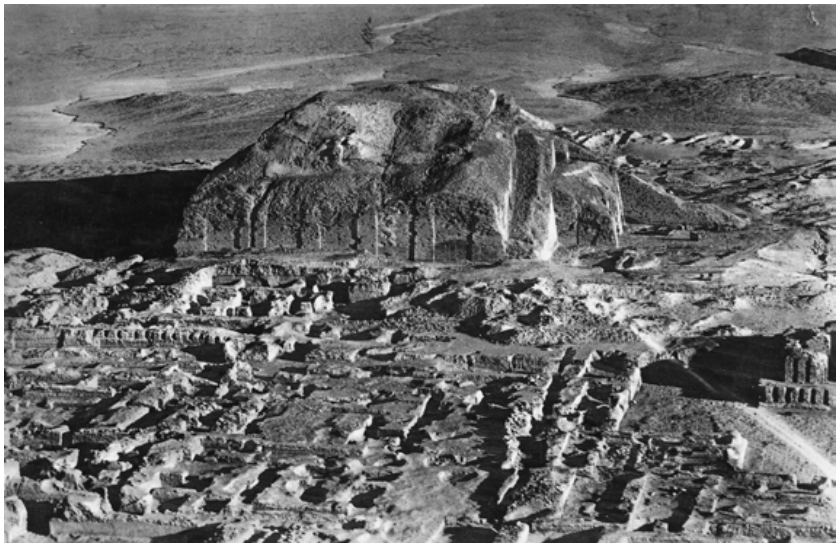

The Ziggurat of Ur and the surrounding excavation field from an aerial photograph taken in 1927. Initially constructed at the end of the third millennium BC by the king Ur-Nammu, the ziggurat eventually fell into disrepair and was restored by the Neo-Babylonian king Nabonidus in the sixth century BC. The ziggurat was dedicated to the moon god Sîn, who also had a cult center at Haran in the north. The idolatry of Abraham's father Terah (Josh. 24:2, 14) has been connected to the worship of the moon deity at Ur and Haran.

"In the Land of the Chaldeans"

The Search for Abraham's Homeland Revisited

Stephen O. Smoot

Readers of the Hebrew Bible first encounter Abram (later Abraham), the spiritual father of the three great monotheistic faiths—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—at the end of Genesis 11. There they discover he was the son of a certain Terah and claimed "Ur of the Chaldeans" as his home (Gen. 11:28).[1] Being as central as Abraham is to the patriarchal narratives of Genesis and, subsequently, to the faith of scores of believers across the globe, both faithful and nonbelieving readers have turned a critical eye toward the passages where Abraham makes an appearance and have attempted to discern if any historicity lies beneath the narratives enshrined in the Bible.

Latter-day Saints have likewise been drawn to this discussion, given the existence of the Book of Abraham, which enjoys canonical status in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as part of the book of scripture called the Pearl of Great Price. The Book of Abraham purports to be the autobiography of the eponymous patriarch and offers narrative details that on many points converge with Genesis. For instance, as in Genesis, Ur of the Chaldeans claims the privilege of being Abraham's ancestral and personal residence according to the Book of Abraham (Abr. 1:1; 2:1–4). Unlike Genesis, however, the Book of Abraham describes some kind of Egyptian influence or presence in Ur of the Chaldeans that almost resulted in Abraham's execution for cultic

1. Biblical citations for this article are drawn from the New Revised Standard Version.

offenses (Abr. 1:8–20).[2] These additional elements in the Latter-day Saint scriptural tradition concerning the life of Abraham have, at least from a Latter-day Saint perspective, added some unique (and uniquely challenging) dynamics to the overall discussion about the historicity of the scriptural work "purporting to be the writings of Abraham, while he was in Egypt."[3]

Indeed, the debate swirling around the historicity of Abraham has grown considerably since the rise of the historical-critical method of biblical studies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the great strides made in Syro-Palestinian and Mesopotamian archaeology in the past century. There exists an almost unending stream of monographs, articles, and other works exploring nearly every aspect of this subject. My efforts for this paper shall therefore be relatively modest. In this treatment, I will not attempt to stake out any definitive position for or against the historicity of Abraham either in Genesis or in the book of LDS scripture that bears his name. It would be impossible to do justice to any such attempt in such a short treatment. Rather, I shall focus my attention on highlighting and exploring a few elements of this debate and bring to focus what the current body of evidence can and cannot resolve for us.

Since Abraham is said to have dwelt in "Ur of the Chaldeans," we might start by asking: do either the books of Genesis or Abraham offer any information about the ancient city most scholars consider Abraham's Ur (modern Tell el-Muqayyar in southern Iraq)? Do these books say anything about Ur that converges with what we know about the history of the city in the late third to early second millennia BC, the supposed time of the historical Abraham? What about the middle of the first millennium BC, the time when many biblical scholars think the end of Genesis 11 was either composed or redacted? Did the author or complier of this portion of Genesis, supposed by many to have been in Babylonian captivity at the time, betray any definitive knowledge about Ur in the pages of his story about Abraham the same way Charles Dickens betrayed knowledge of Victorian London in the pages of his many novels, for example? And if not, must we look elsewhere to find Abraham's Ur? From a Latter-day Saint perspective, we might also ask what the details provided in the Book of Abraham

2. See Kerry Muhlestein and John Gee, "An Egyptian Context for the Sacrifice of Abraham," *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 20, no. 2 (2011): 70–77.

3. "Book of Abraham," *Times and Seasons* 3 (March 1, 1842): 704.

indicate about the location of Abraham's home. If we take the historical claims of the Book of Abraham seriously, or at the very least at face value, then how might this data influence our thinking and, ultimately, our conclusions concerning this matter?

To answer these questions, I will proceed in the following order. First, I will look at what Genesis says about Abraham and his sojourns throughout Mesopotamia and Syria. I will pay special attention to passages in Genesis and elsewhere that touch on Abraham's geographical and cultural setting(s). Then I will provide a brief history of the excavation of Tell el-Muqayyar and recount what modern scholarship says about Ur in various parts of its history. From there I will compare the picture in Genesis with the archaeological picture provided by this scholarship. As will be seen in my analysis, the attempts by the renowned archaeologist Sir Leonard Woolley and others to identify Tell el-Muqayyar as Abraham's Ur are not without considerable difficulty. I will then transition into highlighting the work of scholars who have placed Abraham's Ur not in southern Iraq but rather in various sites in Syria or northern Mesopotamia. After that, I will conclude by bringing the Book of Abraham into the equation to explore the significance it carries when it comes to locating Abraham's Ur.

A few more comments before we begin. Any investigator wishing to unravel the historicity of Abraham and the patriarchs is faced with seemingly insurmountable challenges. Beyond the question of whether Abraham was a historical or mythical figure (or to what degree of either he might have been) is the question of when to date his life. Dates range anywhere from between 2200 BC to 1800 BC and beyond.[4] This inspires little confidence in our ability to pin down a definitive time for Abraham other than to say Genesis (as well as the Book of Abraham) appears to have him alive sometime during the Middle Bronze Age.

There is also the issue of the authorship and composition of the Abrahamic narratives in Genesis and the nature of Joseph Smith's "translation" of the Book of Abraham, both of which are additionally vexing problems. Many scholars, for example, prefer to see the Abrahamic

4. Wayne T. Pitard, "Before Israel: Syria-Palestine in the Bronze Age," in *The Oxford History of the Biblical World,* ed. Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 53–55; P. Kyle McCarter Jr., "The Patriarchal Age: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob," in *Ancient Israel: From Abraham to the Roman Destruction of the Temple,* ed. Hershel Shanks (Washington, D.C.: Biblical Archaeology Society, 2011), 3–14.

narratives as the result of a final redaction of earlier traditions. The earliest tradition (the so-called J or Jahwist tradition) is typically dated to sometime around the tenth to ninth centuries BC, and a later tradition (the so-called P or Priestly tradition) to the seventh to sixth centuries BC or even later.[5] Of course, these dates themselves are debated in various circles, with a growing number of scholars wanting to date the underlying language and concepts of P much earlier than perhaps heretofore supposed.[6] Likewise, the exact nature of Joseph Smith's translation of the Book of Abraham is hotly disputed, as is the historicity of the contents therein.[7] These points—too complex to focus on in much detail right now—are merely raised to alert the reader to the complex situation we face as we proceed.

Abraham in Genesis

Abram's first appearance in the biblical record is brief. He is merely noted to be the son of Terah (Gen. 11:26), the brother of Nahor and Haran (vv. 26–27), and the husband of Sarai (v. 29). For reasons that go

5. Bernhard W. Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1998), 411–14; Richard Elliott Friedman, *The Bible with Sources Revealed: A New View of the Five Books of Moses* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), 3–4, 49–74; Richard N. Soulen and R. Kendall Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism,* 4th ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 79, 101–2, 143.

6. See, for instance, the comments by Victor Hurowitz, "P—Understanding the Priestly Source," *Bible Review* 12 (June 1996): 46.

