

Lee Mount Baptist Church Bible Study

Some notes on Genesis

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Introduction

300 years ago people did not know how many of the places mentioned in the early chapters of Genesis were real places; like the city of Troy, which featured so strongly in Greek and later Roman and European literature, their existence as real places was not important; the moral of the stories about them was important. The excavation of Nineveh in 1842 and the discovery of the city of Troy in 1871 began to change people's attitudes towards these ancient texts and when, in the late 19th century, there was a reaction against the theory of evolution, some Christians began to assert that the authority of the bible made it a true record of history. However, there were serious difficulties matching the dating of events in the bible with the dating of events in other traditions and so people withdrew from any attempt to relate the bible to other historical accounts.

Fortunately, a whole series of quite separate discoveries in the 20th century have allowed us to begin to bridge some of these gaps and to recognise that, in telling a story of the relationships between God and the human race and between people, the storytellers had drawn on the experiences of real people living in real places.

Many of the suggestions offered in this paper are based on relatively recent research which has thrown new light on or offered new interpretations of events described or hinted at in Genesis; further research may refine these suggestions or replace them with better ones. However, what Genesis teaches us about the relationships between God and the human race and between people is more important than whether there is any evidence to support particular elements of the Genesis story.

In the beginning

Genesis begins with the words, 'In the beginning God made heaven and earth.' Until 1927 scientists believed that the universe was eternal because that is what Aristotle had said. So a scientist who was also a Christian would have believed that God intervened in an existing universe in order to create the earth and the solar system which by now scientists understood to be all of a piece.

However, a Belgian Catholic priest who was also a brilliant mathematician realised that recent scientific research did not make sense if that was the case; he worked out that the only

way of making sense of the most recent research was if the universe had started very small and then expanded outwards (Lemaître, 1927). Albert Einstein said, ‘I like your maths but I don’t like your physics,’ because he was still convinced that Aristotle was right. Fred Hoyle dismissed Lemaître’s theory as the ‘big bang theory.’ But by the time Lemaître died in 1966 scientists had proved that he was right.

No one now seriously doubts that the universe had a beginning and so, if God is eternal, God must have existed before the universe came into being. Of course, many scientists in the West do not accept the existence of God but scientists in the Middle East and Asia tend to be more open-minded about the issue (Eklund, 2016).

Interestingly, it is now clear that the rate of expansion of the universe is governed by six ratios (Rees, 2000) and that, if any of those six ratios had been slightly different, the universe as we know it would not have existed. The probability of all six ratios happening by chance is so vanishingly small that, in any other circumstances, scientists would say that there must have been a cause. For Christians, the cause is stated at the start of Genesis, ‘In the beginning God made . . .’

Genesis 4 and 5

In Genesis chapters 4 and 5 there is a family tree for Cain and one from Adam to Noah suggesting that Noah was born 1,061 years after Adam; from other evidence, there was probably at least 2,000 years from the time of Adam to the time of Noah. Rohl (2003) argues that Enoch, the son of Cain, can be identified with Uanna, the founder of Eridu, in around 5400BC. Eridu was not far from the later city of Ur and was at the mouth of the river Euphrates at the time — silting has caused the mouth of the Euphrates to move 90 miles further south east.

Human lifespan

In Genesis 6:3 God says of human beings, ‘their days will be one hundred and twenty years.’ Yet throughout Genesis we find much longer lifespans attributed to human beings. A number of explanations have been offered for this:

1. because this matches what science suggests will be about the longest lifespan of a human being, we should take our cue from the view common 200 years ago that, for a full revelation of God’s purposes, we must read both the ‘book of nature’ and the ‘book of God’ (Bragg, 2010) and therefore that, because these words of God from the ‘book of God’ and scientific research from the ‘book of nature’ agree, we should regard all lifespans beyond one hundred and twenty years as invalid;
2. when the Jews were taken into captivity in Babylon, they discovered that Babylonian histories stretched further back than their own and so added years to people’s lifespans to make up the difference — this was a common explanation some years ago but lacks credibility because Josephus, writing in the first century AD, records a date for the events in the Garden of Eden which suggests that other traditions of the Jews preserved timespans well in excess of the lifespans in the bible, which were the basis for the calculations of Archbishop Ussher. These Jewish traditions lend credibility to Rohl’s identification of Enoch with Uanna, the founder of Eridu;

