

# THE ROLE OF TERAH IN THE FOUNDATIONAL STORIES OF THE PATRIARCHAL FAMILY

ARI BERMAN

As the first of the three patriarchs in the book of Genesis, Abraham is known as the father of the Jewish nation. But a careful reading of the foundational stories reveals a more nuanced and complex picture. While there is no question that Abraham is the central figure who launched the family that eventually became the Jewish nation, there is another individual, often overlooked, who also appears to have played an instrumental role. Terah, the father of Abraham, is barely mentioned in the biblical stories, but his significance is far more important than his brief appearance would seem to indicate. Through a close reading of the text, this article seeks to uncover the essential role that Terah plays in the founding of the chosen family.

TERAH THE FATHER OF ABRAHAM, NAHOR AND HARAN

Terah's main appearance in the biblical story consists of eight verses:

*When Nahor had lived 29 years, he begot Terah. After the birth of Terah, Nahor lived 119 years and begot sons and daughters. When Terah had lived 70 years, he begot Abram, Nahor, and Haran. Now this is the line of Terah: Terah begot Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran begot Lot. Haran died in the lifetime of his father Terah, in his native land, Ur of the Chaldeans. Abram and Nahor took to themselves wives, the name of Abram's wife being Sarai and that of Nahor's wife Milcah, the daughter of Haran, the father of Milcah and Iscah. Now Sarai was barren, she had no child. Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot the son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and they set out together from Ur of the Chaldeans for the land of Canaan; but when they had come as far as Haran, they settled there. The days of Terah came to 205 years; and Terah died in Haran (Gen. 11:24-32).*

*Rabbi Ari Berman is the Rosh ha-Merkaz of Hechal Shlomo and a Lecturer of Talmudic Literature at Herzog College. He is the former Rabbi of The Jewish Center and Instructor of Talmud at Yeshiva University, and is currently completing his doctoral dissertation on the Philosophy of Halakhah at Hebrew University.*

In this brief appearance, Terah is introduced twice. First he is introduced as the last individual on the list of the descendants of Shem. This presentation generally follows the same pattern as the rest of the individuals on the list which includes an announcement of birth based on the year of the father's life, the passing of the father and the name of the individual's progeny. But there is one noticeable difference. In the verses about each of the previous individuals only one child is named while other offspring are simply referenced with the phrase *and he begat sons and daughters*. This leaves the clear impression that the primary heir and continuation of the family of Shem is the one son who is named. In the case of Terah, however, all three of his sons are named, *Abram, Nahor, and Haran*, without any reference to additional offspring. This already signals that Terah's family is different. This impression is strengthened in the next verse in which Terah and his family are reintroduced: *Now this is the line of Terah: Terah begot Abram, Nahor, and Haran*. Once again, each of Terah's three sons are named and counted as his descendants. In the subsequent verses, additional details about Terah's family are mentioned including the fact that his son *Haran begot Lot* and died during his lifetime in his native land of Ur of the Chaldeans as well as the names of the wives of Abram and Nahor. The details of Terah's family that are mentioned in this passage help provide context to a number of significant elements that will appear later in the story. The background on Haran explains why Abraham's nephew Lot is part of his travelling retinue; the introduction of the family of Nahor and Milcah lays the groundwork for the story of finding a wife for Isaac; the disclosure of Sarai's barrenness foreshadows an important theme that runs throughout the lives of the first patriarch and matriarch. But one particular aspect of the story of Terah is unclear. In this presentation of the life of the family, Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot, and his daughter-in-law Sarai to journey from Ur of the Chaldeans to the land of Canaan. Unmentioned in this verse though is the motivation behind this journey. Moreover, in the next verse we are informed that Terah did not complete his mission but stopped his journey in *Haran*. This adds another complication to the story as the reader is not only left to wonder why Terah embarked on this journey but also why he cut his journey short and did not complete his mission.<sup>1</sup> This background to the journey of Abraham, clothed in ambiguity, raises questions about the character and motivations of Terah.

These questions become magnified in importance when considering the subtle but central role that Teraḥ plays in the broader story of Genesis.

#### THE CHOSEN FAMILY

When Abraham sought to find a wife for Isaac he forbade his servant from choosing a wife from the native Canaanites and ordered him to go to his land and his kin to find the appropriate woman.<sup>2</sup> Abraham does not explain, though, why a woman from his family is preferable to a native woman in the area. In truth, in thinking of the family marriage patterns, one finds that there is a tendency within this family to marry its own members. Naḥor, Abraham's brother, marries Milcah, Haran's daughter. Isaac marries Rebecca, Naḥor's granddaughter, while Jacob marries Leah and Rachel, Naḥor's great granddaughters. In fact, later in the story Abraham tells Abimelech that he called Sarah his sister because she is related to him as she is an offspring of his father.<sup>3</sup> This fact completes the pattern in which all of the marriages of the patriarchs and matriarchs are intrafamily unions. In this light, an interesting fact emerges from the story. The patriarchs and matriarchs are all actually descendants of Teraḥ.

