

# Chaldea

## Contents

**Chaldea** is the land bordering the Persian Gulf that gave its name to the ruling dynasty and thus became a synonym for Babylonia itself.

**I. Geography** The tribal territory covering the southern marshes and coastal plains of ancient Iraq bordering the Persian Gulf was called by outsiders “Chaldean land” after the name of the tribes inhabiting the area. This Assyrian-Babylonian name was followed by the Greek, while the Hebrew probably follows an old dialect form. The name has no proven connection with Chesed (Gen. 22:22).

The origin of the Chaldeans is uncertain but may well be in the west, or else branches of the family may have moved there (cf. Job 1:17). The general name for the area in the earliest period is unknown, since it was part of Sumer (see SHINAR); so it cannot be argued that the qualification of Abraham’s home city UR as “of the Chaldeans” (Gen. 11:28, 31; 15:7; as later Neh. 9:7; cf. Acts 7:4) is necessarily a later insertion in the text. Such a description may well have been needed to distinguish the city from other places with a similar name, Ur’. In the 2nd millennium the area was designated “the Sea-Lands” and was described as adjacent to Elam on the east, the “west land” (Amorite or western desert) to the west, and Dilmun, the islands and coastal regions of Bahrain, to the south. First-millennium texts name the tribes of the Kaldu under chiefs. Assyrian kings claimed the capture of at least seventy-five walled towns or villages and 420 hamlets from these tribes.

**II. Early References** The later rulers of the 1st Dynasty of Babylon (ca 1740-1590 B.C.) referred to the “Sea-Land” as ruled by independent chiefs, of whom Gulkišar was the most renowned, Another,

Ea-gamil, was the contemporary of Samsu-ditana of Babylon (1625–1595), while the later Babylonian king list A records a second Sea-Land dynasty of three kings who reigned over most of Babylonia for twenty years and three months, ca 1010-980 B.C. It is likely that these were “Chaldeans,” though not so named in these texts, since Ashurnasirpal II in his annals for the year 860 mentions the Kaldu as strong in this same area.

**III. Assyrian Control** The expansionist aims of the Sargonid Assyrian kings brought them into direct clash with the independent tribes of the south in their need to control the trade routes to Elam and the Gulf. Shalmaneser III in 851 sacked the town of Baqani, which then belonged to Adini of the Dakkuru tribe. When his capital Enzudi fell Adini paid the Assyrian tribute, as did Mušallim-Marduk of Amukkani and Bit-Yakin; the latter is called “of the land of the Sea,” thus identifying the earlier description of “Sea-Lands” with the now more frequently used “land of the Chaldeans.” Adadnirari III (805) lists the Amukkani and Bit-Yakin among his Chaldean vassals.

**IV. Merodach-baladan** In 734 the Amukkani seized Babylon, on the death of Nabunašir. Tiglath-pileser III immediately responded by sending his Assyrian army, who plundered Amukkani, Šilani, and Sa’alli while the Chaldean chief UkIn-zer was engaged at Sapia. His rivals Balassu of Dakkuru and Marduk-apla-iddina (the biblical Merodach-baladan) of Bit-Yakin made a treaty with the Assyrians, and their lands were spared, Merodach-baladan even dominated Babylon itself from 721 to 710 B.C.

Sargon II of Assyria set out to win over the Li’tau

and various Aramean groups. He sealed the border with Elam from which the rebels were supplied, eventually regaining control of Babylon. Marduk-apla-iddina II withdrew to Yatburu in Elam; and though the Assyrians captured Dur-Yakin, his main city, he retained the chieftainship. However, on Sargon's death in 705 Merodach-baladan took the title "king of Babylon" (so 2 K. 20:12) following the disappearance of the little-known Marduk-zakir-šumi II. It is probably at this time, rather than at the earlier rule in Babylon, that Merodach-baladan sent his embassy to Hezekiah of Judah to enlist his support against the expected Assyrian countermeasures (Isa. 39; 2 K. 20:12–19). Thus here too, "Chaldean" is rightly used as synonymous with "Babylonian" (Isa. 13:19; 47:1, 5; 48:14, 20).

