

From the Rabbi's Desk
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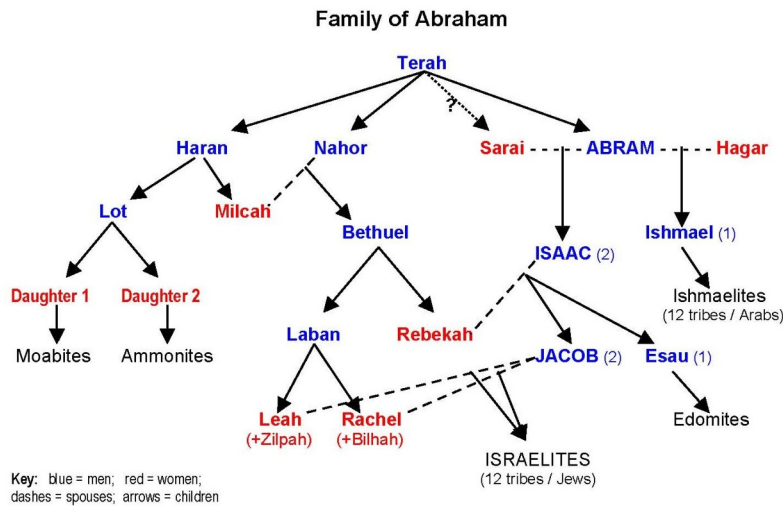
Stories with a Twist [10]

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Abraham Descends into the Fiery Furnace (Insights into Genesis Rabbah 38: 13)

Background to Our Story

Avraham's Family Tree



Nimrod



<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nimrod>

Nimrod: a biblical figure described as a king of Shinar (Assyria/Mesopotamia), was, according to the Book of Genesis and Books of Chronicles, the son of Cush, therefore the great-grandson of Noah. The Bible states that he was "a mighty hunter before the Lord [and] began to be mighty in the earth". Extra-biblical traditions associating him with the Tower of Babel led to his reputation as a king who was rebellious against God.

Attempts to match Nimrod with historically attested figures have failed. He does not seem to represent any one personage known to history, and in reality is more likely a conflation of several real and fictional figures of Mesopotamian antiquity, including the Mesopotamian god Ninurta, the Akkadian kings Sargon and his grandson Naram-Sin (2254–2218 BCE), and Tukulti-Ninurta I (1243–1207 BC) of the Middle Assyrian Empire.

Book of Daniel Chapter 3

3 King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, sixty cubits high and six cubits wide, and set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon. ²He then summoned the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges,

magistrates and all the other provincial officials to come to the dedication of the image he had set up. ³ So the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials assembled for the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up, and they stood before it.

⁴ Then the herald loudly proclaimed, "Nations and peoples of every language, this is what you are commanded to do: ⁵ As soon as you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music, you must fall down and worship the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. ⁶ Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace."

⁷ Therefore, as soon as they heard the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp and all kinds of music, all the nations and peoples of every language fell down and worshiped the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

⁸ At this time some astrologers came forward and denounced the Jews. ⁹ They said to King Nebuchadnezzar, "May the king live forever! ¹⁰ Your Majesty has issued a decree that everyone who hears the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music must fall down and worship the image of gold, ¹¹ and that whoever does not fall down and worship will be thrown into a blazing furnace. ¹² But there are some Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon—Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego—who pay no attention to you, Your Majesty. They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up."

¹³ Furious with rage, Nebuchadnezzar summoned Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. So these men were brought before the king, ¹⁴ and Nebuchadnezzar said to them, "Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the image of gold I have set up? ¹⁵ Now when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music, if you are ready to fall down and worship the image I made, very good. But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?"

¹⁶ Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, "King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. ¹⁷ If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us^[c] from Your Majesty's hand. ¹⁸ But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up."

¹⁹ Then Nebuchadnezzar was furious with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and his attitude toward them changed. He ordered the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual ²⁰ and commanded some of the strongest soldiers in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and throw them into the blazing furnace. ²¹ So these men, wearing their robes, trousers, turbans and other clothes, were bound and thrown into the blazing furnace. ²² The king's command was so urgent and the furnace so hot that the flames of the fire killed the soldiers who took up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, ²³ and these three men, firmly tied, fell into the blazing furnace.

²⁴ Then King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisers, "Weren't there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?"

They replied, "Certainly, Your Majesty."

²⁵ He said, "Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods."

²⁶ Nebuchadnezzar then approached the opening of the blazing furnace and shouted, "Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!"

So Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego came out of the fire,²⁷ and the satraps, prefects, governors and royal advisers crowded around them. They saw that the fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was a hair of their heads singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them.

²⁸ Then Nebuchadnezzar said, "Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him and defied the king's command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God. ²⁹ Therefore I decree that the people of any nation or language who say anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego be cut into pieces and their houses be turned into piles of rubble, for no other god can save in this way."

³⁰ Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the province of Babylon.