The importance of Teraḥ as the common ancestor of the chosen family is highlighted by the internal division of the Book of Genesis. While the division of chapters and verses came later in history, the Book of Genesis is naturally divided into sections through the literary tool of headings. Each new section begins with the phrase *ve-'eleh toldot*, "and these are the generations" (Gen. 5:1, 6:9, 10:1, 11:27, 25:12, 25:19, 36:1, 37:2). The individuals whose lives are introduced by this heading include Adam, Noah, the sons of Noah, Teraḥ, Isaac, Ishmael, Esau and Jacob. Interestingly, the one name that is left off the list who we would otherwise expect to appear is Abraham, and the name that perhaps surprisingly appears is Teraḥ. Since the section about the chosen family begins with *ve-'eleh toldot Teraḥ* and is not interrupted with *ve-'eleh toldot Avraham*, Teraḥ is marked as the ancestor under whom this story unfolds. This perspective of Teraḥ as the father of the patriarchal and matriarchal family explains why all three of his sons are named as his descendants. While Abraham stands out as the father of the patriarchs, Naḥor

and Haran are the “fathers” of the matriarchs and as such all three brothers form the origins of the chosen family.<sup>4</sup>

All of these observations beg an obvious question. Why should Terah be given such a privileged place in the narrative of the history of the Jewish people? This question is especially perplexing considering the long standing tradition, cited in Joshua (24:2-4), that Terah was an idol worshipper. Moreover, throughout the story of Genesis it is Abraham, not Terah, who merits God’s blessing and receives God’s covenant and it is Abraham, not Terah, who is referenced by all subsequent generations including his immediate successors, Isaac and Jacob, as the father of their family.<sup>5</sup>

#### THE CHARACTER OF TERAH

While the laconic treatment of the life of Terah leaves us with little evidence, one could tease out suggestive hints from the text to help us address this question. The first hint is that Terah left Ur of the Chaldeans to travel to Canaan. Although the narrative does not reveal Terah’s motivations for this journey, perhaps one can suggest that this physical journey reflects a shift in Terah’s spiritual life journey.<sup>6</sup> Terah lived his life as an idol worshipper but perhaps this journey is reflective of the fact that towards the end of his life he began to shift away from his past modes of worship and began to seek God.<sup>7</sup> This suggestion is especially reasonable if one assumes that it was widely known and recognized that the land of Canaan is the land of God.<sup>8</sup> As such, just mentioning that Terah intended to travel to Canaan is sufficient to indicate a shift in his world view. This perspective of the story explains why God in the command to Abraham to travel to the *land that I will show you* (Genesis 12:1) never needs to reveal the particular direction for Abraham’s journey as the location of God’s land was not a secret and was already known to him.

Interestingly, if one assumes that Terah in his lifetime began a spiritual journey to God, a couple of seeming ambiguities that appear later in the story are clarified. For example, the conversation between the servant of Abraham and the family of Nahor is more understandable. After the servant of Abraham reveals his identity to Rebekah, she runs home and tells her family. Her brother Lavan rushes outside and greets the stranger using the name of God: *Come in, O blessed of the Lord, why do you remain outside, when I have made ready the house and a place for the camels?* (Gen. 24:31). The name of

God is repeated twice more by Bethuel and Lavan after hearing the servant of Abraham repeat the story of finding Rebekah: *The matter was decreed by the Lord; we cannot speak to you bad or good. Here is Rebekah before you; take her and go, and let her be a wife to your master's son, as the Lord has spoken* (Gen. 24:50-51). The problematic element to this story is the fact that this family in Haran not only knew the name of God but referred to it regularly in their conversations. It is possible that they only recently learned the name after hearing Rebekah tell the story of her meeting the servant. Alternatively, if one assumes that Teraḥ began the shift in the family towards God, it possible that they were already familiar with the name and perhaps regularly included it in their worship and daily conversations. This explanation also helps clarify why Abraham specifically wanted his son to marry into his family in Haran as opposed to the idol worshippers of Canaan, as his family was distinct in their beliefs and practices. In addition, it provides greater context to the later encounter between Lavan and Jacob in which Lavan attempts to sanctify their agreement by invoking the God of their fathers: *May the God of Abraham and the God of Naḥor judge between us – the God of their fathers* (Gen. 31:53). Jacob subsequently breaks the equation by taking an oath to the God of his father Isaac. Traditional commentators understand that the phrase *the God of Abraham and the God of Naḥor* is referring to two different deities,<sup>9</sup> but based on the idea that the original shift towards the worship of God began with Teraḥ, the father of Abraham and Naḥor, Lavan could be understood as claiming that in fact both Abraham and Naḥor share the same God.