7. Some approaches to this issue include Karl C. Sandberg, "Knowing Brother Joseph Again: The Book of Abraham and Joseph Smith as Translator," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 22, no. 4 (1989): 17–37; Kerry Muhlestein, "Egyptian Papyri and the Book of Abraham: A Faithful, Egyptological Point of View," in *No Weapon Shall Prosper: New Light on Sensitive Issues,* ed. Robert L. Millet (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2011), 217–43; Brian M. Hauglid, "Thoughts on the Book of Abraham," in Millet, *No Weapon Shall Prosper,* 217–43; David Bokovoy, *Authoring the Old Testament: Genesis–Deuteronomy* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2014), 191–214; The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "Translation and Historicity of the Book of Abraham," https://www.lds.org/topics/translation-and-historicity-of-the-book-of-abraham?lang=eng; Kerry Muhlestein, "Joseph Smith and Egyptian Artifacts: A Model for Evaluating the Prophetic Nature of the Prophet's Ideas about the Ancient World," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 55, no. 3 (2016): 35–82; Kerry Muhlestein, "Assessing the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Introduction to the Historiography of Their Acquisitions, Translations, and Interpretations," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 22 (2016): 17–49.

unspecified in the text, we are informed, "Terah took his son Abram and his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, his son Abram's wife, and they went out together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan; but when they came to Haran, they settled there" (v. 31). This concludes the initial introduction of Abram and his family, with only sparse genealogical and geographical information provided in these passages.

Genesis 12 begins as abruptly as Genesis 11 ends. Here we encounter Abram's prophetic call and divine commission. "Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed'" (Gen. 12:1–3). What is especially revealing in these verses is the comment that Haran (located in northwestern Mesopotamia[8])—and not Ur of the Chaldeans—is identified as Abram's "country" (ארץ, "land"). This has led some, such as Friedman, to conclude that the redactor of Genesis had Abram and his family migrate from Ur in the south to Haran in the north to smooth out the apparently contradictory traditions recorded in Genesis 11 (southern location) and Genesis 12 (northern location).[9] While this is certainly one way to explain this anomaly, it is not the only possible solution, as we will explore below.

The next several chapters include the details of Abraham and his family in Canaan and Egypt (Gen. 12–23). It is in Genesis 24 where more relevant geographical information about Abraham's homeland comes into play. Here Abraham instructs his servant to "go to my country [ארץ] and to my kindred and get a wife for my son Isaac" (v. 4). The servant obliges, but instead of returning down to Ur in southern Mesopotamia, he fetches Isaac's wife Rebekah from "Aram-naharaim" ("Aram of the two rivers"; v. 10) in the north, not far from Haran.[10] This detail led

8. Cyrus H. Gordon, "Where Is Abraham's Ur?" *Biblical Archaeology Review* 3, no. 2 (1977): 20; Mark Wilson, *Biblical Turkey: A Guide to the Jewish and Christian Sites of Asia Minor* (Istanbul: Ege Yayinlari, 2010), 51–53.

9. Friedman, *Bible with Sources Revealed,* 50.

10. John A. Tvedtnes and Ross Christensen, "Ur of the Chaldeans: Increasing Evidence on the Birthplace of Abraham and the Original Homeland of the Hebrews," in *Special Publications of the Society for Early Historic Archaeology* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1985), 27–28; Wilson, *Biblical Turkey,* 40.

Gordon,[11] Hamilton,[12] Lundquist,[13] and Wilson[14] to see northern Mesopotamia as Abraham's native land, not Ur in southern Mesopotamia as Genesis 11 would seemingly have us believe.

The rest of Genesis, which contains the subsequent accounts of Abraham's son Isaac, grandson Jacob, and great-grandson Joseph (Gen. 24–50), appears to strengthen the contention of these and other scholars that northern Mesopotamia and Syria is both the immediate and ancestral setting for Abraham's clan. When Isaac instructed his son Jacob to find a wife, he directed him to the vicinity of "Paddan-aram [פדן ארם; "field/garden of Aram"] to the house of Bethuel, your mother's father," to "take as wife from there one of the daughters of Laban, your mother's brother" (Gen. 28:2). This Jacob accordingly did, and having secured no less than four wives from the area (Gen. 29–30) returned to Canaan from Paddan-aram (Gen. 31:18; 33:18; 35:9, 26). Once again, we encounter a northern setting for Jacob's activities and the home of his relatives, since Paddan-aram is recognized as being either identical with or located near Haran in northern Mesopotamia.[15]

Genesis is not the only biblical text to place Abraham and his immediate family in the north. Deuteronomy contains one passing reference to the ethnic identity of either Abraham or (more likely) Jacob/Israel. "When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the Lord your God," the text reads, "you shall make this response before the Lord your God: 'A wandering Aramean was my ancestor [ארמי אבד אבי]; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous'" (Deut. 26:4–5). Here the text reinforces the narratives of Genesis that portray the patriarchs as enjoying an Aramean and not southern Mesopotamian origin or identity.[16]

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11. Cyrus H. Gordon, "Abraham and the Merchants of Ura," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 17 (January 1958): 30–31; Gordon, "Where Is Abraham's Ur?" 20.

12. Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1990), 364.

13. John M. Lundquist, "Was Abraham at Ebla? A Cultural Background of the Book of Abraham," in *Studies in Scripture—Volume Two: The Pearl of Great Price,* ed. Robert L. Millet and Kent P. Jackson (Salt Lake City: Randall Book, 1985), 226.

14. Wilson, *Biblical Turkey,* 49.

15. Wilson, *Biblical Turkey,* 41–42.

16. Edwin M. Yamauchi, "Abraham and Archaeology: Anachronisms or Adaptations?" in *Perspectives on Our Father Abraham: Essays in Honor of*

The History of the Excavation of Tell el-Muqayyar

The biblical tradition would therefore seem to place Abraham's homeland in the north. To fully understand how Tell el-Muqayyar (Urim or Uru in the Sumerian and Akkadian cuneiform sources) in the south came to be identified as Abraham's Ur in the minds of many scholars, it is needful for us to look briefly at the history of the site's excavation. Before I detail this history, however, I wish to point out that my designating Tell el-Muqayyar as "Ur" is simply to be consistent with standard academic language. That is to say, even though, as I'll explain below, I am skeptical that Tell el-Muqayyar is specifically Abraham's Ur, I will nevertheless, for the sake of convenience, follow the scholarly literature as I describe the history of the site by calling it Ur. The reader should simply be aware that while Tell el-Muqayyar may be *one* Ur, there is debate about whether it is *the* Ur, as we will shortly see.

Jewish and Islamic tradition has long placed Abraham's birthplace and homeland in the north, near modern Urfa in southern Turkey.[17] This tradition very likely arose in response to nothing less than the very passages from Genesis reviewed above. Even today, Urfa (modern Sanliurfa) in southern Turkey persists as the traditional site of Abraham's birthplace and remains a pilgrimage site for Muslims.[18] It would not be until the nineteenth century that scholars began to look southward for Abraham's Ur. Although it was Leonard Woolley who first revealed the full significance of Tell el-Muqayyar in the early part of the twentieth century, by the time he published his findings, excavations at the site had already been undertaken as early as the 1850s with the work of the British archaeologist John Taylor.[19]

Taylor, however, made no connection between the site and the biblical Ur in his initial excavations. Instead, he described some of the monumental architecture (complete with rough sketches) and ceramic

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Marvin R. Wilson, ed. Steven A. Hunt (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), 22–24.

17. George Bush, *Notes, Critical and Practical, on the Book of Genesis: Designed as a General Help to Biblical Reading and Instruction,* 2 vols., 3rd ed. (Andover: Gould, Newman and Saxton, 1839), 1:188–89; Paul Y. Hoskisson, "Where Was Ur of the Chaldees?" in *The Pearl of Great Price: Revelations from God,* ed. H. Donl Peterson and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1989), 121; Wilson, *Biblical Turkey,* 49.

18. Wilson, *Biblical Turkey,* 49.

19. John E. Taylor, "Notes on the Ruins of Muqeyer," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 15 (1855): 260–76.

vessels uncovered at the site. It would not be long after Taylor that biblical scholars began to recognize the potential of Abraham's Ur being Tell el-Muqayyar. By the end of the nineteenth century, German and English scholars were beginning to make the positive association between the Ur of Genesis and the Urim of Tell el-Muqayyar as deciphered in the now-readable cuneiform texts from the site and elsewhere. Doubt lingered in the minds of some on philological grounds, but by the early twentieth century the *communis opinio* had been secured: Abraham's Ur was none other than Tell el-Muqayyar.[20]

Woolley's excavations at Tell el-Muqayyar from 1922 to 1934 revealed a tremendous amount about Ur in nearly every period of its history. His voluminous work, including his multivolume field reports *Ur Excavations* and his synthesizing (if not also popularizing) monographs such as *Ur of the Chaldees, Abraham,* and *Excavations at Ur,* revolutionized our understanding of the ancient city.[21] Funded by the British Museum and the University of Pennsylvania, Woolley's excavations uncovered graves, royal tombs (with spectacular artifacts), private houses, royal residences, temples, plentiful inscriptions, and numerous other goods and wares. Even today, public imagination is thrilled by the "Standard of Ur," the "Ram in a Thicket," and the recovered goods of the tomb of queen Puabi.