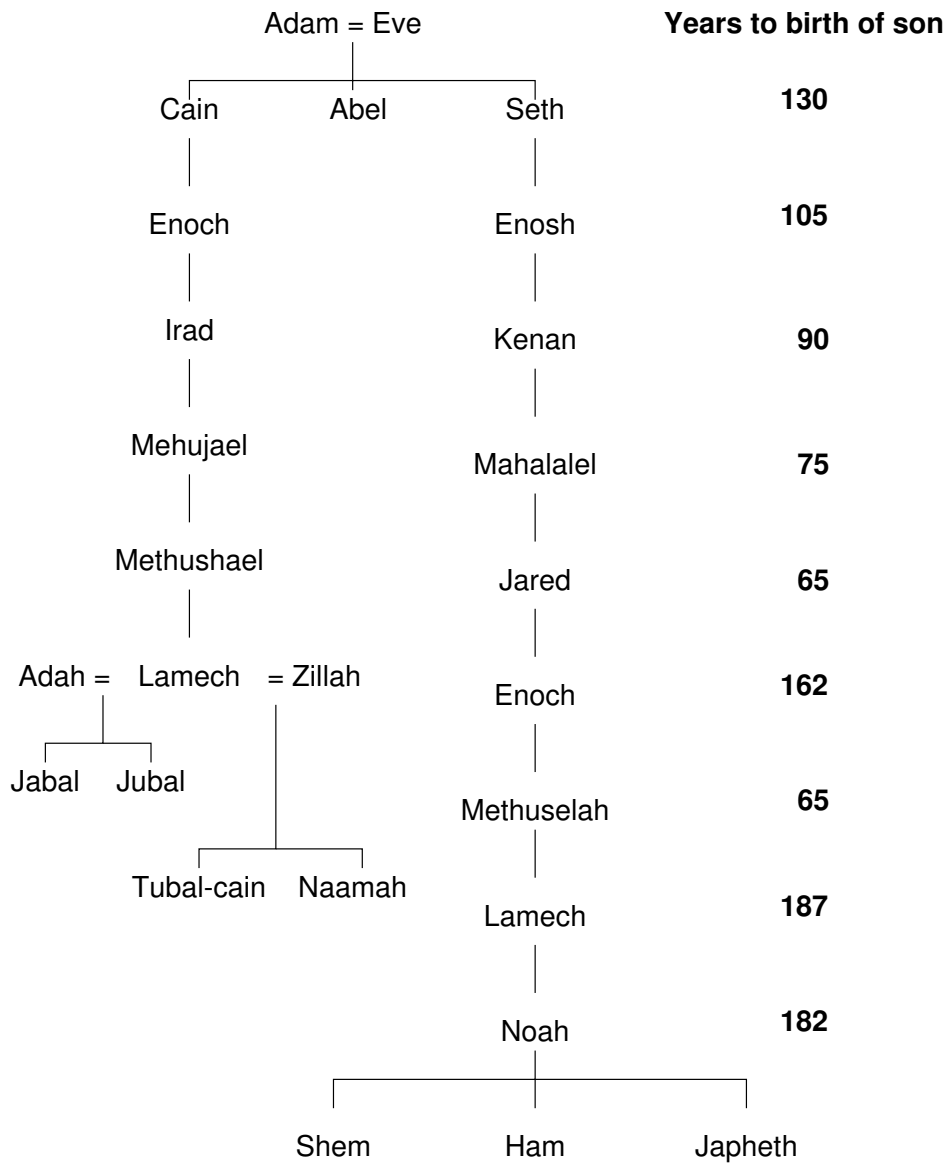


Figure 1: Genesis 4 and 5

3. the ages reflect dynasties rather than individuals in a family; this explanation works well for some of the lifespans set out in Genesis 11 but not for others.

