

## AUTHOR'S NOTES

### WHAT IS THIS STORY?

An assortment of oral and written comments and stories accompany both Jewish and Islamic tradition and their primary source texts, the Hebrew Bible (Tanakh) and the Koran. In Judaism, those commentaries are known collectively as *midrashim*. As with my previous novel, *Noah's Wife*, this story is “my *midrash*,” my commentary—my imagination layered on a foundation of archeology, historical theories, and ancient writings. For ease of reading, I chose to quote Biblical text primarily from the New Living Translation. On occasion, I used brackets for clarification or to substitute a word or phrase from the Chabad.org translation of the Tanakh.

### UNRAVELING THE KNOT OF “WHEN?”

In a historical novel, the first challenge is to determine when the narrative takes place. According to the Bible, Lot was the nephew of Abraham (Abram), which sets the story “in the time of Abraham,” but controversy swirls around Abraham himself. Was he a mythological figure or a real historical figure, or some mixture? The three major religions of the Middle Eastern and Western civilizations trace their roots to this one man. Scholars also disagree about his era, which likely occurred in the Middle Bronze Age, spanning 2100–1500 BCE. The Elba tablets (discovered in Syria in 1976) mention a city called *Sadam*, which some believe was Sodom, and that would place the era of Abraham between 2950–2000 BCE—but this is hotly debated.

Based on David Rosenberg’s research in his book *Abraham: The First Historical Biography*, I placed Abraham at approximately the time of Samsu-iluna (1749–1712 BCE), the king of Babylonia and son of the famed Hammurabi. Samsu-iluna’s kingdom fell to invasion

by peoples living on his eastern border, who attacked Babylonia from the mountains in two-horse chariots.

The Babylon of the period in which *Angels at the Gate* is set has not been excavated. Therefore, we cannot know its architecture or way of life, but we have detailed descriptions of the city in 300–400 BCE. We also have clear descriptions of earlier Sumerian cities based on archeological findings and writings of the day. One of the more emotional moments in my travels came when I stumbled upon several of the beautiful blue-tile segments of Babylon's wall in an Istanbul museum. The famed glazed walls date from King Nebuchadnezzar's day (605–562 BCE), much later than this story; however, he may have modeled them after existing walls and art, as the ziggurats and other structures of his city were built on earlier Sumerian designs.

#### WHAT WAS THE RELIGION IN ABRAHAM'S TIME?

The second major research challenge to writing *Angels at the Gate* was determining the religion actually practiced by Abraham, the population of Sodom, and the desert nomads. As Raphael Patai states in his book *The Hebrew Goddess*, "The average layman, whether Jew or Gentile, still believes that the official Hebrew religion was a strict monotheism beginning with God's revelation of Himself to Abraham. [But] scholars date the origin of Hebrew monotheism a few centuries later, during the days of the great prophets." Archeological sites provide increasing evidence of this. The earliest Hebrews took ideas about deities from their native land—Canaan and Mesopotamia. For this reason, I have used the small case for "god" throughout.

I also chose to name the earliest Hebrew tribal god "El," rather than "Yahweh," as there is evidence the name Yahweh developed later. El is the word contained in the Hebrew word, "elohim." Elohim is a plural word in Hebrew; possibly it originally meant God, the Most High, or God the Highest [of the gods]. The "watchword" of Judaism is the phrase, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one." The word "one" (*echad*) in that phrase can mean "one" as in "there is only one," which is the common interpretation; but it can also mean "first." This would make the interpretation read as "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is first among the gods." This echoes, "Who is like you, Yahweh, among the gods?" (Exodus 15:11).

The first commandment is “I am the Lord, thy God who brought thee out of the Land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.” It is interesting that the text says, “I am the Lord thy God,” not “I am the Lord, God,” as if identification is necessary. The rest of the commandment reads, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3). Does this mean no gods should be placed above God, or no additional gods should be worshipped? Either way, the question does not seem to be whether other gods exist, but rather, which one is to be primary and worshipped by the Hebrew people.

The roots of El are to be found in the land where the Hebrews arrived or arose—Canaan. Writings discovered in the city of Ugarit (Syria) and dated around 1300–1400 BCE name El as the chief and creator god. He was the consort of the goddess Asherah, the mother of gods. The city-states of Canaan acknowledged the pantheon, but each city had their own special god (also true in Mesopotamia), usually the husband/companion of the goddess.

