

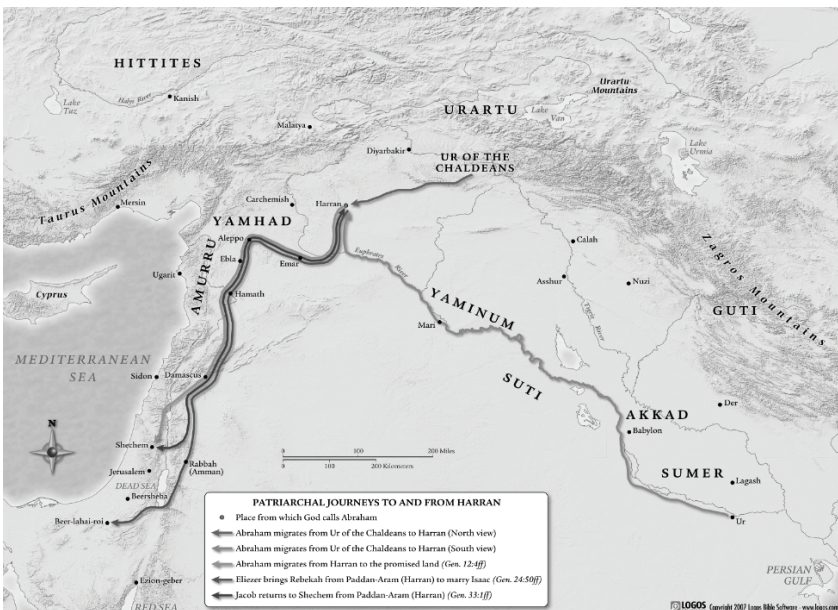
GENESIS 12

Genesis 12:1-9

12:1 *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."*

Abram, the son of Terah and brother of Nahor and Haran, had been born and raised in the region of Ur of the Chaldees, located in what is modern day Iraq. He married Sarai, his half-sister. For some unstated reason, Terah decided to move to Canaan (*Genesis 11:31*). So he took Abram, Sarai, and Lot, Haran's son, and began the long journey to Canaan. However, instead of moving directly southwest toward Canaan, the small caravan traveled to a region southwest of Ur known as Haran, a distance of more than 300 km (180 miles). Perhaps he preferred to travel the well-known trade routes. Once the family arrived in Haran, they settled there. It seems that Terah forgot about his decision to move to Canaan. Eventually, at the age of 205, Terah died. Abram, the eldest son of Terah, then became the head of the family.

However, the Lord did not allow Abram to forget about their original destination. The Lord spoke to Abram and told him to leave his family roots and move on to some unspecified location. Whereas Terah knew where he wanted to go, Abram did not know. Terah wanted to go to Canaan, but the Lord did not specify the destination toward which Abram should travel. The only thing Abram did know was that he was leaving everything that was familiar to him and walking into an unknown future with an unknown destination.



Scholars present two opinions about the location of Ur, one as a city and the other as a region. One group believes that Ur was located in Iraq, and the other group holds that Ur is the name of a region in northern Mesopotamia. It seems reasonable that Terah's family would travel southward toward Haran on their way to Canaan rather than travel the long distance required from the southern location. However, it would have been dangerous to cross the Arabian desert from southern Ur directly to Canaan.

12:2 *And 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.*

Even though his destination was not clear, the Lord told Abram that he would be a blessing to his people. Indeed, he would become the father of an entire nation. Because of this promise, his name would never be forgotten. He would always be remembered. This, in itself, is a blessing. However, the magnitude of this blessing is seen to this day, because Abram is revered by Jews, Muslims, and Christians. More than that, Abram would be most honored as a man who was a friend of God, and God's blessing on Abram was clearly reflected throughout his life.

12:3 *I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."*

God the Lord then made a promise to Abram consisting of two facets. He would protect Abram, blessing those who bless him and cursing those who do not honor him. This promise would have a major impact—not only on Abram, but on all the peoples of the world.

As Abram's journey unfolds, it will become clear how the Lord protected him every step of the way. He traveled into territories foreign to the culture and traditions of Abram's family, yet every dangerous situation became a source of material blessing to Abram. God's protection and favor followed everything Abram did, whether Abram's behavior reflected God's grace or Abram's sin.

