

## How Long did Jacob Wrestle with Laban—Part One

*What were the societies and cultures like in Mesopotamia during the time of the biblical patriarchs? Why was Jacob sent into Mesopotamia to choose a wife from among the daughters of Laban? And how many years did Jacob live with and work for Laban in Harran?*

The patriarch Abraham was a prosperous merchant and sojourner in the Middle East who came from the Sumerian city-state of Ur in a land of the Chaldeans. These Chaldeans lived in the lower valley of the Euphrates at the head of the Persian Gulf (Bitter Sea), and they—like other peoples in the region—were caught up in the various warring conflicts among the developing city-states of Mesopotamia.

In time one of the earliest of these Mesopotamian city-states became an “empire” during the rule of Sargon the Great of Akkad, who came to prominence with the conquest of the Sumerian city-states and his defeat of Lugalzaggesi (Lugal means “king,” or “mighty one”), who is thought by some people to have been the Nimrod of Scripture. And a consequence of Sargon’s expanding rule over southern Mesopotamia was the spread of the Semitic tongue known as Akkadian, which was replaced by a later lingua franca known as Aramaic (Gen. 10:9-12).

Then with the decline of the dynasty of Akkad there was a resurgence of influence—a renaissance—in the city-state of Ur under the leadership of Ur-Nammu, the first king of the

Third Dynasty of Ur. And as understood from ancient records he was called the “king of Sumer and Akkad,” and the oldest known surviving law code—Code of Ur-Nammu—is attributed to him, which is considered by some to be three centuries older than the Code of Hammurabi.

Notably then Ur-Nammu’s leadership and influence, along with that of the succeeding rulers of Ur’s Third Dynasty, created a significant influence on the societies and cultures in the region where the patriarch Abraham was born. But as with other city-states and their dynasties the Third Dynasty of Ur also succumbed to the continuing problems of the warring city-states until it too fell into decline and was eventually overthrown by the Aramaeans and Elamites, who were—in the larger picture of ancient history—related to the descendants of Asshur and Arpachshad—sons of the biblical patriarch Shem.

And this gives us something to consider.

The patriarch Noah died about two years before the birth of Abraham because Noah lived for 350 more years after the Flood. And the patriarch Shem was still alive when Abraham was born, and he was still living when Abraham and his family departed from Ur, noting that a forefather of Abraham and possible founder of Ur was Arpachshad who was also living when Abraham was a young man in the region of Chaldea.

Consequently the societies and cultures that Abraham grew up in were influenced by those

who had experienced the Flood and by those who were born shortly thereafter. Therefore the nature of the Flood and the reason for it would not have been unknown in the time of Abraham.

This tells us that in the years following the Flood—a deluge that destroyed earlier descendants of Adam and the pre-Flood patriarchs—there were again aggressively growing conflicts among the family groupings descended from Adam. And despite their knowledge of the Flood the people of Abraham’s day continued to perpetuate societies of warring city-states not so different from those that developed before the Flood, which included societies that cultivated the worship of many different gods—even identifying the patriarchs with gods.

This was notably true of Terah the father of Abraham, which was confirmed by God through Joshua, who said, “Your fathers dwelt on the other side of the flood [Euphrates] in old time, even Terah, the father of Abraham, and the father of Nachor: and they served other gods.... Now therefore fear the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in truth: and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the flood, and in Egypt; and serve ye the Lord. And if it seem evil unto you to serve the Lord, choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the flood, or the gods of the Amorites [of Amor], in whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord” (Jos. 24:2, 14-15). [Author’s emphasis throughout.]

Here we have a glimpse into the societies and cultures of Abraham’s day, and the then Mesopotamian world with its politics and

religions, which were influential on the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and also Jacob who in a dishonest manner took the birth-right promise and family inheritance from Esau. And interestingly it was this particular event regarding the birth-right promise that resulted in Jacob being sent into the region where his great grandfather Terah had eventually settled after leaving Ur. And it was here that Jacob would live for many years among his relatives near Harran.

But let’s review a little more about the story of Abraham.

Scripture states that: “Terah begat Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran begat Lot. And Haran died before his father Terah in the land of his nativity, in Ur of the Chaldees. And Abram and Nahor took them wives: the name of Abram’s wife was Sarai; and the name of Nahor’s wife, Milcah, the daughter of Haran, the father of Milcah, and the father of Ischah. But Sarai was barren; she had no child. And Terah took Abram his son, and Lot the son of Haran his son’s son, and Sarai his daughter in law, his son Abram’s wife; and they went forth with them from Ur of the Chaldees, to go into the land of Canaan; and they came unto Haran [Harran], and dwelt there” (Gen. 11:27-31).

So Terah and his son Abraham and Abraham’s nephew Lot and their families made their journey to upper Mesopotamia where they settled near the Euphrates River in a place that became known as Harran. Then sometime after Terah had died Abraham continued his journey into the land of Canaan. (Harran was once a major city of the ancient world, which is today considered to be near the modern village of Altinbaşak in Turkey. It is not far from modern Sanliurfa

that was at one time referred to as Urfa of the Chaldeans.)

