncle Abraham. It is then also possible that Lot was actually older than his uncle Abraham.

Sifting through all of this uncertainty, it seems likely that Terah, Abraham, and family departed Ur in the early part of that 2125-2095 BC window, and Abraham would have been about 40-45 at that point. In that case, Abraham remained in Haran about 30 years or so which would also suggest that he and Sarah had been married 35 years or more when they went to Canaan—clearly a long enough time for the conclusion that Sarah was barren (Genesis 11:30).<sup>33</sup>

## GOD'S CALL TO TERAH AND ABRAHAM

The records indicate that Ur was a pagan city which was noted for worship of the moon god Sin, as was also the city of Haran.<sup>34</sup> However, as discussed above, Genesis 31:53 seems to maintain that Jacob, Abraham, and his father served the true God (see footnote 4). The suggestion then is that Abraham was one of the surviving worshipers of the true God in

<sup>30</sup> Hamilton suggests that Abraham is mentioned first because he is the most important (p. 367).

<sup>31</sup> When Abraham sent his servant to get a wife for Isaac, he is sent to 'the city of Nahor' which in the region of Haran, although there is no mention of Nahor and his family moving (Cassuto, pp. 272-3).

<sup>32</sup> Sarna, p. 87.

<sup>33</sup> As Segal points out, it was also long enough for Abraham to acquire the possessions and persons cited in Genesis 12:5. He specifically maintains that the 318 retainers cited in Genesis 14:14 as being born in his house had to have been born prior to Canaan; M. H Segal, 'The Religion of Israel Before Sinai', *Jewish Quarterly Review*, n.s. 52 (1961), 61.

<sup>34</sup> Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, p. 100.

a world that was turning increasingly pagan.<sup>35</sup> If so, then there would be several implications.

First, the Old Testament evidence of this family would mirror the pattern of the rest of mankind where they were beginning to incorporate elements of pagan worship into their belief system as shown by comparing Joshua 24:2 with Genesis 31:53.<sup>36</sup> In other words, what we see in the life of the patriarchs is a process of syncretism and compromise. One example that seems to support this is Laban. Laban was Nahor's grandson, thus he was the great grandson of Terah, the grand-nephew of Abraham, and Rebekah's brother. While in Genesis 31:53 he called on the God of his great uncle and cousins, at the same time he included *teraphim* in his home which were apparently religious items. While generally viewed as 'household idols,' (so NASB in Genesis 31:19),<sup>37</sup> Hoffner suggests that they were 'mantic devices employed for cultic inquiry.'<sup>38</sup> In any case, this is what Rachel, Laban's daughter and the wife of Abraham's grandson Jacob, subsequently stole.<sup>39</sup>

Second, it would then suggest that this encroaching idolatry was one reason (and perhaps the primary reason) why Abram and Terah left Ur. The suggestion here is that God's call to Abraham came to him while he was in Mesopotamia (as indicated in Acts), but that it was a collective call to the elements of the family who were still holding fast to the worship of

<sup>35</sup> Michael A. Harbin, *To Serve Other Gods* (Lanham MD: University Press of America, 1994), p. 31. This is *contra* Segal who argues that Abraham rejected the worship of the moon god of his culture and became a monotheist. It is interesting that Segal maintains that the worship of YHWH may be traced back to Enosh in Genesis 4:26, but that Abraham's monotheism was new to him, to which he attached the name YHWH. Thus, he argues that 'Abraham and not Moses was the founder of Israel's monotheism' (Segal, pp. 41-9).

<sup>36</sup> Michael A. Harbin, 'Melchizedek and the Name of Jesus,' paper presented at the Evangelical Theological Society Annual Meeting, San Francisco, California, November 2011.

<sup>37</sup> Oswalt states that the meaning of the word itself is unknown, but they are viewed as 'household gods ranging from rather small (Gen 31:34, 35), to nearly life-sized (1 Sam 19:13, 16)'. He suggests that one function was divination. It is also noted that in Nuzi, an archaeological site whose records illuminate activities performed by the patriarchs, the possession of the *teraphim* was associated with headship of the household ;J. Oswalt, s.v. 'Teraphim', in *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. by Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975), vol. 5, p. 677.

<sup>38</sup> Harry A. Hoffner, Jr., 'Hittite *Tarpiš* and Hebrew *Terāphim*', *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 27 (1968), 66.

<sup>39</sup> Segal suggests that the purpose of this theft was to prevent her father from consulting the *teraphim* as an oracle (p. 63).

the true God in an increasingly pagan culture. As the father and head of the family, it was Terah who led the way which would explain the Genesis statement that ‘Terah *took* Abram his son, and Lot the son of Haran, his grandson, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Abram’s wife; and they went out together from Ur of the Chaldeans in order to enter the land of Canaan’ (Gen. 11:31, italics added). This would also explain why this material is part of Terah’s *’elle tôle dôt* section of the book.

