

## ארם נהרים

אבנר רמו

In the Book of Deuteronomy we read:

**יאיר בן-מנשה לקח את-כל-חבל ארגב, עד-גבול הגשורי והמעכתי; ויקרא אתם על-שמו את-הבשן חות יאיר, עד היום הזה.**

**“Jair the son of Manasseh took all the region of Argob, to the border of the Geshurites and the Maacathites, and called them, even (the) Bashan, after his own name, Havvoth-jair, to this day”** (Deu 3:14).

The English translator had to change the order of the word to make sense of what appeared to him as word disorder. However, it is suggested that here **את-הבשן חות יאיר** (*et habashan khavoth yair*) is a misspelled: **ושמן חות יאיר** (*veshman khavoth yair*) - “and their name: Khavoth Yair” (e.g. Gen 5:2).

This event was previously described in the Book of Numbers:

**וילכו בני מכיר בן-מנשה גלעדה-וילכדה; ויורש את-האמרי אשר-בה. ויתן משה את-הגלעד למכיר בן-מנשה; וישב בה. ויאיר בן-מנשה הלך וילכד את-חותיהם; ויקרא אתהן, חות יאיר. ונבח הלך וילכד את-קנת ואת-בנתיה; ויקרא לה נבח בשמו.**

**“And the children of Machir the son of Manasseh went to Gilead, and took it, and dispossessed the Amorites that were therein.**

**And Moses gave Gilead to Machir the son of Manasseh; and he dwelt therein.**

**And Jair the son of Manasseh went and took the villages thereof, and called them Havvoth-jair.**

**And Nobah went and took Kenath, and the villages thereof, and called it Nobah, after his own name”** (Num 32:39-42; see also: Jud 10:4, 8).

When the Chronicler refers to this event he writes:

**ואחר בא חצרן אל-בת-מכיר אבי גלעד, והוא לקחה והוא בן-ששים שנה; ותלד לו את-שגוב.**

**ושגוב הוליד את-יאיר; ויהי-לו עשרים ושלוש ערים בארץ, הגלעד.**

**ויקח גשור-וארם את-חות יאיר מאתם, את-קנת ואת-בנתיה-ששים עיר; כל-אלה בני מכיר אבי-גלעד.**

**“And afterward Hezron went in to the daughter of Machir the father of Gilead; whom he took to wife when he was threescore years old; and she bore him Segub.**

**And Segub begot Jair, who had three and twenty cities in the land of Gilead.**

**And Geshur and Aram took Havvoth-jair from them, with Kenath, and the villages thereof, even threescore cities. All these were the sons of Machir the father of Gilead”** (1 Ch 2:21-23).

While in the Books of Numbers and Deuteronomy we read that Jair took “Havvoth” in Argob the Chronicler tells us that the “Havvoth” were actually taken from Jair. Furthermore, while in the Books of Numbers these “Havvoth” were in Gilead, who’s **Amorites** were dispossessed by Machir the son of Manasseh, the Chronicler tells us that the “Havvoth” were taken by “**Geshur**

and Aram.” Yet we should notice that **אָרַם** (*aram*) is a metathesis of **אֶמֹרִי** (*emori*) - “Amorites.”

We also read in the Book of Chronicles:

**בְּנֵי מְנַשֶּׁה, אֲשֶׁר יָלְדָה אֵשֶׁר יָלְדָה; פִּילְגְּשׁוֹ הָאֲרַמִּיָּה, יָלְדָה אֶת-מַכִּיר אֲבִי גִלְעָד.**  
“The sons of Manasseh: Asriel, whom his wife bore--his concubine the Aramitess bore Machir the father of Gilead” (1 Ch 7:14).

However, the comparison between the verse and verses Num 32:39-42, suggests that here **אֲרַמִּיָּה** (*aramiah*) is a letter-substitution and order-type error of **אֶמֹרִית** (*emorith*) - “Amorite.”

In the Book of Genesis we read that God told Abraham:

**אֲנִי יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאוּר כַּשְׁדִּים-לְתֵת לְךָ אֶת-הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת לְרִשְׁתָּהּ.**  
“I am YHWH that brought you out of Ur of the Chaldees, to give you this land to inherit it” (Gen 15:7; see also: Neh 9:7).

We also read in the Book of Genesis that Abram came to **חָרָן** - “Haran” from **אוּר כַּשְׁדִּים** - “Ur of the Chaldees” (Gen 11:28). Apparently, it was assumed that this Ur was in the land of the Chaldeans, and therefore it was traditionally believed that originally Abraham was an Akkadian. However, in various historic periods the Akkadians conquered towns that were outside their homeland. Furthermore, the language spoken by Abraham is not Eastern Semitic but rather North-Western Semitic.

We read that when God approached Abraham for the first time He told him:

**לֵךְ-לְךָ מֵאֶרֶץ וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ, אֶל-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֲרַאֲךָ.**  
“Get you out of your country, and from your kindred, and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you” (Gen 12:1). Yet in the previous verse we are told that at that time Abram was already in **חָרָן** - “Haran” (Gen 11:31-32).

For unknown reason Abraham does not refer to: **אוּר כַּשְׁדִּים** - “Ur of the Chaldees” as: **אֶרְצִי** - “my country” and as: **מוֹלַדְתִּי** - “my kindred” but rather to **אֲרַם נְהַרַיִם** - “Aram-naharaim” (Gen 24:4, 6, 10).

It is therefore not surprising that the Greek translators of the Pentateuch assumed that **אֲרַם נְהַרַיִם** - “Aram-naharaim” is “Mesopotamia” (Gen 24:10; Deu 23:5), and this understanding also prevailed until quite recently among many biblical scholars.

