

GENESIS

The Languages of Mesopotamia and the Near East

Abram lived in Ur of the Chaldeans (Persia, modern day Iraq) during the early days of what scholars refer to as the Old Babylonian Empire, or the First Babylonian Empire. This empire dates from approximately 1894 BC to 1595 BC. Archaeologists would place this period in the Middle Bronze Age.

The Sumerians (not to be confused with the biblical Samaritans at the time of Christ), having displaced the Akkadian empire, had been in power prior to that, with their rule ending when the Third Dynasty of Ur was destroyed. The Babylonians of the day had their own language, written and spoken, which Abram would have also known and spoke. It was a dialect of the earlier Akkadian and Sumerian language, and it included a written form of communication called cuneiform script, all of which Abram would have been aware of and used.

We know then that Abram spoke a dialect of the Akkadian language called Babylonian and that he could read cuneiform script. We can surmise the cuneiform usage, as it was developed as far back as 3000 BC and was very useful in communicating well-defined things, such as contracts, business records, inventories of livestock and so on. Given that Abram's family were likely pastoralists raising herds of sheep and goats, they would have known and used cuneiform, and they would have spoken Amorite or the Babylonian dialect of Akkadian. These languages would have been prevalent throughout Mesopotamia, allowing Abram and his family to eventually travel west to Haran without a language barrier.

As time passed, Babylonian would become the language across the Near East until Aramaic replaced it around 1000 BC. Bear in mind that while the Babylonian language became the predominant language, it did not replace the languages of the Amorites, the Canaanites, and other people groups living in the Near East. As such and as pointed out earlier, it enabled Abram and his family to move from one geographic area to another without the challenges of a language barrier. It is likely that Abram spoke Amorite as well, given that the city of Babylon was built by Amorites and that the first king of Babylon was an Amorite called Hammurabi. From this, they would develop the Babylonian language and culture that would become well known throughout the Near East.

The Gods of the Amorites, the Babylonians, the Mesopotamians, and the Canaanites

During Abram's day, from Northern Mesopotamia to Southern Canaan, one could find hundreds, if not more, of gods. The Canaanites in particular may have had as many as a thousand, as they had a god for everything. The gods of Abram's day ranked from very high, superior to all others, down to local gods who protected a home or a city—with a wide range in between. However, from the Amorites and Babylonians, and across Mesopotamia into Canaan, there were a few key gods we should be aware of, as they had a great deal of influence during the time of Abram/Abraham and his descendants, the Hebrews.

The Gods of the Amorites: Assur (Martu) and Asherah

Like other cultures the Amorites had a list of gods, however, for this study we will take a brief look at one pair, as one of them will surface later in Hebrew history. Assur, or Martu, was a storm and weather god who was married to Asherah, who was viewed as the supreme goddess.

1. What can we learn of Asherah in 2 Kings 17:10 and 23:24?

- a. ANSWER: We can see from just these two brief verses that, even centuries after Abraham, she is being worshipped by the Hebrews as a large part of their idol worship—which they practiced in addition to worshipping Yahweh. In fact, there are no fewer than forty verses in the Old Testament with references to the worship of Asherah by the Hebrews.

The Mesopotamian Gods and Goddesses: Marduk and Dagon

Marduk was the chief god of the Mesopotamians/Babylonians with dominion over everything in the universe. Babylonians believed that he was the god who helped form the original Babylonian Empire, referred to as the Old Babylonian Empire, as opposed to the one that would come along under King Nebuchadnezzar much later in history.

2. What does Jeremiah 50:2 tell us about Marduk in Hebrew history?

- a. ANSWER: Jeremiah, referring now to the second Babylonian Empire and its coming destruction by God in 539 BC, shows us that—well over a thousand years later removed from the time of Abram—Marduk is still viewed as a powerful god by the Babylonians.

Dagon was worshiped as the father of the gods, lord of the land, and the father of prosperity.

3. What group of people mentioned in the Bible is recorded as worshipping Dagon? (1 Samuel 5:1-5)

- a. ANSWER: The Philistines worshipped Dagon, whom they honored as the fertility god and the patron god of the Philistines. Clearly in this passage, God is showing the Philistines that He is the one true God.

The Gods of the Canaanites: El, Asherah, Baal, and Moloch/Molech/Molek

The Canaanites possessed a large number of gods and goddesses, headed by El, the god of creation, and Asherah the queen. You may recall that Asherah was symbolized by the "Asherah pole" in the Bible. (See for example 1 Kings 14:15 and 14:23.) The Canaanites made idols for every person and every house, and the Hebrews followed after the Canaanites and their idols, in addition to their worship of Yahweh.