In later times, Hebrews came to call their god Yahweh, rather than El, and El was used as a more general term for god or God. For example Israe-el (land of God), Anan-iel and Rapha-el, (angels), etc. Canaanites believed that Baal overthrew his father El and became the consort of his mother, Asherah. There is scholarly thought that the Hebrews believed the same thing, only Yahweh (not Baal) became the highest god (the Elohim) and took Asherah as *his* queen. Artifacts from 700–800 BCE bear inscriptions that read “Yahweh and his Asherah.” The terminology becomes even more confusing. Some think Baal and Yahweh originally may have been the same god. In any case, over time, “Baal” in Akkadian came to mean simply “master” or “lord.” In *Angels at the Gate*, I chose to have Baal and Asherah as the deities worshipped in the city of Sodom, to reflect a tension between the nomadic Hebrew tribes and the Canaanites in the cities.

#### WHAT ABOUT THE GODDESS?

Just as there were many gods in Israel’s Bronze Age, the goddesses were many, or at least had many names and forms across the Middle East and across time—Asherah, Anat, Anath, Astarte, Ashtoreth, Ishtar, Isis, and Athirau-Yammi, or Yam Nahar. For thousands of years, prior to the emergence of the Hebrews, the goddess reigned in

Anatolia (Turkey) and across the Middle East. In fact, the old name for Turkey, Anatolia, means “Land of Mothers.” Even in much later times, the feminine remained an entwined and yet mysteriously distinct part of the Hebrew God, known as the *Shekinah*, the holy spirit or presence of God.

Asherah was also known as the goddess of healing. She was represented by a tree or pole. (Perhaps that is the origin of the spring May-pole rites.) Snakes, symbolizing wisdom and renewal, were often associated with her and other goddesses. Moses and Aaron carried staffs (poles) as symbols of power, and the concept of snakes and staffs—later associated with the Greek god Asclepius and the Hebrew Essene priests—became the symbol of healing, as it still is today.

After the first destruction of the Temple and the Babylonian exile, Biblical prophets (and/or Biblical authors) made great efforts to separate the Hebrew religion from the Canaanite religion, and the goddess was “demonized.” Perhaps this is why Eve, a woman, was blamed for listening to the snake who offered the fruit of the tree of knowledge in the Garden of Eden.

The concept of a personal god (as opposed to a city god) probably originated in Mesopotamia—in the Sumerian kingdom, of which Ur was the primary city. According to Genesis, Abraham came from Ur. In Sumer, there were “high” gods, as well as family gods who interceded with the high gods for the people. We know this from the many cuneiform writings uncovered there. In *Angels at the Gate*, Abraham brought this concept to his tribe, but modified it so that his personal god became a personal god of his tribe, a god that did not reside in one place or in a statue, but existed wherever his people were. It was a tremendous leap in the concept of the nature of the divine.

#### WHO WERE THE ANGELS?

Perhaps the greatest challenge in writing this story was the question—Who were the angels? Angels in the Hebrew Bible weave in and out of the narrative as God or sons of God or messengers of God. They usually appear as men. “The *Lord* appeared again to Abraham near the oak grove belonging to Mamre. One day Abraham was

sitting at the entrance to his tent during the hottest part of the day. He looked up and noticed three *men* standing nearby. *My lord*," he said, "if it pleases you, stop here for a while." (Genesis 18:1; italics mine.)

Some scholars believe the Hebrew phrase "sons of God" (*bēnê elīm*) is related to a phrase from a Ugarit (Canaanite) text for the sons of El and Asherah (*bn il*). Some biblical translations have used "angels" in place of "sons of God." The Book of Enoch and the Book of Jubilees both refer to the "Watchers" as "sons of God."

The English word, "angel" is used for the Hebrew word *mal'āḳh*, which simply translates as "messenger." Sometimes the phrase *mal'āḳ* 'al'āḳhīm appears or *mal'āḳ YHWH*, which have been interpreted as "messenger(s) from God, an aspect of God, or God himself as messenger."

It has been suggested that the divine council imagery of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Canaan may have influenced the Jewish understanding of angels as a "heavenly host" over which God presides. It was not until 200-500 CE that theology and art gave angels the physical characteristics (wings and halos) we now associate with them.