The second part of the promise was clearly unconditional. All the peoples of the earth would be blessed through Abram. How this would be accomplished is not made clear. Nevertheless, we now understand that the biblical narrative moves forward through the centuries until the birth of One of Abram's descendants Who offered His redemption as the way to live with their Creator in peace and harmony, rejoicing in the fact that the eternal God would not hold His redeemed people accountable for their sin and

rebellion. It was this One Who fulfilled every aspect of God's Law, and died as the sacrifice that paid the penalty of man's sin. It was this One Who rose from the dead and validated every claim He had made with the incontrovertible evidence of His authority over men and nations. Paul the Apostle properly interprets this promise God made to Abram:

¹³Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree"—¹⁴so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith. ¹⁵To give a human example, brothers: even with a man-made covenant, no one annuls it or adds to it once it has been ratified. ¹⁶Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, "And to offsprings," referring to many, but referring to one, "And to your offspring," who is Christ. (Galatians 3:13–16)

12:4 *So Abram went, as the LORD had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.*

It is difficult to determine the length of time that Terah's family lived in Haran, but it was probably a considerable length of time by today's standards, perhaps fifteen to thirty years. However, we are now informed that Abram was seventy-five years old at the time he left Haran and began his journey to an unknown destination. Accepting God's direction and relying on His promise, Abram gathered his family, his servants, and his herds and began traveling in a southward direction.

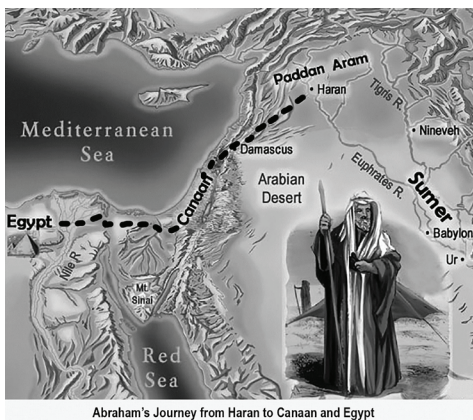
Abram took Lot, his nephew, with him. It is likely that Abram's brother Haran had died when Lot was a young boy. In the culture of these times, the responsibility for the care of the family fell on the eldest son. When Terah died, Abram became the head of the family, not just his immediate family but of the extended family as

well. Although Lot was now a mature young man, he would remain Abram's responsibility until Lot married. When that happened, then Lot would become the head of his own family. Nevertheless, the welfare of Lot was under the oversight and supervision of Abram for as long as Abram lived.

12:5-6 *⁵And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people that they had acquired in Haran, and they set out to go to the land of Canaan. When they came to the land of Canaan, ⁶Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land.*

When Terah and his family settled in Haran, their herds continued to grow. The herds grew faster than Abram's family could care for them, so they acquired people to help them in this expanding task. Abram's family became quite prosperous. When they began their journey, the job of managing this sizeable flock and their caretakers was a huge task. Day after day they would break camp and drive their herds southward until it was time to stop for the night. Progress was painstakingly slow, and the work was tiring—yet the large caravan moved onward until they arrived in the lands settled by the descendants of Canaan, the fourth son of Ham.

Even though the Lord had not told Abram the location of his destination, Abram decided to move toward Canaan. This was the location where Terah, his father, planned to settle when they left Ur of the Chaldees. Now it seems



<https://www.bible-history.com/maps/6-abrahams-journeys.html>

that Abram continued on toward Canaan to accomplish Terah's dream. Abram left Haran to begin the 480-mile (775 km) journey to Canaan.¹ It may have taken six to twelve months. As Abram's family worked their way slowly southward, they passed through the region of Shechem. Shechem would eventually become one of the leading cities of Israel hundreds of years later when Abram's descendants occupied the land of Canaan. Shechem was located about thirty-two miles (51 km) north of Jerusalem and six miles (9.5 km) east of Samaria in a valley between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim.

12:7 *Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him.*

This is the first time in the Genesis narrative that the Lord "appeared" to one of the early patriarchs. Precisely what this means is often disputed, but most commentators agree that this is what is called a *theophany*, that is to say, a visible manifestation of the Lord. How the Lord communicated with Noah when He instructed him about the construction of the ark is impossible to say. But here, the Lord "appears" to Abram.

In this conversation with Abram, the Lord makes a huge promise in a very short declaration. Abram has now pitched his camp and settled his family in the region of Shechem, the geographic center of Canaan. Here, in this location, the Lord promised Abram that He would give this land to Abram's descendants. Now, Abram knew where the Lord had wanted him to go. More than that, Abram knew that the Lord had directed his journey to this location. No conditions are attached to this promise. Just a simple statement of fact—this land would be given to Abram's offspring.