Besides providing archaeologists a veritable treasure trove of artifacts and texts helpful in reconstructing the history of Ur and southern Mesopotamia more generally, Woolley's excavations likewise—in the minds of many, at least—appeared to settle the question as to the location of Abraham's Ur. The new evidence uncovered at Ur, it was argued (including by Woolley himself), appeared to grant more than enough credibility for the historicity of Abraham. The old traditions putting Abraham's Ur in the north were dismissed,[22] and, armed with a decade's worth of excavations, Woolley illuminated Genesis and other parts of the Hebrew Bible in the light of his discoveries. His initial efforts proved

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20. Hoskisson, "Where Was Ur of the Chaldees?" 121–23.

21. Leonard Woolley and Max Mallowan, *Ur Excavations* (London: The British Museum, 1927–62); Leonard Woolley, *Ur of the Chaldees* (London: E. Benn., 1929); Leonard Woolley, *Abraham: Recent Discoveries and Hebrew Origins* (London: Faber and Faber, 1936); Leonard Woolley, *Excavations at Ur: A Record of Twelve Years' Work* (London: E. Benn. 1954); Leonard Woolley and P. R. S. Moorey, *Ur "of the Chaldees,"* rev. ed. (London: Herbert Press, 1982).

22. Woolley, *Abraham,* 57–71.

persuasive, and a generation of scholars, even those who saw problems with Woolley's work,[23] happily followed his arguments.

Ur in the Third to Second Millennium BC

With this brief history of the discovery and excavation of Tell el-Muqayyar in mind, we can now consider a quick profile of Ur during the two periods relevant to Abraham: the late third to early second millennium BC (the Ur III to Old Babylonian periods) and the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian periods of the mid-first millennium BC. Understanding Ur during these two periods is important, since Woolley and others have speculated not only that the historical Abraham lived sometime in the Ur III or Old Babylonian periods but also that the Genesis narrative was composed or redacted during the Neo-Babylonian period.

In undertaking any investigation into the history of Ur, one is quickly confronted with several problems. The first and most obvious is the sheer amount of history that one must wade through. In historical times, Ur as an urban area is known to have existed at least as early as 2800 BC.[24] In its earliest historical period, it was an important Sumerian city-state that—along with Uruk, Larsa, Eridu, and Lagash, to name a few others—was a key player in the political and social history of southern Mesopotamia in the Early Dynastic Period (2900–2350 BC). It continued to serve as an important religious and political city throughout the Ur III (c. 2112–c. 2004 BC), Old Babylonian (2000–1600 BC), and later Kassite (c. 1595–1155 BC) periods.[25] And this is to say nothing of the first millennium, when Ur continued as a city of no small importance during both the Neo-Assyrian (911–612 BC) and Neo-Babylonian (626–539 BC) eras.[26] As such, any look at Ur is going to have to reckon

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23. Theodor H. Gaster, "Reviewed Work: Abraham: Recent Discoveries and Hebrew Origins by Leonard Woolley," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 3 (July 1937): 529–31.

24. Marc Van de Mieroop, *A History of the Ancient Near East ca. 3000–323 BC* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 41–43.

25. Van de Mieroop, *History of the Ancient Near East,* 66–69, 72–84; J. A. Brinkman, "Ur: 'The Kassite Period and the Period of Assyrian Kings,'" *Orientalia* 38, no. 2 (1969): 310–48.

26. J. A. Brinkman, "Review: Ur: 721–605 B.C.," *Orientalia* 34, no. 2 (1965): 241–58; Jean-Claude Margueron, "Ur," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary,* ed. David Noel Freedman, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:766–67; J. J. M. Roberts, "Chaldea, Chaldeans," in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible,*

with several centuries of history, with some centuries being better documented and understood than others.

Van de Mieroop has noted other problems that confront us as well.[27] The first is the changing countryside around the city, which over the centuries has obscured the "numerous settlements" that almost certainly surrounded Ur.[28] A second problem related to the first is our inability to accurately date the remains of these settlements "with sufficient accuracy to be of great value for a detailed historical study." Laments Van de Mieroop, "The inaccuracies of the chronological information make it impossible to establish what settlements existed at exactly the same time. Moreover, as almost none of these sites have been excavated, they remain nameless. It is thus impossible to relate them to the textual information from Ur."[29] These and other hindrances should sober anyone attempting to reconstruct a history of Ur.

Thankfully, not all is lost, as the combined archaeological and textual evidence is able to provide a reasonable enough picture of ancient Ur. Building on the early work of Woolley and others, Van de Mieroop has carefully combed through the evidence to reconstruct Ur's size, environment, economy, populace, government, and architecture. Ur was about average size for a Mesopotamian city, rounding out at about sixty-one hectares from the early second millennium onward.[30] Compared to Babylon, Uruk, and other sites that stretched out hundreds of hectares, Ur was a rather modest city.[31] Still, Van de Mieroop's investigations reveal a metropolitan Ur in the third to early second millennium that featured: a robust temple economy that dealt in land, livestock, specialized workshops, gifts, taxes, loans, and other offerings;[32] a palace bureaucracy that oversaw economic affairs more broadly while also

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ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, 5 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006–9), 1:581–82.

27. Marc Van de Mieroop, *Society and Enterprise in Old Babylonian Ur* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 1992), 17–20.

28. Van de Mieroop, *Society and Enterprise in Old Babylonian Ur,* 17.

29. Van de Mieroop, *Society and Enterprise in Old Babylonian Ur,* 18.

30. Marc Van de Mieroop, *The Ancient Mesopotamian City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 95.

31. Van de Mieroop, *Ancient Mesopotamian City,* 94–95.

32. Van de Mieroop, *Society and Enterprise in Old Babylonian Ur,* 77–105; Van de Mieroop, *Ancient Mesopotamian City,* 181.

keeping ties with the temple;[33] several private residences and prominent neighborhoods, complete with private textual archives that afford us a glance at the daily lives of the citizenry;[34] a "private" economy made up of such professions as farmers, fishers, hunters, craftsmen, textile workers, and merchants;[35] and a population of over twenty thousand persons on average and perhaps as high as two hundred thousand persons at the height of the Ur III period.[36]

All of this is in addition to the scores of sanctuaries found at Ur during the third, second, and first millennia. Andrew George has identified some eighty temples, shrines, and sanctuaries in ancient Ur ranging from the Sumerian to the Neo-Babylonian periods.[37] Of these, the most notable is without doubt the Sîn/Nanna temple and ziggurat constructed by Ur-nammu (reigned 2047–2030 BC), founder of the Ur III dynasty.[38] Besides the economy that revolved around the temple, the cultic activities that took place at the temple on behalf of the moon deity served the religious needs of the city.[39] The building of Ur's great ziggurat was most likely a part of Ur-nammu's broader campaign to consolidate the structure of the Ur III empire. This included constructing temples at multiple sites, building canals, and standardizing law codes and judicial practice.[40]

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33. Van de Mieroop, *Society and Enterprise in Old Babylonian Ur,* 107–99, 231–38.

34. Van de Mieroop, *Society and Enterprise in Old Babylonian Ur,* 121–67.

35. Van de Mieroop, *Society and Enterprise in Old Babylonian Ur,* 169–210; Van de Mieroop, *Ancient Mesopotamian City,* 185–86.

36. Van de Mieroop, *Society and Enterprise in Old Babylonian Ur,* 220–23; Mario Liverani, *The Ancient Near East: History, Society and Economy,* trans. Soraia Tabatabai (London: Routledge, 2014), 161.

37. Andrew George, *House Most High: The Temples of Ancient Mesopotamia* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1993), 180.

38. Woolley, *Excavations at Ur,* 123–40; E. Jan Wilson, "Inside a Sumerian Temple: The Ekishnugal at Ur," in *The Temple in Time and Eternity,* ed. Donald W. Parry and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 1999), 303–33; Trevor R. Bryce, *The Routledge Handbook of the Peoples and Places of Ancient Western Asia: From the Early Bronze Age to the Fall of the Persian Empire* (London: Routledge, 2009), 744; Amélie Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East c. 3000–330 BC,* 2 vols. (London: Routledge, 1995), 1:64–66.

39. Wilson, "Inside a Sumerian Temple," 303–33.

40. Liverani, *Ancient Near East,* 156–57.

The Ur III period also saw the rise of "an impressive set of scribal functionaries" and a scribal caste that managed the affairs of the empire and transmitted both imperial bureaucratic information and Neo-Sumerian literary culture.[41] The scribal bureaucracy was supported by the state, which leaves no surprises as to why we discover gushing royal propaganda (such as hymns to royalty) and "mythological elaborations [that] continued to be developed in response to current events."[42] This highly sophisticated scribal culture reinforces the overall cosmopolitan picture we see above when it comes to Ur in the mid-third to early second millennium.

