

## Abraham's Converts in Haran

In the Genesis account of Abraham's sojourning, the text indicates that at the outset of his journey the patriarch "took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their substance that they had gathered, and the souls that they had gotten in Haran; and they went forth to go into the land of Canaan; and into the land of Canaan they came" (Gen. 12:5). This passage is paralleled in the Book of Abraham, with one small but important difference. It reads, "And I took Sarai, whom I took to wife when I was in Ur, in Chaldea, and Lot, my brother's son, and all our substance that we had gathered, and the souls that we had *won* in Haran, and came forth in the way to the land of Canaan, and dwelt in tents as we came on our way" (Abr. 2:15, emphasis added). As Hugh Nibley rightly recognized, the Book of Abraham thus portrays the patriarch as an exemplary missionary (compare Abr. 1:7).<sup>1</sup>

At first glance, the phrase in Genesis 12:5 ("and the souls that they had gotten in Haran") could appear to be depicting the patriarch's acquisition of bonded servants or slaves.<sup>2</sup> This, however, is not the only possible

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1. Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Abraham*, ed. John Gee, The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley 18 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2009), 441–44.

2. Thus, Robert Alter, who renders verse 5 so: "And Abram took Sarai his wife and Lot his nephew and all the goods they had gotten and the folk they had bought in Haran, and they set out on the way to the land of Canaan, and they came to the land of Canaan." Although Alter believes this verse depicts Abraham's involvement in slavery, he stresses that the sort of slavery practiced in the Bible (and throughout much of the ancient Near East) "was not the sort of chattel slavery later practiced in North America. These slaves had certain limited rights, could be given great responsibility, and were not thought to lose their personhood." Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible, Volume 1: The Five Books of Moses, a Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019), 41.

interpretation of this somewhat obscure passage. The Hebrew word rendered “substance” in the KJV (*rēkūš*) means something more like “property” and usually refers to cattle and herds but also seems to apply to the household and its members (compare Gen. 31:18; 36:6; 46:6).<sup>3</sup> It appears to derive from an Akkadian word that as a verb (*rakāsu*) means “to bind” and as a noun (*riksu*) means both a “band, belt,” and an “agreement, treaty.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, it could be referring to those in Haran whom Abraham and his family bound by covenant. In this regard, the “conversion” of members of the local community at Haran may have looked something like the attitude Ruth, a Moabite, adopted when she pledged loyalty to her mother-in-law, Naomi, an Israelite: “Whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God” (Ruth 1:16).

As Nibley has noted and discussed,<sup>5</sup> there is a long, sustained interpretative tradition within Judaism (and later Islam) that reads Genesis 12:5 in exactly this manner.<sup>6</sup> In Targum Neofiti and Targum Pseudo-Jonathan (Aramaic translations and expansions of the Bible), for example, Genesis 12:5 is rendered to read that Abraham “converted” or “made proselytes” (*gyyr*) of the inhabitants of Haran.<sup>7</sup> In Targum Onqelos, the residents of Haran are depicted as having been “subjected to the Law” (*ša’ābiydu lə’orāytā’*) by Abraham and are thus counted as his converts.<sup>8</sup> The Targumic interpreters, accordingly, understood Genesis 12:5 exactly as depicting “the proselytizing activity of Abraham.”<sup>9</sup>

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3. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), 940; John Gee, “The Wanderings of Abraham,” in *From Creation to Sinai: The Old Testament through the Lens of the Restoration*, ed. Daniel L. Belnap and Aaron P. Schade (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2021), 261–62.

4. Jeremy Black, Andrew George, and Nicholas Postgate, eds., *A Concise Dictionary of Akkadian* (Wiesbaden, Ger.: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2000), 297, 304.

5. Nibley, *Approach to the Book of Abraham*, 441–44.

6. See the sources gathered and catalogued in John A. Tvedtnes, Brian M. Hauglid, and John Gee, eds., *Traditions about the Early Life of Abraham* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies: 2001), 544.