Abram responded to the Lord's gift by building an altar commemorating this historic event. Noah, as soon as his family left the ark, also built an altar and offered sacrifices to the Lord, thanking Him for His protection during the flood. Now Abram also builds

an altar. He worshiped and thanked his Lord for this gift. However, most scholars agree that the building of altars and worship of the Lord must have included the offering of sacrifices. Calvin reminds us, "... as the word *altar* occurs, let the sacrifices also come into our mind; for from the beginning, God would have mankind informed, that there could be no access to himself without sacrifice."²

12:8 *From there he moved to the hill country on the east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. And there he built an altar to the LORD and called upon the name of the Lord.*

Abram broke camp in Shechem and journeyed on to Bethel, a region about thirty-six miles (57 km) south of Shechem. On the map, locate Bethel, and Ai. Shechem was located in a fertile valley between two mountains. When Abram moved his encampment to Bethel, he now settled on a mountain that lay between Bethel and Ai.

Again, Abram built an altar and worshiped his Lord. Abram's growing dependence on his relationship to God becomes more evident. In Shechem the Lord appeared to Abram, and the altar was Abram's response to the Lord's appearance. Here, however, Abram built an altar and, in his worship, invoked the presence of the Lord.

We must not forget that Abram was now living in the land of Canaan, a region already occupied by the descendants of Canaan, the fourth son of Ham. The Lord had already cursed Canaan and his offspring (*Genesis* 9:22–25). Thus, Abram, the man of God's favor, was living in the land of God's enemy. It is interesting to note that Abram settled between Bethel (*House of God*) and Ai (*ruin*). It seems to represent Abram's journey, living in the tension between God and the sins of mankind. Calvin makes note of this and then explains why Abram's construction of an altar and his public worship bore testimony to his devotion to his Lord in the

midst of a land where its people had erected altars to the worship of their fertility gods.

Should any one ask, whether he could not worship God without an altar? I answer, that the inward worship of the heart is not sufficient unless external profession before men be added. Religion has truly its appropriate seat in the heart; but from this root, public confession afterwards arises, as its fruit. For we are created to this end, that we may offer soul and body unto God.³

12:9 *And Abram journeyed on, still going toward the Negeb.*

Again, Abram broke camp near Bethel and continued his nomadic wanderings toward the Negev, which is rendered as *Negeb* in this translation. This was a region in the southernmost part of Canaan, following the trade routes that led to Egypt. There is no good means by which we can determine the time frame of Abram's journey from Haran, settling in Shechem, then moving on to Bethel, and then the Negev. Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran. It is likely that several years transpired during this southward trek. Nevertheless, throughout his sojourn it has become increasingly evident that the Lord God was guiding every step of the way, and Abram, in return, was growing closer to God.

Notes/Applications

Throughout this narrative it becomes increasingly noticeable that the Lord God, the transcendent Creator of all that exists, directs Abram and his family along the journey of their lives. As the narrative moves on, this storyline can raise a number of questions that may be troublesome to believers in today's world.

Why did Terah, Abram's father, decide to pull up his tents and move to Canaan? What was so attractive about Canaan? The location of Ur is uncertain. It might have been south of Babylon about 145 miles (235 km) north of the Persian Gulf. If this was the loca-

tion, then Terah would have to make a journey of more than 1,000 miles (1,600 km) from Ur of the Chaldees to this unknown land? Why, with this destination in mind, did Terah travel northwest to Haran and settle there, never to continue the journey southward again to Canaan?

The region of Ur of the Chaldees is sometimes said to be about 150 miles (240 km) east northeast of Haran and was much closer than the southern location. If this was the location where Terah raised his family, then Haran was in a direct line with the route that would eventually take the family to their Promised Land of Canaan.

Some educated speculation may answer some of these questions, but will not clearly map out the events that impacted this family. For example, Terah may have traveled northwest to Haran because he needed to provide food and water for his flocks; thus, he followed along the rivers and streams of the Euphrates River. This was better than striking out directly across a barren region known as the Arabian Desert toward Canaan. But still, why Canaan? What provided the motivation to move at all?

As happens so often in Scripture, we are given much of the historical timeline that helps us understand the development of the human race from creation to God's call of Abram. But it does not fill all the gaps that would help our understanding of precisely how God moved Terah from one destination to another.

In that sense, we are much like Abram. God called him to leave Haran with his entire household and move to an unknown destination. God did not explain why or where. Just get up and go! We, like Abram, do not like such a vague plan of action. We want to know why we are doing something; and we want to know what the purpose of the action is.

What sets Abram apart from our responses is his obedience to the Lord's directive. We sometimes refuse to move without these answers. But God does not always provide such explicit instructions complete with the objective. Without knowing why, where, or how he was to make this move, Abram gathered his flocks and herds, his

servants, and his family and set out on a journey that seemingly had no clear destination.