Finally, Ur during the mid-third and early second millennium is renowned for its royal cemetery.[43] "In many cities," remarks one author, "the urban dead were buried beneath the floors of their homes. Some of these tombs were reused over multiple generations. Some cities, however, had districts that were given over entirely to the dead."[44] This appears to have been the case at Ur, "where in the centre of the town a large cemetery was in use for several centuries in the middle of the third millennium."[45] As summarized by Bryce:

> The most impressive funerary remains discovered at Ur were those of the so-called Royal Cemetery, which contained c. 2,000 graves, dating from the Early Dynastic III period through and beyond the Akkadian period (i.e. from c. 2600 to 2100). The designation "Royal Cemetery" arises from sixteen of the graves belonging to the Early Dynastic III period. They consisted of chambers made of brick or stone, and contained numerous human burials, the majority of which are believed to have been the remains of attendants interred along with the graves' principal inhabitants to serve them in the afterlife. The distinctive structure of these graves, the apparent evidence of human sacrifice, and the richness of the grave goods—which included jewellery made of gold and silver and semi-precious stones, along with an assortment of weapons, musical instruments, furniture, and other items—have led to the conclusion that they were the burial places of royalty. Whether or not the major tomb occupants were in fact Early Dynastic kings and queens remains uncertain. None of the names inscribed on

41. Liverani, *Ancient Near East,* 166.

42. Liverani, *Ancient Near East,* 167–68.

43. Woolley, *Ur of the Chaldees,* 33–89; Woolley, *Excavations at Ur,* 52–90.

44. Jason Ur, "Southern Mesopotamia," in *A Companion to the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East,* ed. D. T. Potts (Hoboken: Blackwell Publishing, 2012), 543.

45. Van de Mieroop, *Ancient Mesopotamian City,* 83.

> seals or other objects are those of kings or queens known from other sources, including the Sumerian King List.[46]

Royal or not, these burials, along with the other forms of evidence discussed, offer valuable insight into the level of civilization present at Ur during the third and second millennia. If in fact a historical Abraham was a resident of Ur during this time, he would have been living in an important metropolitan center of the ancient Mesopotamian world.

Ur in the Neo-Babylonian Period

Even if a historical Abraham lived in the third or second millennium, the record of his life was composed many centuries after his exploits. Many biblical scholars see the details about Abraham and his family recorded at the end of Genesis 11 as having been composed or redacted during the Jewish exile in Babylonia. The detail that Abraham was a native of "Ur of the Chaldeans" in Genesis 11 has been taken as evidence for such. Unlike the earlier tradition that placed Abraham in the north, this later tradition, the argument goes, originated in the exile and so naturally gave the Father of the Faithful a fitting home: the metropolis Ur. Let us therefore take a quick look at Ur during the Neo-Babylonian period to see if we might discern any convergences between the biblical text and the archaeological record.

Unfortunately for our present purposes, most authors writing about the Neo-Babylonian period have focused their attention on such cities as Babylon—the capital of the empire—at the expense of other cities. Consequently, "we know little about the history of Ur" during this time, and the city has been largely, though not entirely, overshadowed by Babylon in much of the literature.[47] This makes the present task somewhat difficult, as it forces us to piece together a history of Ur from disparate sources. Thankfully, however, enough attention has been given to Ur proper during the Neo-Babylonian period that at least a manageable picture emerges.

Ur fatefully fell to the Elamites at the end of the third millennium (2004 BC [middle dating] or 1940 BC [short dating]) and "never recovered the prominence it had during the Ur I and Ur III dynasties."[48] But

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46. Bryce, *Routledge Handbook of the Peoples and Places of Ancient Western Asia,* 743.

47. Brinkman, "Review," 241.

48. J. J. M. Roberts, "Ur," in Sakenfeld, *New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible,* 5:717.

even in its diminished grandeur, the city was continuously inhabited for the next millennium and a half under succeeding dynasties, including the Old Babylonian kingdom and the Kassites.[49] Ur makes several appearances in Neo-Assyrian documents,[50] and even saw "a new heyday" under the governor Sin-balassu-iqbi (653 BC) in the middle of the seventh century.[51] Throughout this time the city remained "an important southern city and a religious center for the worship of the moon god."[52]

Indeed, under the reigns of Nebuchadnezzar II (c. 605–c. 562 BC) and Nabonidus (556–539 BC), Ur underwent extensive restoration and construction projects.[53] "These kings were responsible for rebuilding Ur's ziggurat as well as other temples and the temenos wall which enclosed them," notes Bryce. It thus comes as little surprise that "there were strong connections between Haran and Ur in the Neo-Babylonian period insofar as Nabonidus's mother was a devotee of the moon god of Haran."[54] Partially to uphold a continuity with the old Sîn/Nanna cult established as early as the Ur III period, the "antiquarian"[55] Nabonidus restored the great ziggurat and rededicated the cult.[56] These connections between north and south would have likely fostered at least some trade and migration. At the very least, then, it is possible that a Jewish writer composing Genesis during the exile (598–538 BC) could have imagined Abraham and his family traveling between Ur and Haran.[57]

But while Ur may have boasted many splendid temples and other smaller shrines during the Neo-Babylonian period,[58] the same cannot so much be said for most of its housing. "Private housing dating from this period was also excavated," but unlike the Ur III period, in the first millennium many of these houses were comparatively shabby and betrayed that "Ur's days as a major commercial and administrative

49. Brinkman, "Ur," 310–48.
50. Woolley, *Excavations at Ur,* 195–215; Brinkman, "Review," 241–58.
51. Brinkman, "Review," 249.
52. Roberts, "Ur," 5:717.
53. Woolley, *Excavations at Ur,* 217–25; Roberts, "Ur," 5:717.
54. Bryce, *Routledge Handbook of the Peoples and Places of Ancient Western Asia,* 745; Yamauchi, "Abraham and Archaeology," 21.
55. Woolley, *Excavations at Ur,* 217, 232.
56. Yamauchi, "Abraham and Archaeology," 21.
57. Yamauchi, "Abraham and Archaeology," 21.
58. Woolley, *Excavations at Ur,* 228–40.

centre were now past."[59] True, coming hot on the heels of the victorious expansion of the empire, Ur and southern Mesopotamia saw some economic and population growth at the beginning of the reign of the Neo-Babylonian kings, but this was comparatively "modest," and the city never reached "the density of the time of Hammurabi [1810–1750 BC], or the levels of the Ur III and Isin-Larsa periods [2000–1800 BC]."[60]

Woolley judged that the houses he excavated northwest of Nebuchadnezzar's temenos wall would have been merely tolerable to live in and surmised that the population and economy of Ur during the Neo-Babylonian period must have been considerably paltry compared to its zenith during the Ur III period.[61] The only way Woolley could account for the "very awkward clash between town planning and [the] domestic architecture" that he uncovered was to simply see Ur's urban layout as the result of "some arbitrary authority."[62] This would make sense if in fact Ur's commercial influence had waned during the first millennium and if the Neo-Babylonian kings favored Ur as a religious rather than commercial center. "Now that trade had left it there was little reason for it to exist," Woolley concluded, which would explain the lackluster housing and urban development.[63]

It would therefore appear, based on the available evidence, that Ur never fully regained its prominence in the first millennium. Its population dwindled and its economy became relatively stagnate. Some kings enacted restoration of the monumental architecture during this time, but such did little to halt the entropy of the city. Were it not for its importance as a cultic center, we might wonder if Ur would have survived as long as it did.

The Enigmatic "Chaldeans" and Their Appearance in Genesis

Heretofore this discussion has focused on the identity and history of Ur itself. But Genesis and the Book of Abraham both specify that Abraham's Ur was "of the Chaldeans." Who, then, were the Chaldeans, and why is their mention in Genesis and the Book of Abraham important to answering the question of Abraham's homeland? In fact, the specific

59. Bryce, *Routledge Handbook of the Peoples and Places of Ancient Western Asia,* 745.

60. Liverani, *Ancient Near East,* 545.

61. Woolley, *Excavations at Ur,* 240–43.

62. Woolley, *Excavations at Ur,* 241–42.

63. Woolley, *Excavations at Ur,* 244.

naming of the Chaldeans as being associated with Abraham's Ur is something of a historical and interpretive crux, and doubly so for those who insist on a high degree of historicity for the Abraham narratives.

