

LECH-LECHA: REARRANGING THE CHRONOLOGY AND REHABILITATING TERACH

JEFFREY M. COHEN

The episode that immediately precedes the life and activity of Abra(ha)m is that of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1-9). There we are told that early mankind inhabited a valley in Mesopotamia, which was the place of Abram's family's domicile, and from which he left to find his destiny in the Promised Land. The juxtaposition of those two episodes is suggestive of cause and effect: that we are meant to view Abram's abandonment of his birthplace against the backcloth of what had happened there a few generations earlier, namely the building of the Tower of Babel.

Babel stood for a philosophy that was inimical to that of a spiritual visionary like Abram. It stood for self-glorification and gratification: *Let us build a city and a tower, whose summit is in the heavens and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered over the face of the whole earth* (Gen. 11:4). There is also an unmistakable textual association here between the Tower builders' slogan, *v'na'aseh lanu shem*, "Let us make a name for ourselves," and God's promise to Abram while he was still in Babel, that, once he had left that environment – *va'agadlah sh'mekha - I will glorify your name* (Gen. 12:2).

God was clearly saying to Abram, "Divorce yourself from the society of vain men, attempting to leave a hollow legacy of bricks and mortar. You, on the other hand, are destined to leave behind a legacy of the spirit. Your name will live on in minds, hearts, souls, and deeds. *I, God*, will glorify your name - as opposed to those who attempt to glorify *themselves*, by constructing a monument to their own name, a monument as insignificant as was their contribution to humanity. And, if any remembrance of them at all survives, it will be merely through the silent, broken slabs of a failed, audacious enterprise.

The proximity of those two episodes is undoubtedly intended to focus on the uniqueness of Abram, who stood alone – *contra mundum* – in defiance and rejection of a society that was obsessed with human glorification. Contrast that with his authentic modesty and humility, as evinced when, in petitioning God

Jeffrey M. Cohen is rabbi emeritus of the Stanmore Synagogue in London, and a regular contributor to Jewish Bible Quarterly. He has written some 25 books, including renderings into rhymed verse of the book of Genesis, the Siddur, the Rosh Hashanah & Yom Kippur Machzor, Megillat Esther, the Haggadah, and, most recently, the Book of Psalms. See www.rabbijeffrey.co.uk.

for the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah, he says, *I am but dust and ashes* (Gen. 18:27), as well as in his self-abasement before Ephron, the Hittite prince (Gen. 23:7; 12).

However, this link between the end of the universal story of man and the beginning of the story of Abram presents us with a problem. Genesis 11:31 states, *And Terach took his son Abram, and Lot the son of Haran, his grandson, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of Abram his son, and they departed with them from Ur of the Chaldees to go to the land of Canaan; and they arrived at Haran, and they settled there.* This clearly indicates Terach's desire to move from Ur and to settle in Canaan long before God instructed Abram to do so. This decision is important for any assessment of the character of Terach which is otherwise shrouded in mystery.

In a previous contribution to *JBQ*, I attempted to offer a rationale for R. Yochanan's disparagement of Noah in suggesting that had he lived in Abram's generation he would not have been acclaimed as a man of any spiritual distinction.¹ Perhaps in the case of Terach we have another example of the Midrash offering an undeservedly bad press, as we will see.

From our earliest Hebrew lessons, we are all familiar with the engaging Midrashic stories of Abram's childhood. The favourite is certainly *Bereishit Rabbah* 38:13, which tells about his father Terach having been an idol-maker who, one day, left the young Abram in charge of his shop while he was away on a journey. Abram, having already concluded that inanimate stone idols could not possibly be invested with divine powers, smashed all his father's idols, and placed a hammer in the hand of the largest one, hoping thereby to support his allegation that it was the latter that had perpetrated the crime.

But the most important part of the legend is the continuation: 'When Terach returned and demanded to know what had happened, Abram reported that it was when the smaller idols became hungry, and started squabbling for food, that the large idol became enraged and smashed them all into pieces. When Terach retorted that what Abram was saying was rubbish, given that idols don't get hungry, and cannot talk, squabble, or even move, Abram smiled and came in with his well-prepared punch-line: "Father, let your ears hear what your mouth has just said. If they are so impotent, how, then, can you possibly think of worshipping them as gods?"' (*Bereishit Rabbah* 38:13).