The controversial book *Uriel's Machine* by Christopher Knight and Robert Lumos offered an intriguing possibility. *Uriel's Machine* makes a case for a connection between the Middle East and the European megalith builders, particularly in the structures of Stonehenge (England) and Newgrange (Ireland). Israel and Egypt are the only locations where standing stones and stone circles (gilgal) are found outside Europe. In the Book of Kings, there is a description of Elijah repairing an altar of the Lord with twelve stones and a ditch around it—the elements of a henge, such as Stonehenge. The typical Canaanite sanctuary included a standing stone (messebhōth), an asherah pole, and an altar.

The Book of Enoch (one of the books of the Dead Sea scrolls not included in the biblical canon) provides lengthy and particular descriptions of the prophet Enoch's ascent to heaven, where he is shown God on his throne and the portals around the throne through which the moon, sun, and stars are visible at different times of the year. Knight and Lumos match with precision Enoch's description of the throne and portals—which Enoch has memorized under the tutorage of the angel Uriel—to the ancient stone megalith of Newgrange in

Ireland, an amazing astronomical instrument. They theorize that the vanished builders sought out others (Enoch being one) to give instructions on how to build the structures so their knowledge would not be lost. Those scientist-priests, known as Watchers or Angels or by archeologists as Grooved Ware People, disappeared around 3150 BCE, the time of a large comet impact. Where did they go? Knight and Lumos believe they scattered into the Middle East and Asia, with some remaining in Canaan and “becoming the giants of biblical legend,” eventually passing their lore to the stone masons who built Solomon’s temple (without the aid of metal tools). Thus, they may have been the founders of the traditions of modern-day Masons, whose rites specifically exclude metal.

#### CYLINDER SEALS

Mesopotamian cylinder seals were used primarily to roll on soft clay to create a raised surface that would identify the user. They were used to mark documents and inventories and were made of different materials and decorations. I created the use of a cylinder brand to mark a freed slave for the purposes of my story.

#### CAMELS & HORSES?

Another debate among archeologists is the domestication of camels and horses during this time period in Israel. Although archeologists believe camels were most likely not domesticated in Israel until around 900 BCE, there is evidence of the domestication of dromedary (one-hump) camels as early as 2600 BCE in Iran. Bedouins (nomads) ventured into the Arabian Desert around that time, bringing with them the prototypes for the Arabian horse breed. Evidence of horseback riding dates as far back as 3000 BCE in northern Kazakhstan, and horse bits from the Middle Bronze period have been found in Israel. Finding a bronze bit from my story’s time period in an Israel museum was another exciting moment for me. Drawings of horse chariots date to 2000 BCE in Mesopotamia and 1500 BCE in Egypt. A horse stable from a later period has been found in the Negev desert, proving horses could negotiate the area.

## DOGS?

Genetic research indicates that all dog breeds originated from the gray wolf of the Middle East. Nami was a saluki, one of the oldest known breeds of dog and considered the royal dog of Egypt. Unlike many other breed of dog, the saluki's DNA appears to have deviated very little from its origins. Salukis are sight hounds, bred to be desert hunters and companions, and are to this day prized by the Bedouins as part of the family. Nami became a strong character as I wrote this book, and I loved her, but I didn't know the right ending for her until I got there.

## THE FATE OF SODOM &amp; GOMORRAH?

The Great Rift, a geological tear in the earth that starts in Africa, runs up the valley between Israel and Jordan, cupping the Dead Sea. (I decided not to call the Dead Sea the "Salt Sea" as the Bible does, to avoid confusion—obviously, the Mediterranean, the Atlantic, and the Persian Gulf are all salt seas.) It is the lowest place in the world not below water. Earthquakes are no strangers there. For all the searching, the "five cities of the plain" mentioned in Genesis have not been positively identified, although there are some ruins in contention.

The Genesis story calls for fire and brimstone (burning sulfur) from the sky. Volcanic activity is the first scenario fitting those criteria. But there is no indication of volcanic activity in the time period near the area where Sodom was supposedly located. Most theories place Sodom south of the Dead Sea, although some lean toward north of the Dead Sea. Some even put the "cities of the plain" in Mesopotamia.

