

SUNDAY MORNING BIBLE STUDY
Week 6: Genesis 12 – The Call of Abram

A MAJOR TRANSITION

Watch the “Read Scripture” video from The Bible Project on [Genesis 12-50](#). Chapter 12 marks a major transition in the book of Genesis. The first eleven chapters are what is commonly referred to as pre-history. Each of those stories have been told to set up the story that is about to be told throughout the rest of the Pentateuch, the story of Israel. A lot of those stories, including the Adam and Eve story (as we have seen) is the story of Israel in miniature.

What we have seen through the first eleven chapters of Genesis is that the world and its people are not as good as God intended them to be. And so, God tried to start over with Noah, but that didn’t work. And so, the question becomes, “What is God going to do now?”

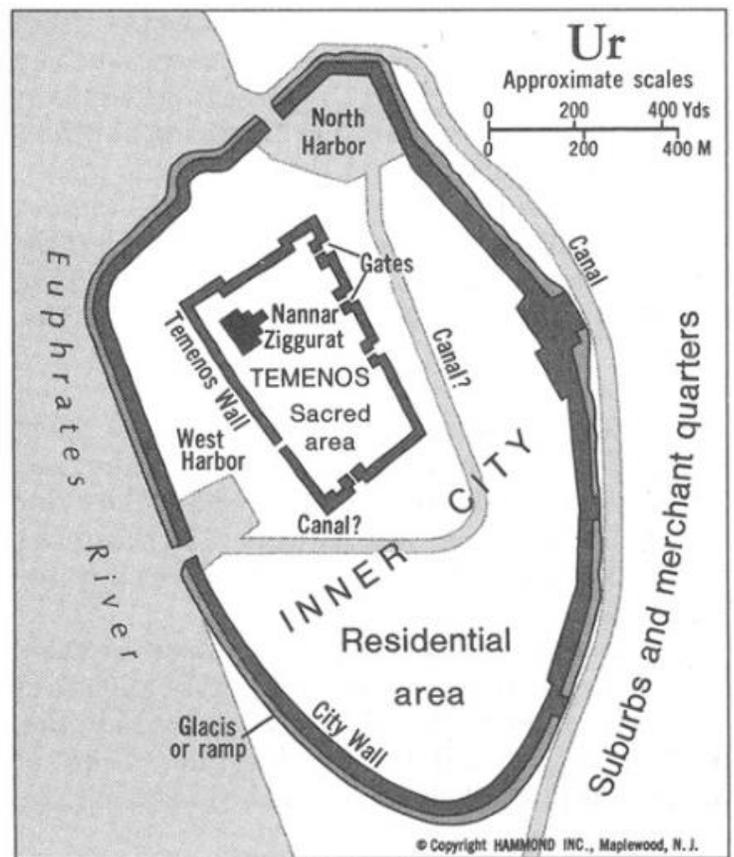
GOD CHOOSES ABRAM

And that’s where we come to chapter 12. Up until now, the world has continued to spiral out of control, but now we catch a glimmer of hope through this family line. We started with Adam, passed through Seth, and now we go on to Terah. God is going to choose one member of this family, Abram, from Ur of the Chaldeans in Babylonia, to make for God’s self a people and a nation and give them a land. And this people will be the tool that God uses to restore order to the chaos. Israel’s first ancestor came out of Babylon and headed to the promised land, just as the nation would centuries later and the God who was faithful to Abraham will be faithful to those who return from exile as well.

ABRAM’S FAMILY

What do we know about Abram and his family from Genesis chapter 11?

- Abram is the son of Terah
- He has two brothers, Nahor and Haran
- His brother Haran died while they lived in Ur of the Chaldeans.
- Abram and his brother Nahor took wives
- Abram’s wife was named Sarai
- Nahor’s wife was named Milcah (whose father was Haran and whose brother was Lot)
- Terah (Abram’s father) took Abram and Lot (Abram’s nephew) and Sarai (Abram’s wife) and they left Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan, but before they got there, they stopped and settled in Haran where Terah died (see map on next page).
- Quick note: If we read further in the Old Testament (Joshua 24:2), we learn that Terah, if not Abram himself, was well acquainted with the worship of Mesopotamian gods. It says “Long ago your ancestors – Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods.