Not much is presently known about the origins of the Chaldeans. We have the classical Greek authors to thank for giving us the name Χαλδαῖος, which is, according to the current consensus, the rendering of the Akkadian *Kaldu.*[64] The Hebrew rendering of the same in Genesis is כשדים,[65] although some wonder whether the כשדים of Genesis are in fact the *Kaldu.*[66] Genesis itself is silent on the history of the Chaldeans, offering no purported ancestral origin for them as it does with many other ethnic groups. True enough, later biblical accounts that take place during the reign of the Neo-Babylonian kings (for example, Jeremiah) or in Babylon itself (for example, Daniel) freely employ the ethnonym "Chaldean" as a simple designation for "Babylonian."[67]

This, however, is problematic, because, as Beaulieu explains, the Neo-Babylonian kings appear not to have used the term "Chaldean" to describe themselves. "Not only do we find no ancient claim for the Chaldean origin of the dynasty," Beaulieu notes, "but the term Chaldean does not appear even once in late Babylonian cuneiform documentation. . . . Relying solely on cuneiform sources from Babylonia, which are relatively abundant, we find no evidence that Nebuchadnezzar considered himself the ruler of Chaldeans and Arameans."[68] The Chaldean kings apparently invented a new ethnic identity for themselves upon the emergence of the Neo-Babylonian dynasty. "The reason for this sudden silence is probably ideological," Beaulieu concludes. "The new kings of Babylon adopted an archaizing political vocabulary which harked back to the time of the First Dynasty of Babylon and even to the Old

64. H. W. F. Saggs, "Ur of the Chaldees: A Problem of Identification," *Iraq* 22 (1960): 205; Richard S. Hess, "Chaldea," in Freedman, *Anchor Bible Dictionary,* 1:886.

65. Saggs, "Ur of the Chaldees," 205–6; Hess, "Chaldea," 1:886; Roberts, "Chaldea, Chaldeans," 1:581.

66. Gordon, "Abraham and the Merchants of Ura," 30; Hoskisson, "Where Was Ur of the Chaldees?" 124–27.

67. Hess, "Chaldea," 1:886; Bryce, *Routledge Handbook of the Peoples and Places of Ancient Western Asia,* 159; Paul-Alain Beaulieu, "Arameans, Chaldeans, and Arabs in Cuneiform Sources from the Late Babylonian Period," in *Arameans, Chaldeans, and Arabs in Babylonia and Palestine in the First Millennium B.C.,* ed. A. Berlejung and M. P. Streck (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2013), 32.

68. Beaulieu, "Arameans, Chaldeans, and Arabs," 33.

Akkadian period. The perennial and unchanging nature of Babylonian civilization and its Sumero-Akkadian heritage was emphasized, and the reality of a society fragmented along ethnic, tribal, and linguistic lines, as well as by several other factors of social and institutional nature seems to be denied."[69] We must therefore turn to other archaeological or textual witnesses to shed whatever light we can on the origin of the Chaldeans.

The general understanding among those who have looked at this problem is threefold. First, scholars agree that the earliest textual appearance of the Chaldeans dates to shortly after the turn of the first millennium.[70] While the Chaldeans predate these sources by at least two or three centuries, and possibly more, we are yet in the dark as to their ultimate background. "No Chaldean inscriptions have survived, and virtually nothing is known of the Chaldean language, beyond the fact that Chaldean names indicate that it was a form of West Semitic."[71] That they make their first textual appearance in the Neo-Assyrian period would seem to indicate that their appearance in Genesis (and the Book of Abraham) is an anachronism.[72] It is certainly possible that sources earlier than our Neo-Assyrian texts that first describe the Chaldeans have simply not survived or have not been properly identified. However, the present state of the evidence suggests that the purported existence of Chaldeans during the time of Abraham in the third to second millennium is anachronistic.

Second, many scholars agree it is very likely that the Chaldeans are not native to southern Mesopotamia but were rather a migratory group of Semites who "appear to have entered Babylonia from the northwest some time in [the eleventh or tenth centuries], settling along the lower Euphrates and the Sealand marshlands at the head of the Persian Gulf."[73] It was there that they established the eponymous dynasty that eventually overthrew

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69. Beaulieu, "Arameans, Chaldeans, and Arabs," 51.

70. Hoskisson, "Where Was Ur of the Chaldees?" 124–25; Hess, "Chaldea," 886; Alan Millard, "Where Was Abraham's Ur? The Case for the Babylonian City," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 27, no. 3 (2001): 57; Roberts, "Chaldea, Chaldeans," 1:581; Yamauchi, "Abraham and Archaeology," 20.

71. Bryce, *Routledge Handbook of the Peoples and Places of Ancient Western Asia,* 159.

72. Woolley, *Abraham,* 63–64.

73. Bryce, *Routledge Handbook of the Peoples and Places of Ancient Western Asia,* 158.

the Neo-Assyrian empire.[74] Given their settlement in the south, Liverani goes so far as to suggest it is "highly plausible" that the Chaldeans were not even native to Syria, as most scholars maintain, but instead claimed the Arabian Peninsula as their homeland.[75] This, however, he acknowledges is little more than speculation. We simply know nothing about the Chaldeans before their mention in Assyrian sources. In any event, it appears that the identification of the Chaldeans as Babylonians as seen in the Bible and other ancient sources reflects a relatively late tradition that postdates the rise of the Chaldean dynasty proper.[76]

The third point is related to the second. It appears that the Chaldeans were related to but distinct from the Aramean tribes that migrated into Mesopotamia at around the same time.[77] Indeed, their Aramean-sounding names and close association with the Arameans in the extant Assyrian sources compels most scholars to see the two groups as somehow related, although the picture is not entirely clear.[78] Fales saw enough commonality between the two groups to postulate "a connection of the Chaldeans with the northern and western Arameans in the general perspective of a shared heritage of ethnicity; while some slight hints in the texts might more specifically point to political affiliations

74. A. Leo Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 160–63; John Bright, *A History of Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), 90; Tvedtnes and Christensen, "Ur of the Chaldeans," 28–29; Hoskisson, "Where Was Ur of the Chaldees?" 124; Hess, "Chaldea," 1:886; Bill T. Arnold, "What Has Nebuchadnezzar to Do with David? On the Neo-Babylonian Period and Early Israel," in *Mesopotamia and the Bible: Comparative Explorations,* ed. Mark W. Chavalas and K. Lawson Younger Jr. (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 335–36.

75. Liverani, *Ancient Near East,* 444–45.

76. Bryce, *Routledge Handbook of the Peoples and Places of Ancient Western Asia,* 159.

77. Hoskisson, "Where Was Ur of the Chaldees?" 124; Arnold, "What Has Nebuchadnezzar to Do with David?" 335; Alan Millard, "Chaldeans," in *Dictionary of the Ancient Near East,* ed. Piotr Bienkowski and Alan Millard (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 70; Bryce, *Routledge Handbook of the Peoples and Places of Ancient Western Asia,* 158; Frederick Fales, "Moving around Babylon: On the Aramean and Chaldean Presence in Southern Mesopotamia," in *Babylon: Wissenskultur in Orient und Okzident,* ed. Eva Cancik-Kirschbaum, Margarete van Ess, and Joachim Marzahn (Boston: De Gruyter, 2011), 95; Liverani, *Ancient Near East,* 444.

78. Beaulieu, "Arameans, Chaldeans, and Arabs," 31–55; Edward Lipiński, "The Arameans in the West (13th–8th Centuries)," in Berlejung and Streck, *Arameans, Chaldeans, and Arabs in Babylonia and Palestine,* 123–47.

of long standing between the Chaldeans and the Aramean tribes of the Middle Euphrates area."[79] Unlike the Arameans, however, the Chaldeans "quickly managed to assimilate with Babylonian culture."[80] So much so, in fact, that they eventually became identified as Babylonians altogether.

Beyond this, not much more can be deduced from the present evidence. The fact that no native Chaldean inscriptions have been recovered, to say nothing of our complete ignorance of their identity before their entrance into Mesopotamia, must demand a great deal of caution in any of our conclusions. Indeed, at least a few scholars doubt parts of the scenario presented above altogether, although their counterarguments aren't especially compelling enough to abandon this consensus wholesale.[81] Nevertheless, if the end of Genesis 11 is in fact the product of the Babylonian exile, then it is understandable how a Jewish author could have come to associate Abraham with Ur "of the Chaldeans [Babylonians]."

The Arguments for Identifying Tell el-Muqayyar as Abraham's Ur

Given this level of ambiguity, what remaining arguments have scholars made for identifying Tell el-Muqayyar as Abraham's Ur? As noted above, Woolley was not the first to propose the site as Abraham's home, but rather English and German scholars writing in the late nineteenth century who had made the connection on philological grounds. What Woolley accomplished with his excavations was to lend archaeological backing to the earlier philological arguments. For some time, Woolley's arguments complementing the philological approach appeared compelling, and indeed they still are in the minds of many. Thus, the confident remarks of the Kenneth Kitchen, who insists that Abraham's Ur "is undoubtedly to be identified with . . . Tell el-Muqayyar."[82]

Undeterred by the absence of any direct reference to Abraham or his family in the texts recovered from Ur, Woolley focused the main thrust of his argument on comparing the "local colour" of Mesopotamia

79. Fales, "Moving around Babylon," 95.

80. Liverani, *Ancient Near East,* 444.

81. J. A. Brinkman, "Notes on Arameans and Chaldeans in Southern Babylonia in the Early Seventh Century BC," *Orientalia* 46, no. 2 (1977): 304–25; Kuhrt, *Ancient Near East,* 2:399–400.