It is worth noting that, when scribes began committing the word of mouth traditions to Hebrew around 800BC, they did not exercise any ‘editorial’ functions; they simply copied down what they were told regardless of whether it contradicted something else they had written down. So we have two versions of creation, two versions of the number of animals taken into the ark and two versions of how Joseph was sold into slavery. We may never know why people handed down such long lifespans in their traditions but the scribes did not see it as their function to ‘edit’ any of this — even when they had the text of Genesis 6:3 in front of them. We should also not forget that other accounts and science verify that the accounts of certain events in Genesis, notably the foundation of Nineveh (Gn 10:11), the flood and the tower of Babel, handed down by word of mouth over thousands of years are remarkably accurate.

The flood

Clouds form around dimethyl sulphide released by algae near the surface of the oceans; algae growth is stimulated by the sun. So the more sun can reach the surface of the oceans, the more dimethyl sulphide is produced. When clouds form and reduce the amount of sunlight, less dimethyl sulphide is produced.

As Rohl suggests, it seems likely that a volcanic eruption, possibly in the Aleutian islands, ultimately triggered the flood. The global ash cloud would have cooled the surface of the earth and inhibited the production of dimethyl sulphide.¹ So snow on the tops of mountains would not have melted and there would have been less rain. As the ash cloud gradually thinned out, the temperature of the earth would have risen and the production of dimethyl sulphide increased. The combination of melting snow and rain would have produced the flood.

Alluvial deposits in the Mesopotamian valley point to a flood around 2900BC. Apart from the account in Genesis, there is a very similar account of the flood in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* where ‘Noah’ is called Uta-napishtim and a slightly shorter account in the Greek story of Deucalion.

Though the prevailing winds in the Mesopotamian valley are from the west, the ark drifted west (further evidence of the unusual weather conditions) and came to rest on Mount Judi in modern Turkey — the association with the quite different mountain, now known as Mount Ararat, occurred relatively recently. The early Christians knew that the ark had come to rest on Mount Judi and visitors to the mountain today can still find fragments of bitumen, which was used to coat boats in Noah’s day, on its slopes.

Genesis 10

Genesis 10 summarises the re-population of the world after the flood (figure 2) — from the point of view of someone living much later as many of the places mentioned would have been unknown to people in Noah’s time and for some centuries afterwards. Gradually the land was re-populated and the cities devastated by the flood rebuilt.

¹There were similar events in 536AD which are recorded in many parts of the world and which caused famines but no-one has been able to identify the actual volcano which caused the cooling of the earth and the famines.

According to Genesis 10 the descendants of Shem populated the Semite areas, those of Japheth the Indo-European areas and those of Ham Africa by using the sea route to Africa.

Boats had sailed up and down the Tigris and Euphrates taking grain from the estuaries up the valley and bringing minerals down from the mountains before the time of Noah; they had also ventured down the Persian gulf as far as modern day Qatar. Gradually they had become more adventurous, sailing across to the Indian sub-continent and round the Arabian peninsula and setting up a trading post in Eritrea. These formed the basis for some more adventurous expeditions.

Among the descendants of Ham mentioned in Genesis 10 are:

Cush who is credited with founding the city of Uruk, and went on to lead an expedition down the Persian Gulf, around the Arabian Peninsula and across the Red Sea to Africa where he settled in Sudan (which is why this area is later known as the Land of Cush), leaving in charge of his kingdom his son,

Nimrod who eventually gained control of the whole of the Mesopotamian valley from the estuaries where most food was produced to the mountains where minerals were found;

Mizraim who, along with Put and Canaan, accompanied their father to Sudan but then took an expedition up the Red Sea to Egypt where, because the Nile floods were much higher at the time than they are now, it was practical for him to drag his boats, albeit slowly, across to the Nile, and establish a colony in northern Egypt;

Put and

Canaan first settled on the coast in northern Egypt and subsequently moved northwards along the Mediterranean coast.

The tower of Babel

Owing to an early misinterpretation, the tower of Babel was wrongly associated with Babylon which did not exist for another 800 years; the tower was in fact located in the rebuilt city of Eridu and was what is now known as a ziggurat, that is, a structure a bit like a pyramid but with stepped rather than sloping sides. As with the story of Noah, the story of the tower of Babel is preserved in other traditions which support the idea that its building was an act of arrogance by human beings. That something significant happened is shown by the fact that the building was abandoned for 1,000 years.