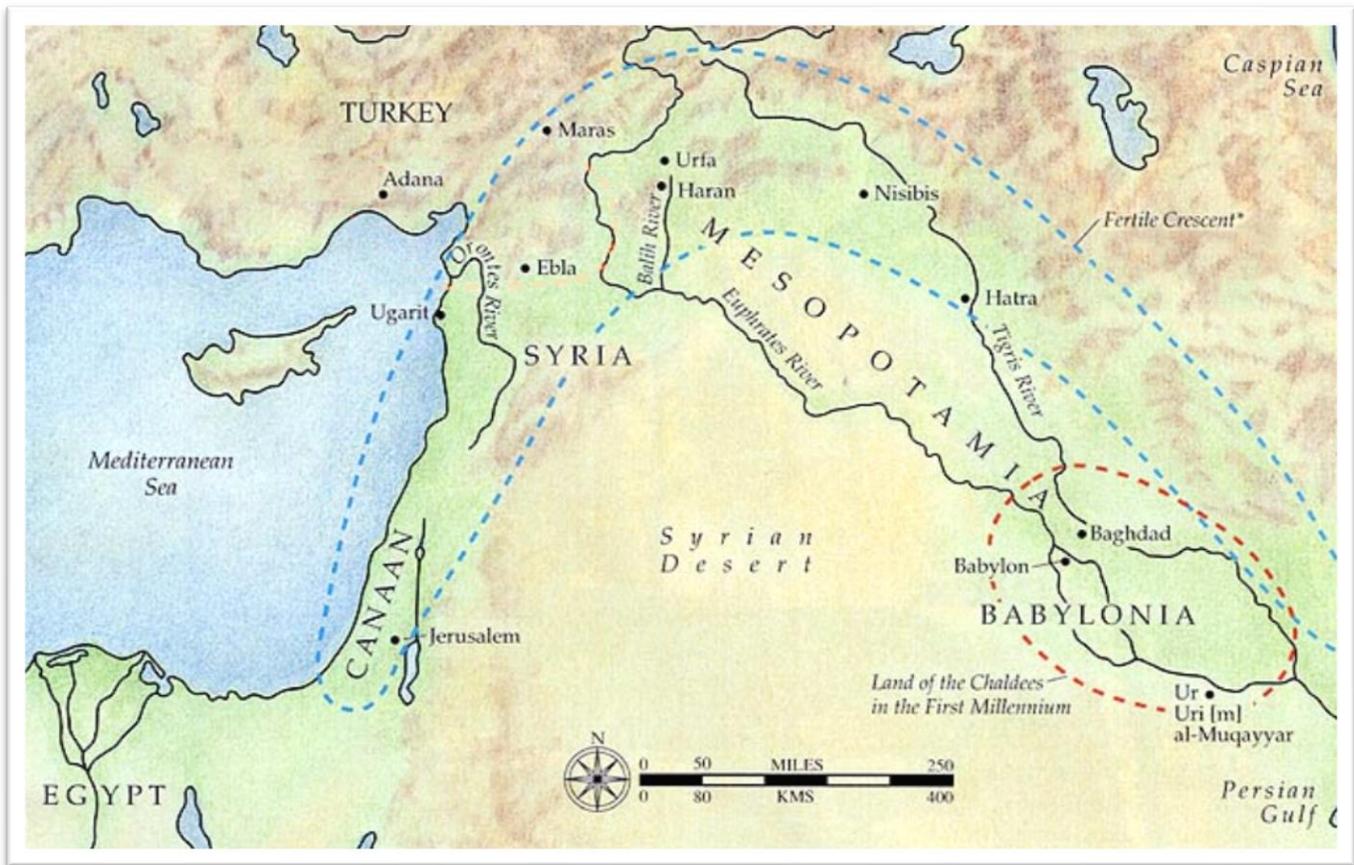


Plan of the site of ancient Ur.