Although this story is typically Midrashic, it draws attention to the fact that the Torah does not provide, as expected, any account of the origin and discovery of monotheism, the central pillar on which the entire Israelite covenant rests. Such an account would have fitted perfectly either at the end of Genesis 11 or the beginning of Genesis 12. It would also have provided an insight into what it was that prompted Terach to uproot himself, “from *his* land, *his* birthplace, and *his* father’s home” even before God issued that command to his son.

One possible explanation is that Terach fled from his homeland precisely out of consideration for his son, Abram. The latter’s conversion to monotheism and the rejection of idolatry would inevitably have made him a figure of hate within his city of Ur; and the report of his rejection of the gods would have certainly spread far and wide, to the extent that the Midrashic account (*ibid.*) of King Nimrod seeking to have him executed is not too far-fetched. Any father whose son was challenging the regnant religious beliefs would have removed him without delay to a country of safety. Furthermore, if we accept the plausible Midrashic tradition (*op. cit.* sec. 12) that Terach was persuaded by his son to embrace monotheism, that would have been an added reason for him to have fled with his family from Ur.

There is a chronological problem, however, when attempting to reconcile the last verses of Genesis 11 with the opening verses of Genesis 12. The former records the flight of Terach from Ur and the family’s settlement in Haran, a place identified by archaeologists with Sanliurfa in S.E. Turkey, about 80 km east of the Euphrates. The family lived there for some sixty years until Terach’s death,² after which the text reports that God appears to Abram with the instruction to leave *your land, birthplace, and father’s home* (namely Ur), *for the land that I shall show you!* (Gen. 12:1).

Rashi raises the problem, stating, ‘But surely he had already left there with his father and had gone to live in Haran!’³ His suggestion is that the words *lech-lecha* are not to be understood as ‘leave your land...’, but rather as, ‘*proceed still further away from your former land,*’ that is, move even further away from Ur, in the direction of Canaan, ‘the land that I shall show you.’

The difficulties with Rashi’s explanation are, first, we would have expected the Torah to have said, simply and more succinctly, ‘leave your place,’ or, more specifically, ‘leave Haran.’ Secondly, Haran, where Abram was currently

residing, was neither his ‘land,’ ‘birthplace,’ or – any longer - his father’s home’; so the Torah’s description of God’s *lech-lecha* call seems difficult to synthesize with either of his places of residence!

To resolve the difficulty, we take account of Abraham ibn Ezra’s application here of the rabbinic axiom - *ein mukdam um’uchar ba-Torah* – that the Torah does not (necessarily) follow chronological order.⁴ In his view, therefore, the verse which records God’s *lech-lecha* call to Abram (12:1-3) refers specifically to the context of the account found in 11: 31 which describes Terach as initiating the move from Ur.

We suggest the following reconstruction of the verses and situations:

Following the threat to Abram’s life:

God said to Abram: ‘Get out of your country, your birthplace, and your father’s house, unto the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. And I will bless those that bless you, and curse anyone that curses you; and in you shall all the families of the earth be blessed. (Gen. 12:1-3)

Terach, already won over to belief in God by Abram’s persuasive arguments, would assuredly have been informed by his son about that personal divine revelation he had received. Terach, not at all surprised that God would have wished to communicate with his son in response to his heroism in defying the idolatrous beliefs of all around, takes the immediate decision to move his family out of harm’s way, and to leave Ur:

Hence: And Terach took Abram his son, and Lot the son of Haran, his son’s son, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Abram’s wife; and they went forth with them from Ur of the Chaldees; and they came to Haran and dwelt there. (Gen. 11: 31)

The family lived in Haran until the death of Terach. Notwithstanding God’s earlier directive to Abram to leave his land for ‘the land that I shall show you,’ he had felt obliged to stay in Haran to support and look after his aged father. For all those years Abram may well have assumed that Haran was the enigmatic ‘land that I shall show you!’