82. Kenneth Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), 316.

in the third to second millennium with the information provided in Genesis. "If the stories about Abraham had first been put into shape after the establishment of the tribes in the Promised Land," Woolley remarked, "it would have been virtually impossible for their authors to have recovered with any degree of fidelity the local colour of the patriarchal age."[83] For Woolley, the Abrahamic and patriarchal narratives were better situated earlier than the supposed exilic date of the composition of Genesis. This, he reasoned, could be seen in how the social, cultural, political, and geographical details of Genesis converged with what his excavations had revealed.

After providing a snapshot of Ur "in the time of Abraham,"[84] which he could establish no more precisely than "in the neighbourhood of 2000 BC,"[85] Woolley went on to provide specific examples of convergences between Abraham's life in Genesis with his own findings at Ur. Woolley claimed to detect the influence of Ur all over Abraham and his actions, and so read the early chapters of Genesis accordingly.[86] Thus, Abraham's seemingly callous treatment of his concubine Hagar (Gen. 16) made perfect sense to Woolley when compared with Sumerian and Old Babylonian legal codes.[87] The idolatry of Abraham's father Terah (Josh. 24:2, 14) was seen by Woolley as reflecting a knowledge of the cult of Sîn/Nanna at Ur and Haran.[88] And even Abraham's offering up of a sacrificial ram instead of his firstborn son Isaac (Gen. 22:13) seemed to Woolley "to recall a figure stereotyped in Sumerian art of which the earliest and most vivid examples shew us the rampant he-goat tied by silver chains to the boughs of flowering shrubs."[89]

Then there was of course the fact that Genesis specified Abraham's Ur was "of the Chaldeans." This for Woolley was a dead giveaway that the author of Genesis had Tell el-Muqayyar in mind, even if it had its own complications. "The Old Testament phrase 'Ur of the Chaldees' as applied to the city of Abraham is an anachronism," Woolley conceded. This, however, could easily be explained as a case where "the writers of the sacred books of the Hebrews naturally applied to the city of Abraham's

83. Woolley, *Abraham,* 54–55.
84. Woolley, *Abraham,* 72–117.
85. Woolley, *Abraham,* 260.
86. Woolley, *Abraham,* 143–87.
87. Woolley, *Abraham,* 148–56.
88. Woolley, *Abraham,* 231–32.
89. Woolley, *Abraham,* 162; compare Woolley, *Ur of the Chaldees,* 67–68.

birth the name by which it was known in their own time."[90] Woolley thus accepted a later date for the composition of Genesis even if he insisted the accounts recorded therein contained a kernel of historical value. For Woolley, then, the historicity of Abraham was a complicated matter, but not one that was beyond the reach of his critical methods. "Direct evidence there is none," Woolley acknowledged. "But indirect evidence is possible," and cumulatively the evidence found at Ur and elsewhere was enough to satisfy him of the reality of a historical Abraham, "an Aramean or Amorite [who] . . . lived originally at Ur in Mesopotamia."[91]

Many of Woolley's points have been reiterated over the years by scholars who likewise have confidence in the historicity of Abraham. Millard, for instance, repeats many of Woolley's arguments for identifying Tell el-Muqayyar as Abraham's Ur, including once again seeing a connection between Terah's idolatry and the moon deity cult at Ur and Haran.[92] While responsible critical scholars who accept the historicity of Abraham are careful not to raise this evidence to the level of "proof," they nevertheless follow Woolley in ascribing a higher historical value to the patriarchal narratives in Genesis, all the attending problems aside.

A Northern Ur?

It did not take long for scholars to recognize problems with Woolley's thesis, however, and a chorus of dissenting voices swelled shortly after his initial publications. The scholarly movement objecting to Woolley's identification of Tell el-Muqayyar as Abraham's Ur was spearheaded by Cyrus Gordon, who began assailing Woolley's arguments as early as the 1950s.[93] Gordon had worked with Woolley at Tell el-Muqayyar for a season in 1932, and so was familiar with his work. He was nevertheless deeply unimpressed with Woolley's attempts at "canonizing . . . Sumerian Ur as the birthplace of Abraham."[94] While equating Tell el-Muqayyar with Abraham's Ur has basically remained the scholarly consensus, a vocal minority nevertheless persists today in nipping at the heels of this consensus.

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90. Woolley, *Abraham,* 63–64; compare Yamauchi, "Abraham and Archaeology," 20.

91. Woolley, *Abraham,* 50–51.

92. Millard, "Where Was Abraham's Ur?" 53; compare Wilson, "Inside a Sumerian Temple," 322.

93. Gordon, "Abraham and the Merchants of Ura," 28–31.

94. Cyrus H. Gordon, *A Scholar's Odyssey* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), 35.

First, there is reason to question the philological arguments made in the nineteenth century that equate Urim with Ur. Hoskisson, building off the earlier objections, explains, "If the Hebrew were based on the original Mesopotamian name for al-Muqayyar, it would have to disregard the final vowel of the Sumerian and possibly the final but unnecessary 'm.' . . . Thus, while the Hebrew 'Ur' could be the equivalent of the cuneiform 'Uri(m),' this identification has serious and probably fatal problems. It cannot be used as a sufficient reason for locating Ur at Uri(m)."[95] It would thus appear that the eagerness of the nineteenth century philologists to equate the Ur of Genesis with the Urim as rendered in the cuneiform sources is somewhat questionable.

The Septuagint preserves a textual variant that further complicates the matter. In each instance, the Septuagint renders "Ur" in the phrase "Ur of the Chaldeans" (Gen. 11:28, 31; 15:7; Neh. 9:7) as χώρᾳ ("field," "place"). Recognizing this, Hamilton observes "that the [Septuagint] reflects a tradition connecting Abraham not with the 'Ur' of the Chaldeans but with 'the land' of the Chaldeans, a designation that obviously covers a much broader territory than the southern Ur."[96] Given the likelihood, as we have seen, that the *Kaldu* were a migratory group of Semites related to the Arameans before their arrival into southern Mesopotamia, the tradition preserved in the Septuagint prompts us to consider locations for Abraham's homeland more broadly than just the area where the *Kaldu* eventually settled.[97]

Another problem with equating Abraham's Ur with Tell el-Muqayyar is that it cannot easily account for the sheer weight the biblical tradition places on situating the ancestral home of Abraham and the patriarchs in the north. Speiser bluntly states it is "beyond serious dispute . . . that the home of the patriarchs was in the district of Haran," and not Tell el-Muqayyar in the south.[98] "Any explanation" for how an "intrusive" Ur found its way into the tradition "is bound to be tenuous and purely conjectural," Speiser concludes.[99] That is, of course, only if we follow Woolley in equating Abraham's Ur with Tell el-Muqayyar. Gordon and the scholars who have followed him have instead looked to Syria and surrounding

95. Hoskisson, "Where Was Ur of the Chaldees?" 124.

96. Hamilton, *Book of Genesis,* 365.

97. Hamilton, *Book of Genesis,* 365 n. 14; Gordon, "Abraham and the Merchants of Ura," 30.

98. E. A. Speiser, *Genesis,* vol. 1 of The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1964), 1:80.

99. Speiser, *Genesis,* 80–81.

territories for Abraham's Ur, arguing on both philological and archaeological grounds that a northern Ur would answer Speiser's objections.

Following the early arguments of Gordon,[100] scholars including Bright,[101] Lundquist,[102] Tvedtnes and Christensen,[103] Freedman,[104] Frayne,[105] and others have appealed to the wealth of documentary evidence from Mari (2900–1750 BC), Ebla (2500–2250 BC), Nuzi (1450–1350 BC), Ugarit (1450–1200 BC), and other sites in northern Mesopotamia and Syria to fashion a *Sitz im Leben* for the Genesis narratives revolving around Abraham and his family. The religious attitudes, social customs, names, and migration patterns of Abraham and his immediate descendants, per these scholars, find ready home in northern Mesopotamia and Syria and betray little awareness of the same in and around Tell el-Muqayyar. In contrast to Woolley, Bright concludes that "the patriarchal traditions show little evidence of southern Mesopotamian influence,"[106] an opinion shared by Thomas, who, while at least granting them "a degree of credit" as perhaps preserving authentic folk memories, dismisses later traditions linking Abraham with Tell el-Muqayyar (such as Abraham's idolatrous father worshipping at the cult of the moon deity) as "late, vague, and inaccurate."[107]

Utilizing Woolley's own methodology against him, Gordon dutifully scours documentation from Syrian and northern Mesopotamian cities to plausibly demonstrate how the Abrahamic narratives could fit a northern setting, even pointing to cities with an "Ur" element (that is, a toponym that features "Ur" in the name in some capacity) attested in

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100. Gordon, "Abraham and the Merchants of Ura," 28–31; Cyrus H. Gordon,"Abraham of Ur," in *Hebrew and Semitic Studies,* ed. D. Winton Thomas and W. D. McHardy (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), 77–84; Gordon, "Where Is Abraham's Ur?" 20–21, 52.