WHERE IS UR?

Ur is one of the oldest cities of southern Mesopotamia. Ur lies ten miles west of the Euphrates (in antiquity, it used to be on the river bank before the river changed course). It is mentioned four times in the Bible: Genesis 11:28, 31; 15:7; and Nehemiah 9:7. In Hebrew it is always mentioned as ‘ur kasidim where Kasidim refers to Chaldeans (as it is called in the Septuagint). The Chaldean Empire didn’t rise until much later than Abraham and the heyday of Chaldean Ur would have been at the time of the biblical editors working during the Babylonian exile. Ur was the center for worship of the moon god, Sin, and contained a ziggurat dedicated to Sin.

Maps



HARAN

The ancient city of Haran, which probably derived its name from the Akkadian word *harranu* ('highway'), is located in modern-day Turkey about 10 miles north of the Syrian border. It is strategically located on the historic east-west trade route that linked the Tigris River with the Mediterranean Sea. Haran was one of northern Mesopotamia's important commercial and religious centers, widely known for its dedicated worship of the moon god, Sin. En route to Canaan, Abram and his family lived there for a time, perhaps to care for Terah, his ailing father, who eventually died there. Abram (i.e., Abraham) is living in Haran when he receives the call from God to depart and go to Canaan (Genesis 12:1). He does so, taking with him a sizable household and considerable wealth, amassed while in Haran (Genesis 12:4–5). Abram later found a wife for his son Isaac from among relatives in Haran (Genesis 24:1-7, 24), and Isaac's son Jacob eventually secured refuge in the region with his uncle Laban (Genesis 27:42-28:5) for whom he worked for 20 years. Before returning to Canaan, Jacob married both Leah and Rachel (Laban's two daughters) and fathered 11 sons in Haran (Genesis 29-31). For a thousand years it remained an important trade city and worship center related to the moon god. But after a civic revolt, it was captured by Assyrian forces in 763 BCE. Haran became the last capital of Assyria in 612 BCE, but was captured in 609 BCE by the Babylonians (as recorded in 2 Kings 19:12) who revived the declining worship of Sin and restored Haran as a thriving trade center (Ezekiel 27:23).

Notice how the author of the gospel of Luke retells the story of Abraham:

Acts 7:2–5 (NRSV)

² And Stephen replied: "Brothers^a and fathers, listen to me. The God of glory appeared to our ancestor Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, ³ and said to him, 'Leave your country and your relatives and go to the land that I will show you.' ⁴ Then he left the country of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. After his father died, God had him move from there ⁵ to this country in which you are now living. ⁵ He did not give him any of it as a heritage, not even a foot's length, but promised to give it to him as his possession and to his descendants after him, even though he had no child.

^a Gk *Men, brothers*

We note from the end of chapter 11 that Abram is now living in Haran and he has become established there. His brother Haran has died in Ur, his father Terah has died in Haran, and now it is Abram and Sarai and his nephew Lot. Notice that Abram's other brother Nahor (who was named after their grandfather Nahor) isn't mentioned much. But he will appear again in Genesis 22:20-24 where we will learn that he and his wife Milcah had eight children and he had four more with his concubine Reumah and these sons became founders of twelve tribes equivalent to the twelve tribes of Israel. His granddaughter, born to his son Bethuel, was named Rebekah, who eventually marries Isaac.

Now let's look at the beginning of Abram's call story.

Genesis 12:1–3 (NRSV)

12 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. ²I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³I 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."^a

Notice how this story begins. It starts so abruptly. It's like we are caught up in the middle of another story. As one scholar has put it:

Once we meet Abraham in Genesis 12, the action goes from zero to sixty in just three verses: "Hi Abraham, I'm the God Yahweh. Now follow me to an unknown place so I can make you the father of a new nation and a source of blessing for everyone else."