However, on the death of Terach, Abram receives a new divine communication: *And Abram went, as the Lord instructed; and Lot went with him. And Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed out of Haran...and they*

went forth to go to the land of Canaan; and to the land of Canaan they came (Gen. 12:4).

According to our textual reconstruction, Rashi's problem of chronology – how, at the beginning of Genesis 12, God could tell Abram to leave 'your land, your birthplace and your father's home' when the family had long since removed to Haran – is neatly resolved.

As mentioned above, it was Terach's stated intention to settle with his family in Canaan, though no specific reason is given for his choice of that land. Indeed, it may be considered most curious given its entrenched and pervasive polytheism as attested to by the Torah (see Leviticus 18:3). This may be accounted for in relation to its geographical position midway between Egypt and Mesopotamia which meant that it attracted the cultural and religious influences of both countries which it synthesized with its own. Hence Canaan's large pantheon of gods – led by such deities as El, Baal, Asherah, Astarte, Chemosh, Dagan, Anat, Moloch, Mot, Resheph, Qos, etc. – as revealed by the Ebla archive from Tel Mardikh and the cuneiform texts from Ras Shamra-Ugarit.⁵ Terach may have reasoned, therefore, that his family would find a welcome in that religiously cosmopolitan environment and that his son would find fertile ground there wherein to sow the seeds of his monotheistic belief.

R. Obadiah Seforno (16th cent. Italian commentator) may well have had in mind that situation - and the incongruity of God's command to Abram to *Get out of your country, your birthplace, and your father's house, unto the land that I will show you* - when he interpreted the latter phrase as referring to a *specific area within* 'the land which I will show you' in a heavenly vision.' He states:

This would explain why Abram kept moving further into the land without pitching his tent to settle down until he received the appropriate sign from God. This occurred when he reached Shechem, where we are told that God appeared to him' (vv. 6-7).

In other words, although the land was inimical to godliness and to the influence of monotheism, yet there was one specific location, in the environs of Shechem, where God would guarantee that his efforts would meet with success.⁶ We find difficulty, however, in reconciling this with Seforno's later comment defining the entire land of Canaan as "a land of which they had heard

that it was singularly suited for people of their religious beliefs, a land in which the true God could be worshipped without hindrance.”⁷

We are not told why Terach decided, notwithstanding, to stay permanently in Haran. We may conjecture that, primarily, it was on account of his old age and infirmity, given that he died aged 205 years (See Gen. 11:32). A contributory factor may have been political instability and inter-tribal warfare in Canaan, as exemplified by the war of the four kings against the five, in which Abraham subsequently became embroiled (See Gen. 14). And, finally, because his main concern had been to secure the safety of Abram and his family, and Haran provided them with the haven they needed. This would also explain why, immediately after recording Terach’s death, the call of *lech-lecha* was given to Abram. Its message was that the time had arrived, and that the conditions in Canaan were ripe, for him to respond to his God-given mission and to travel around the country promoting monotheism and the ethical and moral values to which he was committed.

We suggested above that the Midrash might undeservedly have given Terach a bad press. This may be attributed to the great popularity of that Midrash depicting him as a maker, seller, and worshipper of idols, which certainly coloured any further assessment of him, to the extent that he is depicted in that literature as a wicked and misguided character⁸ who readily seized his religiously rebellious son and brought him to Nimrod to be thrown into a fiery furnace (*Bereshit Rabbah* 38:12). The one exception to that assessment seems to have been Rabbi Abba bar Kahana (*loc. cit.*) who asserted that God assured Abram that his father had been allocated a place in the World to Come.

This reading of the situation may seem to be contradicted, however, by the reference in Joshua to Terach’s family’s idolatrous origins: *In olden times, your forefathers - Terach, father of Abraham and father of Nahor - lived beyond the Euphrates and worshipped other gods* (Josh. 24:2). In our view, this does not conflict, however, with the notion of him having been won over subsequently to monotheism. Indeed, the many spiritual, social, and emotional challenges he would have had to surmount on his road to enlightenment, as well as the need to give up everything and flee his country, represent the greatest tribute to his character, determination, and quality of spirit.