Third, another reason for this call would be that it was a step in the process of God’s preparing the way for the Messiah. This step would require a demonstration of faith on the part of the human figures involved which ran directly counter to the increasing paganism of the culture around them. Archaeological records suggest several things were happening in this region. There was a drying out process going on in the entire Mediterranean region, which had led to several social upheavals. The land of Canaan had apparently lost its population as a result and was temporarily empty.<sup>40</sup> There were tremendous social upheavals in Mesopotamia, which has been called the Ammonite invasion.<sup>41</sup> All of this put together would suggest that the time is right for Terah and Abram to occupy the land.

But, and here is where the issue of human choice comes in, Terah decided to remain in Haran even though Genesis 11:31 and 15:7 indicate that the goal from the beginning was Canaan. As such, it would seem that as a consequence he ended up being passed by while God’s program advanced. This illustrates a pattern observed a number of times throughout the Old Testament. One example of this would be King Saul. In 1 Samuel 13:12-13, Saul is told that by not following Samuel’s instructions, he lost the dynasty that would have been his.<sup>42</sup> There Samuel states ‘the Lord would have established your kingdom over Israel forever, but now your kingdom shall not endure. The Lord has sought out for Himself a man after His own heart.’ One of the key messages of 1 Samuel is that because of this and other decisions Saul died a failure while the nation was delivered by David. A second example comes from the book of Esther where Mordecai tells his niece that Israel *would* be delivered (the inference is by God). The only question for her was whether she would have a

<sup>40</sup> David Neev and K. O. Emery, *The Destruction of Sodom, Gomorrah, and Jericho* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 59-67.

<sup>41</sup> William W. Hallo and William Kelly Simpson, *The Ancient Near East: A History* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, Inc., 1971), pp. 71-7.

<sup>42</sup> Robert D. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel* (New American Commentary, 7; Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), pp. 150-1.

part in the program.<sup>43</sup> Overall, it is felt that this dichotomy explains why Stephen could correctly say that Abram was called out of Ur.

### ABRAHAM OBEYS GOD

One more implication of the sequence that we have been following is that by the time Abraham did get to the land, he was able to dwell there, but was not able to possess it. This is the pattern that we see in chapters 12-15 which is formalized in Genesis 15 where God tells Abraham that his descendants would not have the land for several hundred years. In the meantime, Abraham himself would 'go to [his] fathers in peace.' It seems that there were two reasons for this deferment.

First, in a practical sense, it would appear that because Terah remained in Haran, by the time the members of the family who continued on to Canaan went, the family size was significantly reduced. We are not given numbers, and it does seem probable that even when they left Ur they were not what we might consider a large troop, but the evidence suggests that more were involved than just Terah, Lot, and Abraham and their wives. Genesis 14 indicates this when Abraham went to rescue his nephew Lot who had been kidnapped by the Chedorlaomer alliance. According to Genesis 14:14, in addition to several Amorite allies, Abraham had 318 trained men, 'born in his house.' It is to be granted that this was after his return from Egypt where he had acquired male servants (Genesis 12:16) and it would also include 'the persons they had acquired in Haran' (Genesis 12:5). Even so, it seems likely that the entourage that left Ur would have included several hundred at a minimum.<sup>44</sup>

Second, as a result of this delay while Abraham remained with Terah in Haran, other tribes began moving into the land that Terah and Abram were supposed to have occupied. This is indicated by several interesting comments by the narrator. Genesis 12:6 reports that Abraham moved through the land to Shechem, which is in the middle of the land promised. It also states that 'Now the Canaanite *was* then in the land' (italics in original). The word translated 'then' here is the adverb 'āz which serves to provide emphasis.<sup>45</sup> This emphasis is highlighted in Genesis 13:7, when

<sup>43</sup> Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* (New American Commentary, 10; Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993), p. 336.

<sup>44</sup> Westermann follows Zimmerli in asserting that 'Abraham therefore must have had a household of at least a thousand men' at the time of his rescue of Lot; Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36: A Commentary*, trans. by John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985), p. 201.

<sup>45</sup> Cassuto notes that the word can be understood as indicating 'still,' or 'already.' He suggests that the purpose is to emphasize 'that the land was not empty,

after Abraham returned from Egypt we are told that ‘Now the Canaanite and the Perizzite were dwelling then in the land.’ The situation climaxes in Genesis 15 where Abraham is told that actual possession will be deferred, and God tells him that his descendants will be given the tribes in the land which now includes ‘the Kenite and the Kenizzite and the Kadmonite and the Hittite and the Perizzite and the Rephaim and the Amorite and the Canaanite and the Girgashite and the Jebusite’ (verses 19-21).

This last tribe occupied Salem or Jerusalem, and their king was Melchizedek. It appears that Melchizedek not only worshipped the same God Abraham served but was a priest to Him.<sup>46</sup> It is then suggested that not only was it grace on God’s part that he did not destroy those groups who were moving into the land promised to Abraham, it was in recognition of the piety of at least some. Rather, Abraham is told in Genesis 15:16 that the iniquity of the Amorite (a collective name given to those tribes) was not yet complete—i.e., judgment would come at some point in the future.