#### THE FIRST PATRIARCH?

With this in mind, one must wonder why Teraḥ is not counted as the first of the patriarchs. If already in his lifetime Teraḥ turned to worship God and he is the common ancestor of the patriarchs and matriarchs, why is he not considered the father of the chosen family? To address this question, one can point to another hint in the story. After mentioning that Teraḥ began a journey with the intent to reach Canaan, the story concludes with Teraḥ stopping at Haran and not completing the journey. While the reason that he halted his trip is never revealed, it is clear from the text that he did not finish his mission. This differentiates Teraḥ from his son Abraham. Abraham both heard

the call of God and followed through on God's commands. He entered Canaan, overcame challenges and obstacles, and publicized the name of God throughout his travels. While Terah<sup>h</sup> began a movement away from foreign gods, he was not able to see this movement to its completion. As such Terah<sup>h</sup> remains an obscure figure in the biblical tradition. He is known as an idol worshipper and is not counted as one of the forefathers of the nation, but since he began the shift towards God he initiated a process that eventually led to his descendants becoming the patriarchs and matriarchs of the new nation.

This reading of the story of Terah<sup>h</sup> adds context to Abraham's life and success for it highlights that Abraham did not emerge from a vacuum but continued a journey that was originally started by his father Terah<sup>h</sup>.<sup>10</sup> At the same time it also underscores that ultimate recognition is reserved for the one who not only begins an important endeavor but also triumphs over great difficulties to see it through to its completion. It is Abraham, not Terah<sup>h</sup>, who reached the Promised Land and who sanctified God's name throughout his travels. Consequently it is Abraham, not Terah<sup>h</sup>, who is acknowledged by the later generations as the first of the patriarchs, the father of the new nation and the true hero of the Book of Genesis.

#### NOTES

1. Additional complications arise in attempting to harmonize the way the story is described later in Genesis. For example, in Genesis 15:7, God says to Abraham that *I am the Lord who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans*, seemingly implying that Abraham received the call from God to journey to Canaan when he was still in Ur of the Chaldeans and not in Haran as implied by the version of events portrayed in this passage. In addition, this passage only names Abraham, Sarai and Lot as the ones who accompanied Terah<sup>h</sup> on this journey while later in Genesis we find the whole family of Nahor living in Haran. For medieval rabbinic commentators who address these issues, see Rashi to Genesis 12:2, Abraham ibn Ezra to Genesis 11:29 and Ramban to Genesis 11:28.

2. Abraham orders his servant to go *'el 'artzi ve-'el moladiti* which the new JPS translation renders as *to the land of my birthplace* (Gen. 24:4). Since Abraham's servant travels to Haran, this translation raises the issue of whether Abraham was born in Haran or in Ur of the Chaldeans. In truth, it appears that a more accurate translation is "to my land and to my kindred." This definition is how the servant represents Abraham's command to the family in Haran: *Now my master made me swear, saying 'you shall not get a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites in whose land I dwell but you shall go to my father's house, to my kindred, and get a wife for my son.'* (Gen. 24: 37-38). For another example in which the word *moledet* refers to family and not to birthplace, see Esther 2:10.

3. This is in line with the rabbinic tradition that identifies Sarai as Iscah, Haran's other daughter. See TB *Megillah* 14a.

4. Along these same lines, note that Naḥor had twelve children, eight from his wife and four from his concubine (Gen. 22:20-24). These numbers are symptomatic of the chosen family as they are also found by Jacob and his children. In addition, this orientation provides context for Lot's relationship with Abraham. From the fact that Abraham only began to question God about his lack of heir after Lot left his household (Gen. 15: 2-3), one can possibly infer that the previous expectation was that Lot would be Abraham's successor. If the chosen family is selected from the family of Terah instead of being limited to Abraham's direct progeny, this expectation becomes more understandable.

5. See, for example, Genesis 28:4 and 48:16.

6. This may be hinted at in the similarity of the phrasing used for Terah's journey to Canaan, *Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot the son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and they set out together from Ur of the Chaldeans for the land of Canaan* (Gen. 11:31), and that of Abraham, *Abraham took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot...and they set out for the land of Canaan* (Gen. 12:5).

7. Note that based on the verse in Genesis 15:16 in which Abraham is informed of his eventual passing by the statement that *you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a ripe old age*, the rabbinic tradition assumes that Terah at the end of his life repented and merited reward in the afterlife. See, for example, *Genesis Rabbah* 38:12 and *Midrash Tanḥuma, Shemot, siman* 18.

8. For expression of a similar approach, see Ramban's commentary on Genesis 12:1. The idea that the Land of Canaan was known to be spiritually significant even prior to the time of Abraham is found in many places in Rabbinic literature. For example, see *Genesis Rabbah* 22:7 (Cain and Abel fought over ownership of this land) and TB *Eruvin* 53a (Adam and Eve were buried in Hebron). See also Kuzari 2:14.

9. *Genesis Rabbah* 74:16, quoted by Rashi, Hizkuni, Ibn Ezra and Radak.

10. The biblical story never accounts for how Abraham originally found God and the great rabbinic masters from the days of the early *midrashim* to the medieval and modern era have filled in this gap to describe Abraham's spiritual journey. See, for example, *Genesis Rabbah* 30:8, Rambam, *Hilkhot Avodah Zarah* 1:1-3, and Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Abraham's Journey: Reflections on the Life of the Founding Patriarch*, ed. by D. Shatz, J. Wolowelsky and R. Ziegler (New Jersey: Toras HoRav Foundation, Ktav, 2008), pp. 39-48.