

## THE HARAN OF ABRAHAM, LABAN, AND JACOB

IN connection with Roman History we read of the defeat and death of Crassus in 63 B.C. at Carrhae, in Northern Mesopotamia, and not infrequently we find added by the historian a phrase indicating that it is the "Haran of Scripture." Then in the year A.D. 217 we read of the death of Caracalla at the same place, with a like note. As this latter event took place just at the time when close attention was being given to Bible study and commenting, especially at the neighbouring great Syrian centre of learning, Edessa or Urha (the present Urfa), such identification was unanimously accepted, and it has maintained itself till the present day.

### SERIOUS DOUBTS

But a careful reading of the Bible compels us to doubt either the accuracy of the identification or the accuracy of Scripture. When one knows the country, or even seeks to measure the distances, and trace the route of Jacob's flight from Laban, the difficulties make themselves felt. In Genesis xxxi. 21 we read that Jacob "passed over the river, and set his face toward the Mount Gilead." Three days later (22) Laban pursued after him seven days' journey (23) and overtook him in the Mount Gilead. The place of meeting was named by Laban in his own Aramaic speech "Jegarsahadutha," and by Jacob in Hebrew "Galeed." This is explained (49) as the Mizpah of Gilead, now identified as Suf, beside Jerash. The identification is probably correct, but it does not touch the argument, as any site in Gilead leaves the difficulty all the same.

### AN IMPOSSIBLE JOURNEY

Now it is quite natural, if we accept the Mesopotamian site for Haran, that we identify the "river" (xxx. 21) as the Euphrates. But the nearest point to Mount Gilead where a crossing of the Euphrates could take place is 300 miles distant in a straight line, and from the nearest point to Haran, the distance between Gilead and the Euphrates is 380 miles. To each of these we have to add, in virtue of the routes that would be taken,

at least 120 miles. Accordingly the journey of ten days for Jacob, and of seven days for Laban would be 420 or 500 miles. Now accordingly, to the shortest (but more unlikely) route Jacob had to travel at the rate of forty-two miles per day, while Laban and his associates had a day's march of sixty miles for seven consecutive days. Then we must consider that Jacob was travelling with sheep, cattle and young children, and he later on offers the natural excuse to Esau (xxxiii. 13) that, if they be overdriven one day, the whole flock will perish. Clearly the journey from the Euphrates is impossible: the ground could not be covered; no, not by the fleetest Arab steed. There is misunderstanding somewhere.

#### AN ETHNOLOGICAL DIFFICULTY

There is another point of importance that seems to decide against the Mesopotamian Haran as the place of residence of Abraham, Nahor, Laban and Jacob, and that is that the inhabitants at that time belonged to the Mitanni, a kindred race with the Hittites. We may, of course, be told that it was possible that Arameans may have settled there in groups; but that would never have given the district the name of Aram-Naharaim (Gen. xxiv. 10) unfortunately translated "Mesopotamia" in the English Versions, following the lxx. In Acts vii. 2, Stephen uses the word Mesopotamia, but it is for the place of Abraham's residence "before he dwelt in Charran." The name Aram-Naharaim and the speech of the Terachites retained till the third generation at least, indicates an Aramaic Land, and in some way enclosed by two rivers. In addition we have the name Paddan-Aram. Now Paddan is a synonym of Harran, and both mean "way" or "highway" in Assyrian. Of course Paddan-Aram might be interpreted as "the highway to Aram," but it is more naturally understood as the "highway of" or "through" Aram.

#### AN ARAMEAN HARAN

Now geographical research in modern times has revealed another Haran that fully meets the demands of every Scripture reference. Fifteen miles to the east of Damascus, and quite visible from the hill of Salihyeh, beside Damascus, there is an ancient site named till today Haran el-Awamid, or "Haran of the Pillars." Its position is in a stretch of country well watered

by the Abana and Pharpar, between the water-courses of which it is situated. The land is well adapted for pasturage, and the chief difficulty would be malaria, but the climate may in these long centuries have changed. The name Haran or Paddan would be quite suitable, as the Great Eastern Highway to Transjordan and Arabia must have passed between this site and Damascus, and besides, in ancient times, when the Syrian Desert was more fertile than it is today, there may have been through this district a direct route to Babylonia.

#### DIFFICULTIES VANISH

And when once this site for the Haran of the patriarchs is accepted the difficulties all vanish, and besides, even seemingly incidental remarks are illuminated. The Aram-Naharaim then of Terach, Abraham and Nahor is the district between the Abana and the Pharpar, the latter of which may have been then of more importance than it is now, but even as a dry water-course it would give enough trouble in the transport of flocks to deserve special note. And from prehistoric days this district has borne the name of Aram and no other. Then from this Haran to the recognised Mizpah of Laban and Jacob there is a distance of seventy miles in a direct line, and as the road is almost straight we need reckon the distance traversed as not more than eighty miles. Sheep in Palestine travel at the rate of ten miles a day, so that the journey could be accomplished without pressure. And if we consider Laban to have taken too long a time before he overtook Jacob, we must remember that after three days he might not be able to track him without doubt, and he would have to discover whether or not he had taken the western route into Northern Palestine.

#### INCIDENTAL SUPPORT

This leads us to consider a remark made by Jacob (Gen. xxxii. 11) in his prayer by the Jabbok, "with my staff I passed *over this Jordan.*" Had the eastern Haran been his objective on leaving home, that was not only unnecessary, but would have been a useless prolongation of the journey. The route thither was the well-known one that ran from Assyria to Egypt and passed between Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon. But to reach the Damascene Aram it was natural for Jacob, after leaving Bethel, to pursue his journey northwards, leaving Western Canaan at

the bridge or ford over the Jordan to the south of the Waters of Merom (Lake Huleh) that now bears the name "Jisr Banat Jacob." And on his return journey there was no reason for, but many reasons against, his getting into Transjordan, if he came from the distant north. These points not only support our contention for the southern site, but they practically cut out the traditional identification.

#### ABRAHAM A KING

Josephus (*Ant.* I, 7, 2) mentions that Abraham "reigned at Damascus." He quotes from Hecateus (500 B.C.), Berosus (250 B.C.) and Nicolaus of Damascus (fl. 4 B.C.). These men were all interested in history and travel, and a statement like this from ancient times would appeal to them. A like story has to our own times been preserved among the Arabs who assert that "Abraham was king of Damascus." We would not make too much of these old-world stories; but perhaps we may recognise in them an echo of the fact that Abraham sojourned for a time at Aram-Naharaim or Paddan-Aram beside Damascus. At all events our identification leaves the Scripture narrative intact.

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