The Text: Genesis Rabbah 38: 13

וימת הרן על פני תרח אביו, רבי חייא בר בריה דרב אדא דיפו תרח עובד צלמים היה, חד זמן נפיק לאתר, הושיב לאברהם מוכר תחתיו, הוה אתי בר אינש בעי דיזבן חד והוה א"ל בר כמה שנין את, והוה א"ל בר חמשין או שיתין, והוה א"ל ווי ליה להווא גברא דהוה בר שיתין, ובעי למסגד לבר יומי, והוה מתבייש והולך לו, חד זמן אתא איתתא טעינה בידה חדא פינך דסולת, אמרה ליה הא לך קרב קודמיהון, קם נסיב בוקלסא בידיה, ותבריהון לכולהון פסיליא, ויהב בוקלסא בידא דרבה דהוה ביניהון, כיון דאתא אבוה א"ל מאן עביד להון כדין, א"ל מה נכפר מינך אתת חדא איתתא טעינה לה חדא פינך דסולת, ואמרת לי הא לך קריב קודמיהון, קריבת לקדמיהון הוה דין אמר אנא איכול קדמאי, ודין אמר אנא איכול קדמאי, קם הדין רבה דהוה ביניהון נסב ותברינון, א"ל מה אתה מפלה בי, וידעין אנון, א"ל ולא ישמעו אזניך מה שפיק ומסריה לנמרוד, א"ל נסגוד לנורא, א"ל אברהם ונסגוד למיא דמטפין בוקלסא נסגוד למיא, א"ל אם כן נסגוד לעננא דטעין מיא, א"ל נסגוד לעננא אומר, נסביה לרוחא דמבדר עננא, א"ל נסגוד לרוחא א"ל ונסגוד לבר אינשא נורא, א"ל נמרוד את משתעי אני איני משתחוה אלא לאור, הרי אני משליכך א"ל אם כן נסגוד משתחוה לו ויצילך הימנו, הוה תמן הרן קאים פלוג, אמר דסביל רוחא, א"ל מילין אנא אמר מן דאברהם אנא ואם נצח נמרוד אנא אמר בתוכו, ויבא אלוה שאתה מה נפשך אם נצח אברהם דנמרוד אנא, כיון שירד אברהם לכבשן האש וניצול, אמרין ליה דמאן את, אמר להון מן אברהם אנא, נטלוהו והשליכוהו לאור ונחמרו בני מעיו, ויצא ומת על פני תרח אביו, הה"ד (שם/בראשית/יא) וימת הרן על פני תרח וגו'.

Rabbi Hiyya said: Terah was a manufacturer of idols.

He once went away somewhere and left Abraham to sell them in his place. A man came and wished to buy one.

"How old are you?" Abraham asked him.

"Fifty years," was the reply.

"Woe to such a man!" he [Abraham] exclaimed, "you are fifty years old and would worship a day-old object!" At this he [the man] became ashamed and departed.

On another occasion a woman came with a plateful of flour and requested him [Abraham], "Take this and offer it to them [the idols]." So he took a stick, broke them [the idols], and put the stick in the hand of the largest [idol].

When his father returned he demanded, "What have you done to them?"

"I cannot conceal it from you," he [Abraham] rejoined. "A woman came with a plateful of fine meal and requested me to offer it to them [to the idols]. One claimed, 'I must eat first,' while another claimed, 'I must eat first.' Thereupon the largest arose, took the stick, and broke them."

"Why do you make sport of me," he [Terah] cried out; "have they [the idols] then any knowledge!"

"Should not your ears listen to what your mouth is saying (you deny their knowledge and yet you worship them!)," he [Abraham] retorted.

Thereupon he [Terah] seized him and delivered him to Nimrod.

"Let us worship the fire!" he [Nimrod] proposed.

"Let us rather worship water, which extinguishes the fire," replied he [Abraham].

"Then let us worship water!" Nimrod proposed.

"Let us rather worship the clouds which bear the water" replied Abraham.

"Then let us worship the clouds!" Nimrod proposed.

"Let us rather worship the winds which disperse the clouds" replied Abraham.

"Then let us worship the wind!" Nimrod proposed.

"Let us rather worship human beings, who withstand the wind" replied Abraham.

"You are just exchanging words," he [Nimrod] exclaimed; "we will worship nothing but the fire. Behold, I will cast you into it, and let your God whom you adore come and save you from it."

Now Haran was standing there undecided. If Abraham is victorious, [he thought], I will say that I am of Abraham's belief, while if Nimrod is victorious I will say that I am on Nimrod's side. When Abraham descended into the fiery furnace and was saved, he [Nimrod] asked him, "Of whose belief are you?" "Of Abraham's," he [Haran] replied. Thereupon he [Nimrod] seized and cast him [Haran] into the fire; his innards were scorched and he died in his father's lifetime.

Hence it is written (Genesis 11:28): "*and Haran died in the lifetime of his father Terah...*"



Explaining the Story - What's going on in our story? (Explain the sequence of events)

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

Bonus ? The text says about Terah: "Thereupon he seized him [Abraham] and delivered him to Nimrod." How can we explain Terah's attitude?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? Nimrod gets tired from the "philosophical argument" with Abraham. What is the straw that "breaks the camel's back?"

? Why does the king want to throw *Abraham into the fiery furnace*?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? "*And Haran died in the lifetime of his father Terah*" (Genesis 11: 28).

The Midrash usually deals with a difficulty in the text. Sometimes the problem is in the language, sometimes, like in this case, in the content. What is bothering the Midrash here?

Bonus ? Why was Haran punished?

I Kings 18:21

Elijah stepped forward before all the people and said, "How long are you going to jump back and forth between two positions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if it's Ba'al, follow him!..."

"The Twist" – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from the Text

- ! Be loyal and stand for what you believe!



"Those are my principles, and if you don't like them... well, I have others."

Groucho Marx

Our story is so well known that many people cannot believe it doesn't appear at all in the Jewish Bible. The image of Abraham smashing his father's idols stands at the beginning of Abraham's journey into his new faith. The ideological battle between Abraham and Nimrod is perhaps less known and it is based, probably, on the story narrated in the third chapter in the Book of Daniel.

While our story is about Abraham's faith in God Almighty, its placement as a commentary on Genesis 11:28, indicates that the author was troubled by the death of Haran in his father Terah's lifetime. From this perspective, the story about Abraham smashing the idols and the ideological debate with Nimrod serves merely as the prologue to Haran's own story, centered on his indecisiveness and speculation. As our story explains how and why Haran died, it reminds the reader that opportunism and disloyalty never triumph at the end.