It was pointed out by others that several towns in the Middle-East were named Ur. One of them is named today Urfa (*Urha* in Armenian; *Orrhoa* in Greek). It was also noticed that the names of several of Abraham ancestors such as: **שְׂרוּג** - “Serug”, **נַחֹר** - “Nahor”, and **תֵּרַח** - “Terah” are similar to some ancient place-names in the vicinity of Urfa. One of Abraham's early ancestors was **אַרְפַּכְשָׁד** - “Arpachshad” (Gen 11:10-13). However, **אַרְפַּכְשָׁד** (*Arpachshad*) could be a mis-division of **אַרְפַּכְשָׁד** (*urpha-kassad*) or “Urpha of the Chaldeans” a name similar to: **אוּר כַּשְׁדִּים** - “Ur of the Chaldees.”

This ancient town is located 38 mi north-west of the town of Harran, another ancient town that was mentioned already in the Ebla tablets (late 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC). Both towns were between the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> centuries BC in the Hurrian-speaking state - Mitanni. In the Egyptian Amarna letters this state was referred to as: *N-h-r-n*.



**Mari's Goddess of the vase (18th century BC)**

Prior to that time this area was part of the Amorite kingdom of Mari. The Amorites were Western-Semites who began to settle in this area before the twenty-first century BC. Their third kingdom lasted from c. 2266 BC to c. 1761 BC, when it was destroyed by the Babylonian King Hammurabi. The Akkadians referred to this kingdom as *Amurum* and the Egyptians as: *Amar*.

As prior to the 17<sup>th</sup> century BC this part of Eastern Syria was referred to by the Egyptians as *Amar*, and after the 16<sup>th</sup> century as *Naharin*, it is likely that in between these eras, it had the combined name *Amar-Naharin*. It is therefore suggested that **אֲרַם נַהַרִים** - “**Aram-naharaim**” is an order-type error of this name.

When the name **אֲרַם נַהַרִים** - “**Aram-naharaim**” is mentioned in the Books of Judges (Jud 3:8), Psalms (Ps 60:1), and Chronicles (1 Ch 19:6) it is translated to Greek as: “Syria of rivers”,

“Mesopotamian Syria”, and Mesopotamia of Syria, respectively. We may therefore assume that the Greek translators believed that these biblical references to **אֲרָם נַהֲרַיִם** - “**Aram-naharaim**” are indeed referring to Syria.

The proposition that in the Pentateuch “Aram” is an order-type error of “Amar”, suggests also a remedy for another problem.



**Jacob Tells Laban that He Will Work for Rachel** (woodcut by **Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld** from the 1860 *Die Bibel in Bildern*)

A contemporary of Abraham (and in fact his relative) is **לבן הארמי** - “**Laban the Aramean**” (Gen 25:20; 28:5; 31:20, 24). Yet the first credible reference to the Arameans as a people appears in the inscription of Tiglath Pileser I (c. 1100 BC). As Laban apparently lived several hundred years earlier, he could not have been an “Aramean.” However, he could have been an Amorite **אֲמֹרִי** (*emori*) rather than **אֲרָמִי** (*arami*).

When old Abraham was sending his servant to fetch a bride for his son Isaac he told him:

**לֹא-תִקַּח אִשָּׁה לְבָנִי מִבְּנוֹת הַכְּנַעֲנִי, אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי יוֹשֵׁב בְּקִרְבּוֹ.**

“**You shall not take a wife for my son of the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell**” (Gen 24:3).

A similar instruction was given by Isaac to his son Jacob (Gen 28:1). We should notice that in both events the Amorites are not mentioned.

In fact, we read that the relations between Abraham and the Amorites were more than cordial:

**וְהוּא שָׁכַן בְּאֵלְנֵי מַמְרֵי הָאֲמֹרִי, אַחֵי אֲשַׁכֵּל וְאֲחֵי עֵשָׂר, וְהֵם בְּעָלֵי בְרִית-אֲבָרָם.**

“**He dwelt by the terebinths of Mamre the Amorite, brother of Eshcol, and brother of Aner; and these were confederate with Abram**” (Gen 14:13).

Furthermore, these Amorites are described as the men that helped Abraham pursuing the people that took captive Lot, his brother's son (Gen 14:14-24).

We are also told about Abraham:

ויסף אברהם ויקח אשה, ושמה קטורה  
ותלד לו את-זמרן

**“And Abraham took another wife, and her name was Keturah.  
And she bore him Zimran”** (Gen 25:1-2).

The name זמרן - **“Zimran”** sounds similar to Amorite names. For example: the last king of Mari was Zimri-Lim (1775-1761 BC).

These facts suggest that Abraham was originally a Syrian Amorite. Although we are told that his move to Canaan was instructed by God, it is possible that he had to leave Syria with his family for reasons not dissimilar to those of Jacob (Gen 31:20-21) or Idrimi, the son of Ilim-Ilimma I of Halab (Aleppo), who later became king of Alalakh (c. 1460- c. 1400 BC).



**Statue of Idrimi in the British Museum.**

It seems that the origin of Abraham was known at least to the Prophet Ezekiel. In his book we read:

בן-אדם, הודע את-ירושלם את-תועבתיה.  
ואמרת כה-אמר אדני יהוה לירושלם, מכרתוך ומלדתוך מארץ הכנעני; אביך האמרי, ואמך  
חתיית.

**“Son of man, cause Jerusalem to know her abominations;  
And say: Thus said my Lord YHWH to Jerusalem: Your origin and your nativity is of the  
land of the Canaanite; the Amorite was your father, and your mother was a Hittite”** (Eze  
16:3, 45).