The confusion of tongues may reflect the rise of the Indo-European group of languages among the post-flood generations. The language spoken in the area before the flood, Sumerian, had, like Basque today, no relationship with any other Indo-European language but the languages which dominate Europe, the Middle East, Central Asia and India today are linked by a common ancestry and began to be spoken in Mesopotamia after the flood. Very quickly different dialects and languages developed making communication between different peoples difficult.

Abram's business

Abram's generosity to Lot (Gn 13:8–12) may reflect his business: textiles. In the Mediterranean area and the Middle East, wool was one of the most common textiles and, as the population of

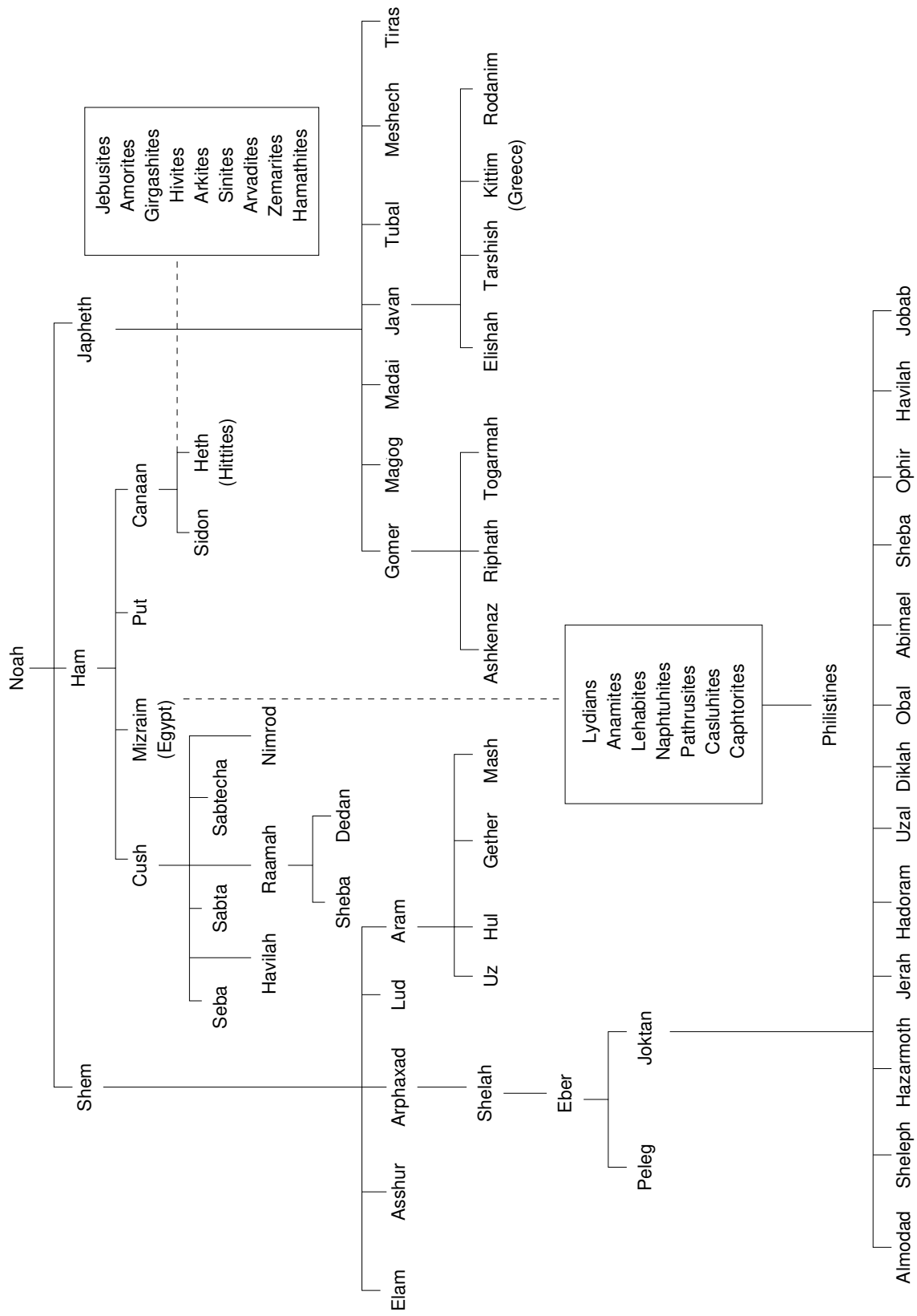


Figure 2: The re-population of the world

the growing cities increased, there would have been continuous demand for it. Interestingly, we know that cotton was being grown and woven in India and in the land of Cush (Sudan) at this time but none of this appears to have been exported. When Alexander the Great's soldiers, wearing woollen clothing, reach India about 1,500 years after the time of Abram, they are astonished to meet people wearing cotton clothing. As sheep can survive at higher altitudes than cattle, Abram may not have been so worried about taking the Judaeian highlands and leaving the Jordan valley to Lot.

Abram's family

With the focus on Ishmael and Isaac, it is easy to overlook that fact that Abram had six more children by another handmaiden, Keturah (figure 3). Also Ishmael, even though he and his mother had been expelled from Abram's household, was not far away and Isaac's son, Esau, was to marry Ishmael's daughter, Mahalath. By this time Jacob, Isaac's other son, had married two of his cousins on his mother's side and had had over a dozen children by them and the handmaidens which had come with them when he married them.