101. Bright, *History of Israel,* 90–91.

102. Lundquist, "Was Abraham at Ebla?" 225–37.

103. Tvedtnes and Christensen, "Ur of the Chaldeans," 13–28.

104. David Noel Freedman, "The Ebla Tablets and the Abraham Tradition," in *Reflections on Mormonism: Judaeo-Christian Parallels,* ed. Truman G. Madsen (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1978), 67–78.

105. Douglas Frayne, "In Abraham's Footsteps," in *The World of the Arameans I: Studies in History and Archaeology in Honour of Paul-Eugène Dion,* ed. P. M. Michèle Daviau, John W. Wevers, and Michael Weigl (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 216–36.

106. Bright, *History of Israel,* 90.

107. D. Winton Thomas, *Archaeology and Old Testament Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 95.

texts from Ugarit, Ebla, and elsewhere as possible candidates for Abraham's Ur. As late as 1995, Gordon continued to argue against a southern site for Abraham's Ur, maintaining that the Uri(m) known from Sumerian and Babylonian records "is never called 'Ur of the Chaldees,'" and thus "Abraham's Ur must have been one of the many Urs far to the north of Sumer."[108] More recently, Walton acknowledges no less than six possible candidates for Abraham's Ur as attested in the textual record of Syria and northern Mesopotamia, even if in his own estimation "the case for any of them will be weak" until a positive association can be made between one of them and the enigmatic "Chaldeans" of Genesis.[109]

While other objections to equating Tell el-Muqayyar with Abraham's Ur can and have been raised,[110] it should be acknowledged that these counterarguments themselves are not decisive. Saggs,[111] Millard,[112] and others—including even Hamilton,[113] who accepts the likelihood of a northern Ur—have all either questioned some of the counterarguments proposed by Gordon and his school or altogether discount them and uphold Tell el-Muqayyar as Abraham's Ur. Saggs, for instance, questions whether Abraham was in fact a Syrian merchant, as Gordon argued by comparing Genesis with texts from Ugarit and elsewhere, and whether the כשדים in Genesis "intended to represent [the] 'Ḫaldians'" of ancient Armenia, and not the *Kaldu* of Babylonia, as Gordon has also proposed.[114]

More recently, McCarter has raised the point that the traditions and names in Genesis marshalled as evidence for a northern Mesopotamian or Syrian setting appear not to be strictly unique to the Middle Bronze Age. "In almost every specific instance, the proposed parallels between details of the patriarchal stories and information found in surviving second-millennium documents have now been disputed," McCarter

108. Cyrus H. Gordon, "Recovering Canaan and Ancient Israel," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East,* ed. Jack M. Sasson, 4 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1995), 4:2784.

109. John Walton, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Volume 1, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2009), 67.

110. Hoskisson, "Where Was Ur of the Chaldees?" 126; Hamilton, *Book of Genesis,* 364–65; Gordon, "Recovering Canaan and Ancient Israel," 4:2784; Walton, *Genesis,* 67.

111. Saggs, "Ur of the Chaldees," 200–209.

112. Millard, "Where Was Abraham's Ur?" 52–53, 57.

113. Hamilton, *Book of Genesis,* 364–65.

114. Saggs, "Ur of the Chaldees," 206.

notes. "In several other cases, the phenomena in question have been identified in texts from one or more later periods, thus diminishing the importance of the parallels for dating the patriarchal tradition."[115] It would thus seem prudent at this point not to overstate what the evidence might say about the historicity of Abraham, even if the overall picture of the tradition in Genesis does in fact seem to point northward. The case for a northern Ur is itself therefore not definitive.

The Contributions (and Complications) of the Book of Abraham

As already mentioned, the Book of Abraham, like Genesis, identifies Ur of the Chaldeans as the homeland of the patriarch. But the Book of Abraham goes beyond the Genesis account by introducing Abraham in an Egyptianized Ur (to some extent). The idolatry of Abraham's father and kinsmen as recorded in the Book of Abraham (but not Genesis) included not just the worship of the apparently northwest Semitic deity Elkenah,[116] but also "the god of Pharaoh, king of Egypt" (Abr. 1:6). What's more, besides a nearby site bearing the unmistakable Egyptian name Potiphar (v. 10),[117] the local priesthood devoted to the cults of these deities implemented ritual procedures that included the giving of "offering[s] unto the god of Pharaoh . . . after the manner of the Egyptians" (v. 9). These offerings included what one might call human sacrifices performed "upon [an] altar . . . after the manner of the Egyptians" (v. 11).[118] Whether the local priesthood maintaining this syncretic cult were natives or Egyptian transplants is unspecified by the text.

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115. McCarter, "Patriarchal Age," 13.

116. See Kevin L. Barney, "On Elkenah as Canaanite El," *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 19, no. 1 (2010): 22–35.

117. Potiphar has long been recognized as deriving from the Late Egyptian *pꜣ dî pꜣ rꜥ* ("the one whom Re has given"). While the name itself appears only after the time of Abraham, most notably in Genesis 39, the formula used to render it potentially dates to the Middle Kingdom, and thus to the time of Abraham. This suggests that the specific rendering of the name in the Book of Abraham likely reflects Joseph Smith's translation of the text in his own familiar biblical idiom. See the discussion in James K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 84–85.

118. Muhlestein and Gee, "Egyptian Context for the Sacrifice of Abraham," 70–77. See also the tantalizing discussion in Harco Willems, "Crime, Cult, and Capital Punishment (Mo'alla Inscription 8)," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 76 (1990): 46–51.

While the added detail of an Egyptian presence or influence at or near Abraham's Ur may seem relatively insignificant at first, it in fact carries profound implications for evaluating not only the location of Ur but also the historicity of the Book of Abraham. Currently, there is no evidence for an Egyptian presence in southern Mesopotamia during the time of Abraham. This has not been lost on those who read the Book of Abraham with a skeptical eye. Stephen E. Thompson dismissed the Book of Abraham's depiction of an Egyptian presence in Abraham's homeland as "historically erroneous" on the grounds that "the Egyptians never had a strong cultural influence on Mesopotamia."[119] More recently the Sumerologist Christopher Woods insists that a southern location for Abraham's Ur "poses grave difficulties for the account given in the Book of Abraham, as there is no evidence whatsoever for the cults of the purported Egyptian gods described in the narrative or for established Egyptian practices more generally in the city."[120]

This lack of connection appears highly problematic for the historicity of the Book of Abraham if Tell el-Muqayyar is in fact Abraham's Ur. Accordingly, Latter-day Saint scholars who accept a high degree of historicity for the Book of Abraham have followed Gordon in arguing for a northern Ur.[121] Besides many of the factors explored above that appear to put Abraham in the north, a northern Ur is especially

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119. Stephen E. Thompson, "Egyptology and the Book of Abraham," *Dialogue* 28, no. 1 (1995): 158.

120. Christopher Woods, "The Practice of Egyptian Religion at 'Ur of the Chaldees'?" in *The Joseph Smith Egyptian Papyri: A Complete Edition,* ed. Robert K. Ritner (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2013), 73.

121. Tvedtnes and Christensen, "Ur of the Chaldeans," 34–35; Lundquist, "Was Abraham at Ebla?" 230–35; Hoskisson, "Where Was Ur of the Chaldees?" 127–31; Hugh Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt,* ed. Gary P. Gillum, vol. 14 of The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2000), 234–36, 238, 247; John Gee and Stephen D. Ricks, "Historical Plausibility: The Historicity of the Book of Abraham as a Case Study," in *Historicity and the Latter-day Saint Scriptures,* ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson, vol. 18 of The Religious Studies Center Monograph Series (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2001), 70–72; Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Abraham,* vol. 18 of The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2009), 418–28; John Gee, "Abraham and Idrimi," *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22, no. 1 (2013): 34–39. One Latter-day Saint author who insists on a southern Ur is Wilson, "Inside a Sumerian Temple," 322.

attractive to many Latter-day Saints if for no other reason than there is evidence for Egyptian contact with the northern Levant during the time of Abraham.[122]

But besides nullifying a potential problem for the Book of Abraham's historicity, a northern Ur would appear to converge with some of the geographical details unique to the text. For instance, the Book of Abraham identifies a certain "plain of Olishem" (Abr. 1:10) as being in the vicinity of Abraham's Ur. This specific detail has captured the attention of Latter-day Saint scholars, since there is a very high likelihood that Olishem has been identified.[123] Even Woods acknowledges the possibility that the Book of Abraham's Olishem could be identified with the Ulišum mentioned in an inscription of the Akkadian king Naram-Sin (c. 2261–2224 BC), even if he is quick to dismiss such as little more than a lucky guess on Joseph Smith's part.[124] A southern Ur, however, would

122. Woods, "Practice of Egyptian Religion," 73–74, does not deny the evidence for this contact, but rather dismisses it as being insufficient for bolstering the Book of Abraham's claims. His quick dismissal notwithstanding, the evidence is fairly impressive, and much more persuasive than Woods is willing to admit. See Tvedtnes and Christensen, "Ur of the Chaldeans," 31–33; Gee and Ricks, "Historical Plausibility," 76–78; John Gee, "Overlooked Evidence for Sesostris III's Foreign Policy," *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 41 (2004): 23–31; Gee, "Abraham and Idrimi," 35.