This same story regarding Abraham's family was generally restated by Stephen who said, "Men, brethren, and fathers, hearken; The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Charran [Harran], And said unto him, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and come into the land which I shall shew thee. Then came he out of the land of the Chaldaeans, and dwelt in Charran [Harran]: and from thence, when his father was dead, he removed him into this land, wherein ye now dwell. And he gave him none inheritance in it, no, not so much as to set his foot on: yet he promised that he would give it to him for a possession, and to his seed after him, when as yet he had no child" (Acts 7:2-5). (Stephen's historical account of Abraham's sojourn clearly states that Abraham did not receive the promise in his lifetime, which unquestionably implies a resurrection from the dead for the fulfillment of this particular promise given to Abraham.)

Now in respect to Abraham's brother, Nahor, he had eight sons and one of them was named Bethuel, and he had a daughter named Rebekah who married Abraham's son Isaac. Bethuel also had a son named Laban, and Laban had two daughters named Leah and Rachel, and it was into this family that Jacob would marry and have a long period of contention with his uncle and father-in-law Laban. And this part of Jacob's story began when his mother Rebekah contrived a plan for Jacob to receive the birth-right confirmation and family inheritance, effectively taking it away from Esau.

Consequently Rebekah's plan only served to create more rivalry and conflict between Jacob and his brother Esau, who hated Jacob enough to kill him. This prompted Rebekah to send Jacob to Harran for his safety, but his father Isaac used it as an opportunity to find a wife for Jacob.

"And Isaac calleth unto Jacob, and blesseth him, and commandeth him, and saith to him, 'Thou dost not take a wife of the daughters of Caanan; rise, go to Padan-Aram, to the house of Bethuel, thy mother's father, and take for thyself from thence a wife, of the daughters of Laban, thy mother's brother; and God Almighty doth bless thee, and make thee fruitful, and multiply thee, and thou hast become an assembly of peoples; and He doth give to thee the blessing of Abraham, to thee and to thy seed with thee, to cause thee to possess the land of thy sojournings, which God gave to Abraham.' And Isaac sendeth away Jacob, and he goeth to Padan-Aram, unto Laban, son of Bethuel the Aramaean [Syrian, AV], brother of Rebekah, mother of Jacob and Esau" (Gen. 28:1-5, YLT). (Here we have the promise of Abraham's blessing affirmed to the yet unborn children of Jacob.)

So it was that Jacob began his journey to the land of Harran after having confirmed the receiving of the promises from his father Isaac. And along the way Jacob stopped to rest in the evening and after he fell asleep he dreamed of a ladder set on the earth that reached to heaven, and on the ladder he saw: "the angels of God ascending and descending on it. And, behold, the Lord stood above it, and said, I am the Lord God of Abraham thy father, and the God of Isaac: the land whereon thou liest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed; And thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth, and thou shalt spread abroad to the

west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south: and in thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed” (Gen. 28:12-14). (See also Gal. 3:16.)

Here we have a reaffirmation of the promises given to Abraham by God so that in Jacob’s seed—that is by his descendants and from among his descendants—the world would be blessed. And this was stated to Jacob in the context that God (YHWH) was the God of his grandfather Abraham and his father Isaac. Therefore Jacob determined to accept the God of his fathers if God would take care of him and bring him back to his father’s family in the land of Canaan. (The area where Jacob was going to find a wife was a land that was in some measure included in the promises given to Abraham as understood from Genesis 15:7-18 and Joshua 3:10.)


Now upon nearing Harran, Jacob came to a well where he met some shepherds, and there he also met a daughter of Laban named Rachel. This led to Jacob meeting Laban who claimed that Jacob was his kindred through his sister Rebekah.

Then after staying with Laban for a month Jacob was offered a wage for his work, and this is where Jacob made an unusual contract with Laban.

Jacob decided to strike a deal with Laban by offering to work for seven years under the agreement that Laban would give his daughter Rachel to Jacob to be his wife. This of course was agreeable to Laban, but when the time came for Jacob to marry Rachel, Laban deceived Jacob into marrying Leah first, claiming a regional custom.

However Laban did allow him to marry Rachel a week later, providing that Jacob would enter into another agreement to work an additional seven years, which indentured Jacob to Laban for many years in the area of Paddan Aram. Then later Jacob was again persuaded to enter into a third contractual agreement, which lasted for six years during which time Jacob would establish his own livestock and wealth while working for Laban.

Therefore the total number of years Jacob was under contractual agreements with Laban was 20 years, which many people assume was the total number of years Jacob was wrestling and contending with Laban’s beguiling and dishonest nature while living in the area of Harran.

But did Jacob work for Laban and struggle with him for only 20 years?  **(Continued in part two of this series.)**