Moreover, it should not be forgotten that the Bible does not gloss over the continued allure of idolatry and its many manifestations throughout the

centuries of Israelite history. This was foreshadowed in the first two commandments of the Decalogue: ‘Have no other gods’ and ‘Make no sculptured images or likenesses’ (Ex 20:3-4; Deut. 5:7-9), with a view to worshipping them. Written testimony to its allure is provided by the episodes of the Golden Calf (Ex. 32:2-10), the idol of Micah (Judges chapters 17-18), the separation of the Northern Kingdom and its idolatrous constitution (I Kings 12:26-30), the exile to Assyria (attributed by the author of the second Book of Kings to ‘the worship of other gods’: 17:7), and the inveighing against idolatry by a succession of prophets (see Ezek. 16:15-59; Hos. 1:1-2, *et al.*). The reference to Terach’s family’s early idolatry is fully consistent, therefore, with biblical openness on this issue.

In the light of our analysis of the Torah text – and liberating ourselves from the Midrashic bias against him – we believe that a case may well be made out for upholding the integrity of Terach. After all, he took the initiative in removing his family from Ur, with the intention of reaching Canaan. Whatever his reason of choice, he is still deserving of credit for having been the first biblical figure to implant into his family the notion of Canaan as the ideal place for them to put down roots.

Furthermore, given the chaos that ensued in Babel following the destruction of the Tower, accompanied by the widespread population upheavals (see Gen. 11:9), Terach should also be given credit, at the least, for having brought his family to safety and for having saved Abram for humanity.

But it goes much further: He clearly also provided a nurturing home life. The fact that, given Abram’s personal piety and exacting standards, he was content to remain living with his father until Terach’s death, says much for both father and son, and is suggestive of a close relationship of mutual respect and a home environment attuned to Abram’s ideas, values, and way-of-life.⁹

NOTES

1. See Rashi on Genesis 6:9, *s.v. b'dorotav*; Jeffrey M Cohen, “Had Noah lived in Abraham’s generation,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, 22 (1994), pp.120-122.
2. See the calculation in Rashi on Genesis 11:32, based on the chronological information found in the text.
3. See Rashi on 12:2, *s.v. me'artz'cha*.

4. See Commentary of ibn Ezra on Genesis 11:29. On the principle of the Torah's loose chronology, see BT *Pes.* 6b; *Sifre B'ha'a lot'cha*, sec. 64. Rashi states this clearly in his comment on Exodus 4:20: *Ein mukdam um'uchar m'dukdakim ba-mikra*, 'The Torah does not follow a precise chronological order of events.' For some examples of this, see Numbers 1:1 and Numbers 9:1 and *RMBN ad loc.* Rashi also states that the account of the sin of the Golden Calf in Exodus ch. 32 belongs chronologically before the command to construct the Mishkan, as described in Exodus ch. 25.

5. Hillers D.R. (1985), "Analyzing the Abominable: Our Understanding of Canaanite Religion," *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, 75 (1985), pp. 253-269.

6. See Commentary of Seforno on Genesis 12:1.

7. Seforno on 12:5.

8. Mid. *Bemidbar Rabbah* 19:1; 19:33; *Midrash HaGadol* on Genesis 11:28.

9. The problems we have attempted to resolve above are not new, and, as we have stated, were already raised by some of our classical commentators. A fresh attempt to resolve them was made in the pages of this journal by Ari Berman ("The Role of Terach in the Foundation Stories of the Patriarchal Family," *JBQ* 44 (2016), pp. 251-257), and, although we concur with his attempt to enhance the character and contribution of Terach, we have reservations regarding some of his assumptions, notably that "Terach began a movement away from foreign gods" (p.256). Viewing him as a pioneer of monotheism simply cannot be rationalised with the explicit biblical statement – as quoted in the Haggadah – that *Terach, father of Abraham and father of Nahor worshipped other gods* (Josh. 24:2).