7. See Martin McNamara, trans., *Targum Neofiti 1: Genesis*, The Aramaic Bible 1A (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1992), 86; and Michael Maher, trans., *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Genesis*, The Aramaic Bible 1B (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1992), 52.

8. Bernard Grossfeld, trans., *The Targum Onqelos to Genesis*, The Aramaic Bible 6 (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1988), 63.

9. Maher, *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, 52 n. 6; compare M. Delcor, “La portée chronologique de quelques interprétations du Targoum Néophyti contenues dans le cycle d’Abraham,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 1, no. 2 (1970): 106–8.

This interpretation was continued into the rabbinic period<sup>10</sup> and was notably picked up in texts such as the Bereshit Rabbah (*Lekh Lekha* 39:14) and the Zohar (*Lekh Lekha* 1:85b).<sup>11</sup>

In his commentary on the book of Genesis, the Jewish scholar Umberto Cassuto argued that the “souls” (“lives,” “persons”; *nepes*) of Genesis 12:5 could not be slaves for a variety of reasons; he preferred to follow the rabbinic interpretation that the passage offers “an allusion to proselytes (Abram converted the men, and Sarah the women).” He postulated that the rabbinic interpretation “approximates to the actual meaning of the text” and, what’s more, “that we have here one of those verses that point to the theme of an ancient tradition that was not indeed incorporated in the Torah in its entirety, but was known to the Israelites.”<sup>12</sup> Strikingly, Cassuto’s own translation of Genesis 12:5 parallels the Book of Abraham almost exactly: “And the souls that they had won in Haran.”<sup>13</sup>

The subtle change in the Book of Abraham’s parallel passage to Genesis 12:5, accordingly, finds support both from ancient sources and from modern scholarship. Beyond this, the text provides greater insight to the life of Abraham for the appreciation of Latter-day Saints: the patriarch was a great missionary who was concerned with extending the blessings of the covenant to God’s children, as was part of the obligations of the covenant he took upon himself (compare Gal. 3:6–9; Abr. 1:1–3; 2:9–11). As Elder George Reynolds recognized, “Thus we find that Abraham, having sought for the privilege of becoming a preacher of righteousness, in answer to his desire the priesthood was given to him with the command to magnify it. It is not probable that such a man would fail in the hour

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10. Martin Goodman, “Proselytising in Rabbinic Judaism,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 40, no. 2 (1989): 175–85, esp. 178–79, 182–83; Martin Goodman, *Mission and Conversion: Proselytizing in the Religious History of the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 89, 130, 144–45.

11. H. Freedman and Maurice Simon, trans., *Midrash Rabbah*, vol. 1 (London: Soncino Press, 1939), 324; Daniel C. Matt, trans., *The Zohar, Volume 2* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2004), 45.

12. Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis, Part Two: From Noah to Abraham* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1964), 319; compare Irving Jacobs, *The Midrashic Process: Tradition and Interpretation in Rabbinic Judaism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 124–25 n. 125, 188.

13. Cassuto, *Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, 319. Incidentally, rabbinic authorities also understood Genesis 21:33 as a reference to Abraham’s proselytizing. See C. T. R. Hayward, “Abraham as Proselytizer at Beer-Sheba in the Targums of the Pentateuch,” in *Targums and the Transmission of Scripture into Judaism and Christianity*, Studies in the Aramaic Interpretations of Scripture 10 (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2010), 17–34.

of action. . . . That he did proclaim the law of the Lord where he went, is evidenced [in his record].”<sup>14</sup>

### Further Reading

Nibley, Hugh. *An Approach to the Book of Abraham*, edited by John Gee, 441–44. *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* 18. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2009.

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14. George Reynolds, *The Book of Abraham: Its Authenticity Established as a Divine and Ancient Record* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1879), 10; compare George Reynolds, “The Book of Abraham—It’s Genuineness Established,” *Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star* 41, no. 3 (January 20, 1879): 38.