4. In Genesis 31:19 and Genesis 31:33-34, we are provided some additional insight regarding the value of personal idols in the home. What had happened to Laban's household gods?

- a. ANSWER: Rachel stole them and was hiding them in her tent under the camel saddle. Evidently, both Laban and Rachel saw great value in having these household gods in their possession.

Baal was the lord of all nature and humans, whom many saw as superior to the god El

5. Read 2 Kings 17:16 and 2 Kings 21:3. What insight are we provided in these verses regarding the worship of Baal?

- a. ANSWER 1: Often in the history of the Hebrews, we observe that they had incorporated the worship of Asherah in their worship of Baal.
- b. ANSWER 2: Secondly, we also see references to the Hebrews worshipping "all the starry hosts," which we will discuss later in this lesson.

Moloch—also referred to as Molech and Molek—was the god of fire who required child sacrifice.

6. There are many references in the Bible to the Hebrews worshipping Moloch. Read Leviticus 20:2-5, Jeremiah 32:35 and Zephaniah 1:5. Note what each of these passages reveals to us.

- a. Leviticus 20:2-5
 - i. ANSWER: When the Hebrews were in the desert during their exodus from Egypt, God commanded them to not be involved in offering children as human sacrifices. He also instructed them that, as a community, they were responsible for each other's behavior. That is, they couldn't simply turn a blind eye to someone else doing this—they had to hold that person accountable. If they did not, God would hold all of them accountable. Child sacrifice was strictly forbidden. God told them that when someone does this detestable thing, "he has defiled my sanctuary and profaned my holy name," and is to be stoned and put to death.
- b. Jeremiah 32:35
 - i. ANSWER: In this verse, we note that, hundreds of years later, the Hebrews are still practicing child sacrifice even though God specifically told them not to do it in Leviticus 20:2-5. In this verse, Jeremiah 32:35, God specifically states, "I never commanded—nor did it enter my mind—that they should do such a detestable thing."
- c. Zephaniah 1:5
 - i. ANSWER: In this verse, we see that Molek is being worshipped by the Israelites in parallel with their worship of God.

In addition to the worship of El, Asherah, Baal and Molech, the Hebrews also incorporated the worship of other idols, including worshipping "all the starry hosts."

7. What did it mean to "worship the starry host" or "the host of the heavens," and what did God tell them about this practice? Read Deuteronomy 4:19, Romans 1:25, and Zephaniah 1:5 (also referenced in the previous question). What do each of these verses tell us about this practice of idol worship?
- a. Deuteronomy 4:19
 - i. ANSWER: The Hebrews were worshipping the sun, the moon, and the stars. God warned them that they were to "not be enticed into bowing down to them..."
 - b. Romans 1:25
 - i. ANSWER: In this verse, Paul teaches us that we are not to worship the creation, or created things. Rather, we are to worship the creator. The Hebrews and Jews, just as people in our day, were drawn to worshipping physical things that they could see—and not the one true creator whom cannot be seen with human eyes.
 - c. Zephaniah 1:5
 - i. ANSWER: In this verse, we see that worshipping Molech and worshipping the starry host were often part of the Hebrews' worship practices.

In addition to the specific gods that we have noted in this lesson, God's chosen people followed after many other idols, allowing the cultures of those peoples around them to be incorporated into their worship of Yahweh.

8. Read 1 Kings 11:33 and note what you see in this verse about God's chosen people's practice of worshipping the gods of the cultures around them.
- a. ANSWER: In this verse, we see that idol worship of all sorts had been incorporated into the religious life of God's chosen people, in spite of His warnings against these practices. Note that there are references to worshipping other gods and idols as well, such as Ashtoreth of the Sidonians, Chemosh of the Moabites, and Molek of the Ammonites. In truth, idol worship became such an integral part of their worship that they had forgotten the very God who had delivered them from bondage in Egypt and established them as His chosen people.

As we prepare to study Abraham further, his call to follow God, his life, and the beginning of the world's three largest religions, it has been important for us to observe that, in his day, Abraham was raised in a culture surrounded by idol worship. This situation existed everywhere that God led him—and it's just as true for us today, as we follow God's leading. We live in a world surrounded by idols and those that worship them. God's commandments are just as important today as they were then. We are to be in the world but not of the world, and we are to avoid the worship and influence of the idols all around us today.

In the next lesson, we delve into the call of Abraham.

In Christ,

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