This, then, raises more questions. The Lord did not inform Abram of a specific destination or a specific direction. He could have wandered north, south, east, or west. Why south? Was it because of the conversations that Abram had with Terah, his father, when they decided to leave Ur and go to Canaan? Nevertheless, he traveled southward and stopped at Shechem, right in the heart of Canaan. There the Lord tells him that this was the destination He had chosen for Abram. This land would belong to his heirs.

In whatever way the Lord conversed with Abram, it is increasingly evident that Abram was not a mindless wanderer. He was not just moving from one place to another simply to provide pasture for his growing herds. Rather, Abram knew that the Lord was the One directing his path. The reasons for Terah's move from Ur to Haran may not have been clearly defined, but that became clearer in Haran. By the time Abram pitched his tents in Shechem, he knew Who the Lord was. He built an altar, offered sacrifices of thanksgiving, and worshiped his Lord. Then in Bethel he again built an altar and "called on the name of the Lord."

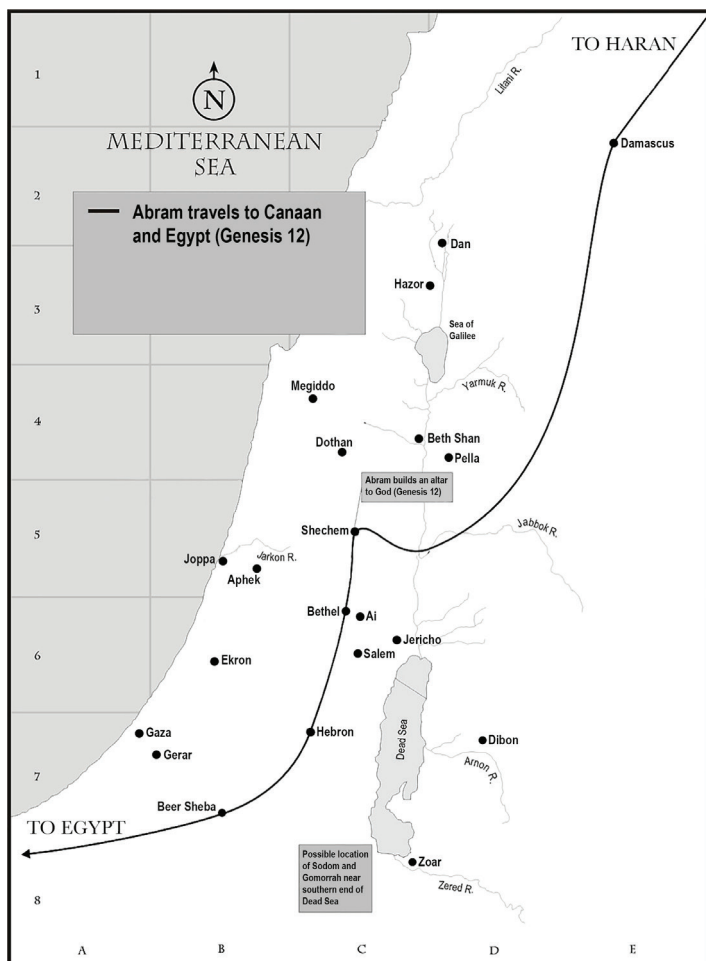
So many of us, followers of the same Jehovah Who directed the journey of Abram, refuse to move unless everything is explained clearly to us. We would be wise to respond as Abram did—simply follow the Lord's instruction and obey His directive.

As believers share the narrative of their journey with the Lord, we often hear remarks like this: "I didn't know what was happening, but years later I could look back and see how the Lord had guided my steps, even though I didn't know where I was going, or even what I was doing!"

When we look back on our lives, the hand of the Lord is clearly visible. Like Abram, we go forth, leave our homes and families, get married, and travel the pathways of our lives. As we move onward, we see the Lord, His guidance, His oversight, and His instructions. Like Abram, we often stop along the way and offer our prayers of

thanksgiving for our Lord's goodness to us. As Jesus further revealed to His disciples, the Holy Spirit Himself becomes our Instructor, our Guide, our Comforter (*John 14–16*).

For those of us who follow our Lord, who are instructed by Him, this journey is one of immense joy and satisfaction. This is the way the life of faith is lived out. We still may not know exactly what we are to do or where we are to go, but we know the One Who bids us to get up and follow Him, whenever and wherever that may be!



Courtesy of *The Net Bible*. Richardson, TX: Biblical Studies Press, 2005.