Meteorites are another possibility, although most meteors that enter Earth's atmosphere burn completely. There is no evidence of significant impact craters in the area. A large meteor might, however, explode before impact in an "air blast," as the 1908 and 2013 events in Russia illustrate (along with a theoretical explosion in 3123 BCE, as documented by a Sumerian astronomer). An air blast explosion could have destroyed the cities and fits the evidence of burning that can be found at the remains of several settlements in the area.

One such archeological dig is Tall El Hamman, a gated ancient city to the north of the Dead Sea. The time period there (Middle Bronze) is close to the estimated time of Abraham. One of the problems with

the Hamman site being Sodom is that there are many cities (more than five) clustered around it, while to the south of the Dead Sea there is some evidence that there were five cities that could match the Biblical reference to the “five cities of the plains.” Biblical references indicate Lot wandered “as far as Sodom.” Ezekiel 16:46 indicates that Sodom is to the *south* of Jerusalem. The Hamman site (in the northern plain or Kikkar) is to the *north* of Jerusalem. Also, the pits mentioned in Genesis are located in the southern region of the Dead Sea.

Some believe the ruins of Bab edh-Dhra, a city near the southeastern edge of the Dead Sea, might have been Sodom, and there is evidence of burning at the site and a large burial ground nearby. However, it is believed that Bab edh-Dhra burned around 2350–2067 BCE, which is two to four hundred years before the commonly believed time of Abraham (1800–1500 BCE). A possible sister city, Numeira (Gomorrah?)—which also shows evidence of burning—exists nearby, but the time period of that city is closer to 2600 BCE.

Of course, assuming the Biblical stories are actually based on real events, the legends of burning cities might have been superimposed onto a later time, but there is another puzzlement. The time periods *between* the various sites of “burned cities” are hundreds of years apart. Are we to believe that three or more meteor air blasts occurred hundreds of years apart in this relatively tiny section of the world? Or is there another explanation for the several burned cities over a varied timespan in the area?

Bitumen (tar) was called “pitch,” and we know it today as asphalt. It is a natural product of petroleum existing underground in the area. Bituminous limestone releases asphalt and gaseous matter. With shifts in the earth, the asphalt rises up in the Dead Sea, as do sulfur fumes. Both occurred more frequently in the ancient past. Historians, including Diodorus Siculus (60–21 BCE) and Flavius Josephus (37–100 CE), confirm the harvesting of asphalt by boat. In the Dead Sea region, there are underground areas of methane, asphalt, and sulfur. Earthquakes might bring these materials into contact with each other underground, a volatile mix that could spontaneously erupt and emit flames of burning sulfur (brimstone) and pitch. I used this concept for “Mot’s Tongue.”



Assuming none of the ruins mentioned are the remains of Sodom and her sister cities, a great mystery surrounds the “cities of the plain” referred to in the Genesis story. What happened to them? Mud bricks made primarily of clay were a common building material during the Bronze Age. Clay hardens when exposed to heat. If the temperatures are high enough, it takes on a glassy structure. But limestone, the most abundant material in the area, is not flammable. If none of the cities mentioned above are Sodom (and none, except the northern El Hamman site fits the time period) what could account for the fact that there is no trace of the burnt city in the Abraham time period south of the Dead Sea?

One possibility is a geological process called liquefaction, where the shaking of saturated (waterlogged) ground causes an increase in water pressure and water can rush to the surface (i.e., the ground turns to water), as has happened in disasters in New Zealand, Japan, and the United States. On a slope, this can become a landslide. In earlier times, the climate in Israel was wetter, and a city built at the edge of the Dead Sea would rest on ground vulnerable to such saturation. Scientists put this theory to a test by building a model city and using a centrifuge at Cambridge where they replicated a 0.6 earthquake in conditions around the Dead Sea in the Early Bronze period. The effects were catastrophic. The ground turned to quicksand (blackened in *Angels at the Gate* by deposits of pitch), and the model city sank to the bottom of the Dead Sea.

Indeed some scholars believe that what is now the southern section (or part of the southern section of the Dead Sea) was once a fertile plain fed by the eastern river washes and that is why the Bible refers to the kings of Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboyim, and Zoar joining battle in the “Valley of Siddim, which is the Salt Sea,” a statement that surely is not meant to mean that the kings fought a battle *in* the Salt Sea (Dead Sea) but in the Valley of Siddim, which is [now] the Salt Sea. Perhaps the burnt city of Sodom will one day be found at the bottom of the Dead Sea, or perhaps the mystery will endure.