A possible chronology

This chronology is taken from Rohl (2003)²; however, there must be caution about some of Rohl's speculations. For example, based on Jewish tradition he gives 4800 as the foundation of Eridu whereas the consensus is that it was nearer 5400; on the other hand, Josephus dates the Garden of Eden earlier than Rohl does; so assuming a date before 5400 for the Garden of Eden allows us to accept Rohl's identification of Enoch with Uanna with some adjustment to Rohl's earliest dates.

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| 5375 | Garden of Eden between Lake Urmiya and Sahand; Sahand is now a protected area because of the variety of its flora and fauna [Josephus suggests a few hundred years earlier]. |
| 4800 | Foundation of Eridu by Enoch/Uanna [archaeologists suggest 5400] |
| 3119 | Volcanic eruption in Aleutian islands results in cold summers |
| 3114 | Ziusudra/Utnapishtim/Noah, son of Ubartutu, begins building the ark |
| 3113 | Ark completed; melting of mountain snow combined with rain leads to flood Ark floats west to end on Mount Judi in Zagros Mountains |
| 3000 | Meskiagkasher/Cush king of Uruk |
| 2980 | Cush sails to Poen (on Red Sea) and then moves inland to Sudan |
| 2979 | Masri/Misraim sails north; drags ships to Nile; establishes Hierakonpolis |

²David Rohl is an Egyptologist who discovered a discrepancy in the traditional dating of events in Ancient Egypt; he developed a new chronology and, when he compared it with events recorded in the Bible, found that it was a better match than the traditional chronology. He went on to extend the chronology backwards to events in the Middle East recorded earlier in the Bible. Most scholars do not agree with him and Wikipedia uses the traditional chronology.