The key word is: You are blessed and you will be a blessing to all people; blessed to be a blessing.

But we also see an echo of the creation story; one that appears again and again: the notion to "be fruitful and multiply". We saw it in the creation story. We saw it again in the story of Noah. We see it here in the story of Abram whose offspring will become a great nation. And we'll see it again later in Genesis. Whereas the story of Adam and Eve looked forward to Israel's story, the story of Abraham looks backward to the creation story.

Genesis 12:4–9 (NRSV)

⁴So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. ⁵Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan. When they had come to the land of Canaan, ⁶Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak^b of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. ⁷Then the Lord appeared to Abram, and said, "To your offspring^c I will give this land." So he built there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him. ⁸From there he moved on 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 invoked the name of the Lord. ⁹And Abram journeyed on by stages toward the Negeb.

SHECHEM

Shechem (shek'uhm), a city located forty-one miles north of Jerusalem in the pass between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim. It dominated an important trade route and controlled a fertile valley to the east where Jacob's sons pastured their flocks (Genesis 37:12–14). Shechem was a Korathite levitical city of refuge in the territory of Manasseh (Joshua 17:2, 7), although it is also described as being "in the hill country of Ephraim" (20:7). Shechem was the first city visited by Abraham in his migration from Haran (Genesis 12:6), but it figures most prominently in the traditions associated with

^a Or by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves

^b Or terebinth

^c Heb seed

Jacob. It was the scene of the rape of Dinah by Shechem, the son of Hamor, king of Shechem (Genesis 34; note that in the narrative of the event the prince and the city have the same name).

When the Israelites entered Canaan (thirteenth century BCE) Shechem passed peacefully into their hands and became the earliest religious center of the tribes. Indeed, they buried the mummified body of Joseph in a tomb near the city (Joshua 24:32). At Shechem Joshua renewed the Sinai covenant with Israel's tribal leaders, probably at the temple of the Lord of the Covenant (Joshua 24). Abimelech, a son of Gideon by a concubine who lived at Shechem, roused the Shechemites to his support and had himself declared king (Judges 9:1–6), against the spirit and traditions of the old tribal confederacy, which held that the Lord was the only king in Israel (8:22–23). Shechem soon revolted against Abimelech's rule and in reprisal he destroyed the city (9:45). Rehoboam went there to be crowned king in the northern part of his kingdom (1 Kings 12:1). After the revolt of the northern tribes Jeroboam I rebuilt the city (12:25).



Silver coin depicting a temple and altar at the top of a stairway leading up Mount Gerizim ca 198-217 CE

Shechem was destroyed by the Assyrian armies in 722/1 BCE. Shechem was rebuilt ca. 350 BCE as the religious center of the Samaritans. Their temple stood on Mount Gerizim, and at the foot of the mountain they constructed a city designed to rival Jerusalem.

OAK OF MOREH

The oak is often a symbol of strength. As a venerable, mighty tree, the oak is associated with worship (Genesis 13:18), with sacrificial offerings (Hosea 4:13), long life (Isaiah 6:13), and sanctuaries ("the oak in the sanctuary of the Lord" at Shechem, Joshua 24:26). Moreh (Mor' eh; Heb., "teacher, oracle-giver"), a place-name suggesting a location for divine instruction. The Moreh tree, a terebinth (large tree resembling an oak) at the sacred site near Shechem, where Abram built an altar commemorating God's appearance to him (Genesis 12:6–7). In Deuteronomy 11:30, this tree is cited as a landmark for the Gerizim-Ebal pass; in Genesis 35:4, the tree (here: "oak") is where Jacob buried idols near Shechem. Trees in Joshua 24:26 and Judges 9:6 were inside Shechem; the Moreh tree lay outside.