123. Lundquist, "Was Abraham at Ebla?" 234–35; Gee and Ricks, "Historical Plausibility," 75–76. John Gee, "Has Olishem Been Discovered?" *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22, no. 2 (2013): 104–7.

124. Woods, "Practice of Egyptian Religion," 74. The meager rationale underlying Woods's brusque denial is hardly convincing. The archaeological and inscriptional evidence presented by Latter-day Saint scholars strongly indicates the connection between Olishem and Ulišum is more than just accidental, since the two converge geographically and chronologically as well as phonetically. Additionally, while it is true that Haran appears to lie east of Olishem/Ulišum, Woods's complaint that this would effectively force Abraham to backtrack from Haran to get into Canaan is by no means fatally problematic. Haran is not so far out of the way in the east that it would be a great impediment to any subsequent migration southward. In fact, if Abraham was trying to escape not only the famine that had overtaken his home (Abr. 1:30–2:5) but also the hostile local (Egyptian?) priesthood that had just attempted to take his life (Abr. 1:12, 15), it would make sense that he would first skip east across the river to let the heat die down and gather supporters and provisions before eventually making his way into Canaan. And indeed, this appears to be precisely what is depicted in Abraham 2:14–15. For a plausible route based on this reading of the text, see Gee, "Abraham and Idrimi," 36.

effectively negate the weight of this evidence for the Book of Abraham's historicity. Abraham 1 clearly places Olishem near Abraham's Ur, not the hundreds of miles away that it would be if Abraham's Ur was Tell el-Muqayyar. It is therefore understandable why many Mormon scholars keen on upholding the historicity of the Book of Abraham would focus their attention northward and appeal to archaeological and inscriptional evidence over the source critical methods favored by others who would place Ur in the south.[125]

This particular survey of the evidence shows that the Book of Abraham appears to place Abraham's Ur in Syria, not southern Mesopotamia. If this is correct, this would refute Woolley's identification of Tell el-Muqayyar as Abraham's Ur. Or at least it would from a Latter-day Saint position that accepts the Book of Abraham's claims as admissible evidence in resolving this controversy. The question Latter-day Saint researchers must therefore answer for themselves at this point is if they are willing allow the Book of Abraham's claims to be admitted as evidence, or whether they would prefer that the Book of Abraham take a back seat to the methods utilized by others to locate Ur in the south. The answer to that question will inevitably influence how they read the text. For what it's worth, I personally favor admitting the Book of Abraham's claims as evidence in this discussion. The evidence placing the opening of the Book of Abraham (and, accordingly, Abraham's Ur) in Syria sometime around the turn of the second millennium BC is, in my estimation, compelling enough that it should not be ignored.

Conclusion

I began this investigation by asking if Genesis converges in any meaningful degree with what we presently know about Tell el-Muqayyar in either the time of the purported historical Abraham or the supposed time of the composition of Genesis. The answer on both counts appears to be negative. The brief mention of "Ur of the Chaldeans" in Genesis 11 leaves us very little in the way of historical or cultural information. In short, Genesis 11 betrays no real concrete understanding of Ur as an urban entity. What do I mean by this? I mean simply that there is practically nothing in Genesis 11 that would compel us to believe that the

125. Bokovoy, *Authoring the Old Testament,* 173–74 n. 19. Bokovoy acknowledges that a northern Ur would allow for "the type of Egyptian cultic influence depicted in the Book of Abraham" but approvingly cites Woods's treatment and ultimately favors Tell el-Muqayyar as Abraham's Ur.

author of this text had Tell el-Muqayyar in mind. Nothing that is distinguishable about Ur appears in the text. No ziggurats or other monumental architecture. No urban settlements. No moon deity cult. No description of daily life in the city. No description of social customs or structures. No hint at a thriving scribal culture or imperial administration. The author of Genesis 11 is silent on any details that would help us confidently establish Tell el-Muqayyar as the Ur of Genesis.

Had Genesis 11 specifically indicated something like, "Ur of the Chaldeans, at which there is a large ziggurat complex dedicated to the moon deity and his consort," then the argument linking Abraham to such would be much more compelling. As it is, however, there's essentially nothing in the Genesis description of Ur that would lead us to believe the author had in mind the southern metropolis. For this reason, the editor of the revised 1982 edition of Woolley's *Ur "of the Chaldees"* felt it necessary to excise any mention of Abraham altogether.

> Ur's fame as the birthplace of Abraham has given it a special position in the literary legacy of Judaism and Islam. Contrary to the view consistently argued by Woolley, there is no actual proof that Tell el-Mukayyar, the Ur of this book, was identical with "Ur of the Chaldees" in *Genesis* 11:29–32. Nor is there any agreed opinion on the existence of Abraham himself, on his social and ethnic origins, on his history and chronology, above all on his relationship to the enigmatic chapter 14 of *Genesis.* The specialist literature debating all these questions has recently grown considerably. In view of the impossibility of providing the reader with any consensus it seemed best to write of the excavations at Ur at this time without mention of Abraham. Even if Tell el-Mukayyar should eventually be shown to have been the Biblical "Ur of the Chaldees," we still have no firm evidence from this site for the period in which Abraham might have lived. He and his people were unknown to the scribes of Ur whose tablets have so far been recovered from the site.[126]

Whatever one thinks about the arguments for identifying Tell el-Muqayyar as Abraham's Ur, it says quite a lot that Woolley's own editor at least felt the arguments for such were so weak that mention of them altogether needed to be scrubbed from one of his most important publications on the matter. Indeed, it would seem the *only* thing keeping Tell el-Muqayyar in the running as Abraham's Ur would be the specific mentioning of the Chaldeans as the ethnic group associated with the city. Even then, however, problems persist. For one thing, as seen above, we know

126. Woolley and Moorey, *Ur "of the Chaldees,"* 9.

next to nothing of the history and ethnic and geographical background of the Chaldeans before their appearance in Neo-Assyrian records in the ninth century BC. This leaves open rather significant questions, such as whether it is possible the author or redactor of Genesis 11 (anachronistically) mistook which Ur should be associated with Abraham, whether Genesis 11 preserves an older tradition associating Abraham with the then native Aramean Chaldeans before their migration into southern Mesopotamia and we are therefore looking at the wrong stage of their history, or whether it's possible the כשדים of Genesis aren't even the *Kaldu* to begin with. Presently, we have no real way of definitively answering these questions until we can know something more about the Chaldeans before their arrival in Mesopotamia.

Unlike the vague and contradictory details provided in Genesis, the Book of Abraham appears to ground Abraham's Ur in Syria. The added geographical (Olishem/Ulišum) and cultural details (an Egyptian presence at Abraham's homeland) in the Book of Abraham make a northern location for Ur essentially inescapable. At the same time, however, problems persist for the Book of Abraham. For one thing, its text's mentioning of the Chaldeans, as with Genesis, is, according to our presently available evidence, probably anachronistic. Perhaps future findings will overturn this, but as things stand at the moment, this remains a problem for the Book of Abraham's historicity (although not a fatal one). Latter-day Saints approaching the historicity of the Book of Abraham should therefore be cautious and nuanced in how they evaluate the text's historical claims. On the other hand, the explicit naming of Olishem/Ulišum in the Book of Abraham, as well as the depiction of an Egyptian presence in the northern Levant during the time of Abraham, reinforces its historicity. These added details missing from the Genesis narrative about the life of Abraham not only draw our attention to the north as we search for Abraham's homeland, but they also complicate attempts to dismiss the Book of Abraham as pseudepigrapha.

All things considered, I am in agreement with one archaeologist's cautious assessment. "Woolley and others quickly linked [Tell el-Muqayyar] to the biblical 'Ur of Chaldees,'" writes Eric Cline. The fundamental problem, however, is that "there were several sites in the ancient Near East that had the name Ur, just as there are many cities and towns in the United States today with the name 'Troy,' and it is not clear which city named Ur, if any, is to be associated with Abraham, just as none of the cities in the United States are actually associated with the original

Trojan War."[127] The arguments for placing Abraham's Ur in the north are rather enticing and, coupled with the added details provided in the Book of Abraham, should not be dismissed lightly. Indeed, I am personally compelled in that direction in the search to locate Abraham's Ur. But the evidence at this point, admittedly, does not definitively settle the debate one way or the other.

Additionally, even if it disputes the conclusions codified by Woolley, the Book of Abraham should be given more than incidental deference as admissible evidence in this discussion. I therefore think the wisest course for now is caution and open-mindedness. The latter is especially crucial, for if we are going to satisfactorily answer this question, we must be willing to admit new evidence into the discussion if or when it surfaces, no matter how much it might challenge the scholarly consensus or a venerated tradition.

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127. Eric H. Cline, *Biblical Archaeology: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 75.