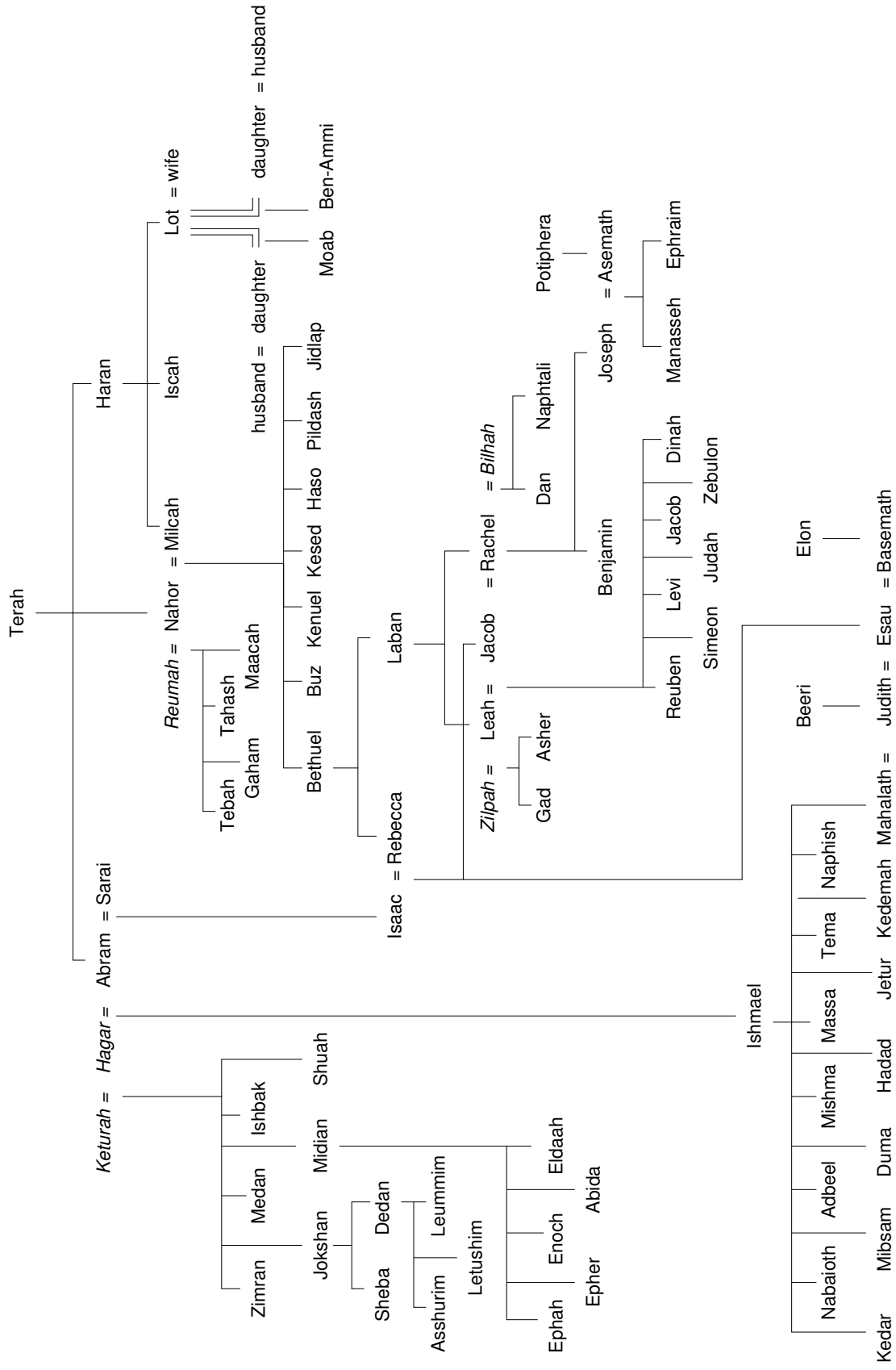


Figure 3: Abram's family

- Put and Canaan go north into Palestine
- 2876-2746 Dynasty of Kenan
- 2852 Enmerkar/Nimrod takes power in Uruk; extends control over Mesopotamia
Tower of Babel at Eridu — site abandoned for 1,000 years
- 2830 Enmer, king of Uruk
Followers of Seth make same journey as Masri/Misraim to Egypt
- 2616–2482 Dynasty of Eber
- 2482–2352 Dynasty of Peleg
- 2352–2222 Dynasty of Reu
- 2222–2090 Dynasty of Serug
- 2090–1970 Dynasty of Nahor
- 1970–1900 Dynasty of Terah
Terah moves to Harran where he dies
- 1855 Abraham moves to Palestine
- 1853 Abraham in Egypt
- 1683 Joseph arrives in Egypt
- 1682–1636 Pharoah Amenemhat III Nimaatre
- 1670 Joseph appointed Vizier
- 1663 High floods
- 1662 Jacob settles in Rowarty
- 1646 Jacob dies and is buried at Hebron

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