BETHEL

Bethel (beth' uhl; Heb., "house of God"), an important biblical city on the north-south mountain road north of Jerusalem. Bethel had few natural defenses, but it did have plentiful water from nearby springs. It stood at the intersection of the north-south road that passed through the central hill country and the main east-west road that led from Jericho to the Mediterranean Sea.

Bethel, formerly named Luz (Genesis 28:19), was conquered by the Joseph tribes (late thirteenth century BCE; Judges 1:22–25) and became a part of the tribe of Ephraim. The religious heritage of Bethel for the Hebrews went back to Jacob (eighteenth century BCE). When Jacob was going to Aram, he spent the night at Bethel and had a dream. As a result he built a shrine there and named the place Bethel (Genesis 28:19; 35:1–7). Surprisingly, the conquest of Bethel is not mentioned in the book of Joshua, although the men of Bethel are said to have aided the men of Ai against the Hebrews (8:17).

In the period of the judges (1200–1000 BCE), Bethel was an important town. The ark of the covenant was located there for a time (Judg. 20:18–28), and it was a center of the tribal confederacy. Samuel made regular visits to Bethel on his annual circuit while he was a judge. But the town was not mentioned during the reigns of David and Solomon, its role as a sanctuary apparently being usurped by Jerusalem, the capital city. With the division of the kingdoms during the reign of Rehoboam, Bethel again rose to prominence (late tenth century BCE). Jeroboam I made it a chief sanctuary and set up a golden calf there (1 Kings 12:26–33). Bethel was a royal sanctuary at the time of Amos (cf. Amos 7:12–13). From the evidence of excavation, Bethel was apparently destroyed by the Assyrians (722/1 BCE). During the resurgence of Judah's power at the time of Josiah (ca. 640–609 BCE), Bethel's sanctuary was destroyed and its priests killed (2 Kings 23:15–20), but the city was spared. Bethel was not destroyed by the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar, but was destroyed either by the Babylonian ruler Nabonidus or the Persians.

The town was soon rebuilt and showed continued growth through the Hellenistic and Roman periods (333 BCE–324 CE). The Roman town shows the first use of cisterns, suggesting an increased population or water use beyond the capacity of the springs.

Ai

Ai (i, ay'i; Heb., "ruin"), a Canaanite town near and to the east of Bethel (Genesis. 12:8; 13:3). Ai was an important urban center during the Early Bronze Age. It had a temple and a royal quarter. Its inhabitants apparently came originally from Syria and Anatolia. Egyptian influence is evident from the temple of this period and imported alabaster and stone vessels. The city had a massive stone-lined reservoir with a capacity of 480,000 gallons. The Early Bronze Age city was destroyed about 2400 BCE and remained a ruin until about 1200 BCE.

Joshua 8 describes the capture and destruction of Ai by the Israelites. However, at the time commonly accepted for the Israelite conquest of Canaan, about 1250 BCE, Ai was uninhabited. One explanation suggests the account in Joshua 8 is etiological rather than historical, ascribing a well-known ruin to the conquest by Joshua.

NEGEB

Negev (neg'ev; Hebrew negeb, "dry, parched, south country"), the southern part of Judah, and the largest region in the modern state of Israel. The Negev forms an inverted triangle with its base roughly following a line from Gaza past Beer-sheba to the Dead Sea. The line then runs south from the Dead Sea through the Wadi Arabah to the Gulf of Aqabah at Elath, and from there northwestward to Gaza. The Negev is a hot region that receives less than 8 inches of rainfall annually. Although dry, some portions of the Negev can sustain limited agriculture; more usual is the pasturing of flocks.

The presence of sufficient water from springs, wells, oases, or cisterns of sufficient capacity permitted settlement in many areas. And the proximity of important trade routes also led to permanent settlement. Towns would naturally be established to meet the needs of travelers and to protect the route. Many of the settlements or towns on the trade routes of the Negev were established, or at least maintained, as fortresses.