## THE INTERTWINING OF SOVEREIGNTY AND FREE WILL

Part of the tension between God’s sovereignty and man’s free will is that they seem mutually exclusive. If God is sovereign, then he ultimately controls everything that happens. This seems to preclude free will on the part of his created beings, e.g., humans. On the other hand, if humans have free will then God would seem not to be really in control.<sup>47</sup> And yet this seems to run counter to both our intuitive understanding and scripture.<sup>48</sup> This is an issue that countless have wrestled with, and this writer certainly does not pretend that he has a solution to it. However, he would point out several aspects of the tension that this section suggests.

First, the text tells us that Terah and his family settled in Haran although they had set out to enter Canaan (Genesis 11:31). We are not told why this decision was made, but given what we see of Terah’s descendants in Haran later, it seems likely that they followed a process of syncretism as they began serving other gods. To point out the tension, the writer, staying within the same *‘elle tôl’dôt* section and immediately following the statement that Terah died, states that God now called Abraham to go

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and consequently Abraham was not able to take possession of it at once’ (pp. 327-8).

<sup>46</sup> Ross, pp. 293-4.

<sup>47</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947), vol. 1, pp. 238-41.

<sup>48</sup> Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989), p. 208.

the land of Canaan—the same land that Terah stopped short of.<sup>49</sup> If our understanding of that *'elle tôl<sup>e</sup>dôt* phrase is correct, then 'what happened to' Terah was that Abraham took his place and thus received the promises which could have been Terah's although it does raise the question of whether Terah had a real option?

Second, although God promised the land to Abraham, when he got there he was not allowed to possess it.<sup>50</sup> Our suggestion is that this was a consequence of the failure for the family to continue on to the land after leaving Ur. Instead, the possession was deferred to Abraham's descendants. Even within this declaration, there is an intermingling of God's intervention into 'the affairs of men' and His knowledge of human nature and the outcome. God declared that the iniquity of the Amorite was 'not yet complete' (Genesis 15:16), indicating that a time would come when that iniquity would be complete, demanding judgment—and God foreknew it.<sup>51</sup> As Kidner points out the future conquest would be in response to the anticipated immorality and thus would be an act of justice, not aggression. He states: 'Until it was *right* to invade, God's people must wait (*italics in original*).'<sup>52</sup> What he does not address is why God would withhold intervention to prevent those tribes from moving into the territory which God had designated for someone else; a step we have suggested was a consequence of the actions of the various Canaanite groups. Instead, it would not be until centuries later and then God would directly intervene when he judged the nation that enslaved Abraham's descendants and bring them to this land. And thus, the land would be given as promised.

So the picture that develops is that in the tension between God's sovereignty and man's free will, both are involved—and intertwined in the mix is the inscrutable concept of God's foreknowledge. In this case, it would seem that God issued a call to Terah and his family to leave the increasingly pagan Ur. The purpose was to begin the Messianic line at this point in history. The option was Terah's in his role as the head of the family. While his line would produce the Messiah, he lost his position as the head by remaining in Haran (a decision which God would have foreknown). Rather, the call was then issued to Abraham who had been drawn out of Ur as part of the family, and now as the head he obeyed. But, at this time,

<sup>49</sup> With respect to the tension, it does not matter whether Abraham left while Terah was still alive or after his death. The point is that Terah made the decision not to go into the land, and God then directed Abraham to do so, which he did (see also Hamilton, pp. 366-8).

<sup>50</sup> Cassuto, pp. 327-8.

<sup>51</sup> Sarna, p. 117.

<sup>52</sup> Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1968), p. 125.

the land was now occupied and God demonstrated His grace and mercy by not immediately rooting out the usurpers; and Abraham's possession of the land was deferred until judgment was demanded. In the process, however, God's plan was not thwarted, and the Messianic line was still developed through the seed of Abraham.

This might suggest that God's focus in the call to Terah was on the ultimate goal which is the Messianic line and the nation that was to produce it. As such, could Terah have had the very real option of obeying God and being the founder of the nation? Here it would be very tempting to speculate on what that nation might look like—but it would just be speculation. And, we would argue that in his foreknowledge, God knew which direction the story would go. Our struggle is that as we try to grasp the intricacies involved we tend to arrive at an either-or understanding. The reality seems to be that it is a both-and process where God allows men to make choices (even to the point of deliberate disobedience) while at the same time accomplishing his goals (Romans 8:28). Thus, instead of a matter of black and white, or even many shades of grey, it is a process so complex that a more fitting metaphor might be a full colour spectrum—including the shadings into the ultra-violet and infra-red hues that we are aware that are there, but cannot see.<sup>53</sup> It is at this point that all we can do is stop and reverently fall before a God who is truly Awesome and totally beyond comprehension.

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<sup>53</sup> In a similar vein, Calvin states regarding predestination (an aspect of this issue): 'First, then, when they inquire into predestination, let them remember that they are penetrating into the recesses of the divine wisdom, where he who rushes forward securely and confidently, instead of satisfying his curiosity will enter in inextricable labyrinth. For it is not right that man should with impunity pry into things which the Lord has been pleased to conceal within himself, and scan that sublime eternal wisdom which it is his pleasure that we should not apprehend but adore, that therein also his perfections may appear'; John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. by Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970), III.xxi.1 (vol. 2, p. 204).