Several highways went through the Negev. The most important was the Via Maris, the coastal road, which connected Egypt with Mesopotamia and Anatolia. The Via Maris skirted along the western edge of the Negev near Gaza. Three other north-south roads went through the Negev. One ran from Jerusalem and Hebron to Beer-sheba and Nissana, and then connected with the Via Maris. Another road came from Hebron to Arad, Hormah, and then to the oasis at Kadesh-barnea. A third road followed the Wadi Arabah from the Dead Sea to Elath/Aqabah.

The Hebrews spent much of the wilderness wandering period (ca. 1290–1250 BCE) around the oasis of Kadesh-barnea in the southern Negev (Deuteronomy 1:19, 46). The Amalekites, a seminomadic people, also lived in the Negev (Numbers 13:29). After the fall of Judah and during the exile, the Edomites gained control of the Negev.

Genesis 12:10–20 (NRSV)

¹⁰ Now there was a famine in the land. So Abram went down to Egypt to reside there as an alien, for the famine was severe in the land. ¹¹ When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, "I know well that you are a woman beautiful in appearance; ¹² and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife'; then they will kill me, but they will let you live. ¹³ Say you are my sister, so that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared on your account." ¹⁴ When Abram entered Egypt the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful. ¹⁵ When the officials of Pharaoh saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh. And the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house. ¹⁶ And for her sake he dealt well with Abram; and he had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male and female slaves, female donkeys, and camels.

¹⁷ But the Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife. ¹⁸ So Pharaoh called Abram, and said, "What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? ¹⁹ Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her for my wife? Now then, here is your wife, take her, and be gone." ²⁰ And Pharaoh gave his men orders concerning him; and they set him on the way, with his wife and all that he had.

FLIGHT TO EGYPT

A famine strikes the land (is this a test for Abram?). Abram decides to head to Egypt (a story played out again later). Apparently, Sarai, in her old age is remarkably beautiful (remember, Abram was 75 when he moved down from Haran; and so that makes Sarai... hmm... perhaps in her 80's by this time). So, Abram asks Sarai to say that she is Abram's sister, instead of his wife. She does. It works. She is taken into Pharaoh's house and becomes one of Pharaoh's wives. And they treat Abram well and he gets rich (all because of her beauty).

But apparently, God is not pleased. What happens in Egypt shouldn't stay in Egypt. So, God sends plagues to afflict Pharaoh. Echo, echo, echo, echo... Pharaoh realizes that Sarai is Abram's wife, gives her back to him, complains saying "Why have you done this to me?" and then says, "Take her and be gone!"

We're going to hear a similar scenario later. Famine causes entrance into Egypt. An Israelite becomes Pharaoh's property. Pharaoh's household are plagued. Pharaoh wants God's people out. God's people leave with a lot of loot.

Key point: Notice the pattern. Exile and captivity are God's punishment. But they are never the end. God always provides a way out.

HAGAR AND ISHMAEL

Later, Sarai is going to recommend that Abraham sleep with her servant, Hagar, so that Abram can get a son. A son is born, and they name him Ishmael. Even though it was Sarai's idea, she gets jealous and Hagar runs for her life. Years later, she comes back, and Sarai tells Abram to get rid of her and her son. Abram agrees and sends them into the desert with a small amount of water. They survive only because of God's intervention.

WHAT DO WE NOTICE?

These stories tend to mirror Israel's story. Even though Abram has been called by God, his behavior leaves something to be desired, which reminds us of Israel's continuous struggle with God.

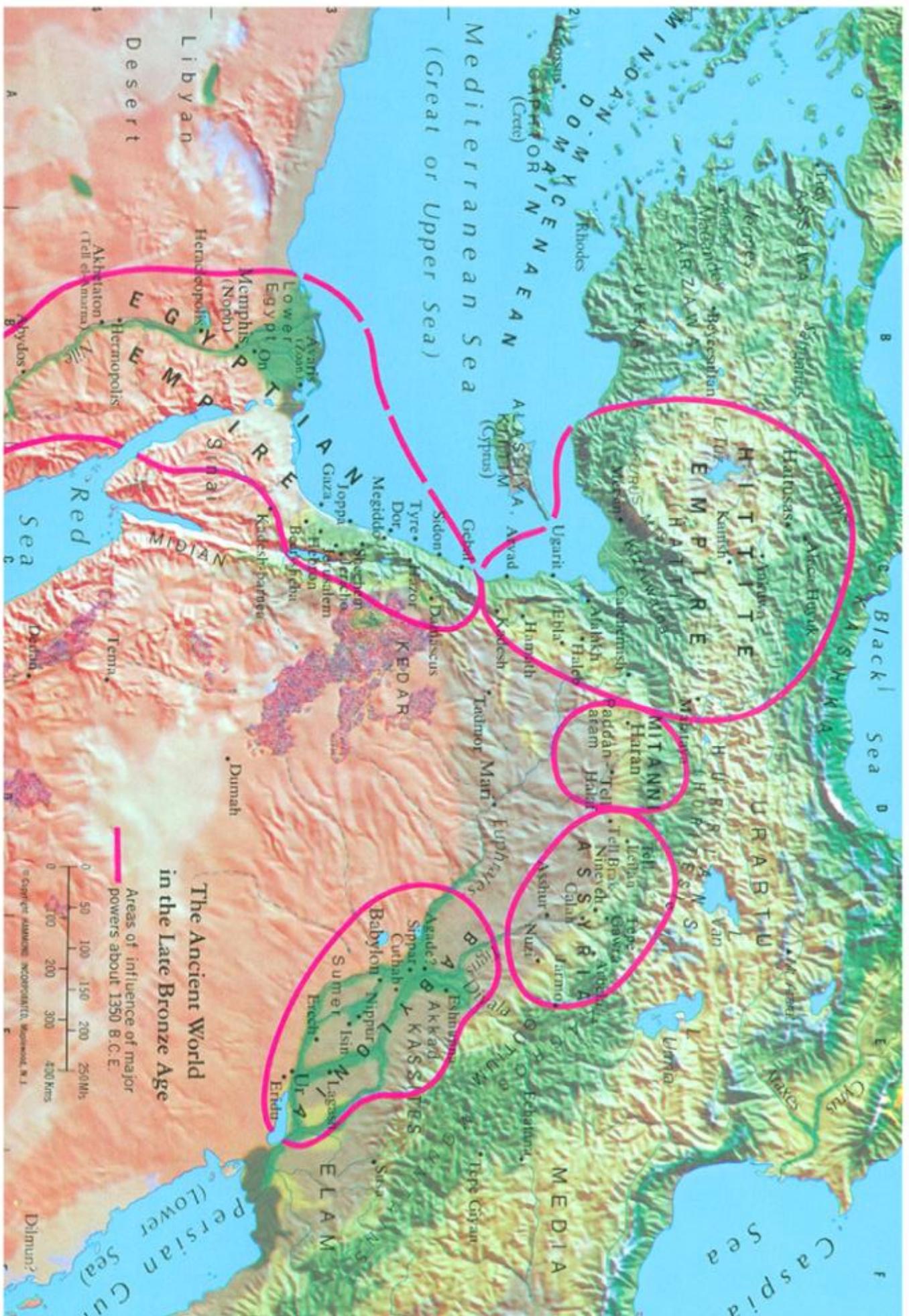
The key questions, however, are:

- "Will Abraham believe that God will keep God's promise?"
- "Will Abraham remain faithful to God if it *appears* that God is not being faithful to him?"

The same question is asked of all God's people:

- "Do we trust that God will keep God's promise to us?"

What we are going to see throughout the rest of Genesis are the stories of Abraham and his descendants (particularly the stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob's sons) and how they continually fail. But, we will also see how God is continually faithful to God's covenant; how God will continually rescue this family and bless them.



**The Ancient World
in the Late Bronze Age**
Areas of influence of major
powers about 1350 B.C.E.



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