For a while another Chaldean, Šuzubu (Mušezib-Marduk), gained power when Merodach-baladan withdrew on the approach of Sennacherib's army. Sennacherib, who defeated the Chaldean tribesmen at Kish, gave Babylon into the hands of his nominee Bel-ibni. Resistance continued for a time under a son of Merodach-baladan, who was betrayed by the Elamites. Merodach-baladan himself died in exile before Sennacherib in 695 could mount an amphibious operation to punish the supporting elements living across the gulf. When Ashurbanipal raided the south ca 652 B.C. he captured Merodach-baladan's grandson Palia. This act forced the Chaldean tribes to side with Šamaš-šum-ukIn of Babylon, and their combined hostility was the prime cause of the sack of that city by the Assyrians in 648. Mannu-kI-Babili of the Dakkuri and Ea-šum-iqIša of the Amukkani were punished for their complicity, and Nabû-bel-šumati, another grandson of the renowned chief of the Bit-Yakin, committed suicide when betrayed by the Elamites to whom he, like his grandfather Merodach-baladan, had fled.

**V. Chaldean Dynasty** After Ashurbanipal's death and the increasing weakness of his regime the Chaldeans rose in revolt and recaptured Babylon, putting their leader Nabopolassar on the throne there in 627. He inaugurated a period of remarkable political and economic recovery, allying with the Medes to sack Asshur (614) and Nineveh (612). His son Nebuchadrezzar II (605–562), while crown prince, confronted the Egyptians, defeating them at Carchemish in 605 B.C. before campaigning in Syria and Palestine (2 K. 24:7; Josephus Ant. x.6.86). The Babylonian Chronicle for this reign records his operations resulting in Jehoiakim's submission to the Chaldean king (2 K.

24:1; Jer. 25:1) and his defection three years later when the Chaldeans had been routed by the Egyptians in 601 (Jer. 26:1–11). In revenge the Babylonians captured Jerusalem, March 16, 597 B.C.; and when their nominee Mattaniah-Zedekiah broke his vassal's oath, they sacked the city and took the Judeans into exile (587).

Nebuchadrezzar much embellished Babylon and strengthened its defenses (Dnl. 4:30). His son Amel-Marduk (Evil-merodach of 2 K. 25:27–30) showed compassion on the exiled Jews, but under his successors Neriglissar (560–558) and Labaši-Marduk (557), their lot deteriorated with the mounting pressure on Babylon by the powerful Medes. Nabonidus (556–539) set up a provincial administration in the Jewish diaspora area of Teima in north Arabia, leaving his son and co-regent Bel-šar-ušur (Belshazzar, "king of the Chaldeans," Dnl. 5:30) to withstand the final assault of the Persians under Cyrus in October 539. Nabonidus himself died in exile, and with the fall of Babylon the Chaldean Dynasty ended.

**VI. Chaldeans as Learned Men** The Chaldeans maintained the traditional Babylonian schools at Babylon, Borsippa, Sippar, Uruk, and Ur. Here the "learning of the Chaldeans" (Dnl. 1:4; 2:2; 4:7; 5:7, 11) comprised the study of Sumerian, Akkadian, Aramaic (formerly called "Chaldee"), and other languages, as well as the extensive literature written in them. Historiography as well as the sciences of astronomy, mathematics, and medicine formed a large part of the specialist work. Associated religious texts, both omnia and astrology (horoscopes were not introduced until the 4th cent B.C.) played a large part.

In one sense Daniel uses "Chaldean" as a synonym for "Babylonian" as elsewhere is the case in the OT. With the increasing introduction of Aramaic, "Chaldean" became a term for "magicians, enchanters, and soothsayers," since these aspects of Babylonian religious texts were the longest to survive in the popular imagination (as ca 450 B.C. Herodotus i.181–83).

#### **Ur of the Chaldees** I. Site

Some 350 km (220 mi) SE of Baghdad, covering an oval area approximately 910 by 730 m (1000 by 800 yds), are the ruins of ancient Ur, known in antiquity as Urim. The major mound was called Tell el-Muqayyar ("mound of pitch") by the Arabs because of the bitumen used here and there as mortar

for the bricks. Other sites have been suggested as the location of the biblical “Ur of the Chaldeans” (AV “Ur of the Chaldees”) but the present site is accepted by almost all scholars, especially because of its association with the southern Babylonian Chaldeans.

The chief deity of the city was Nanna, the Sumerian moon-god; for him and his consort Nin-gal several temples and the great ziggurat were built. It is noteworthy that at Haran, Abraham’s ancestral home, the Semitic moon-god Sin was the chief deity worshiped.

Today, and for centuries past, the area of Ur has presented a most unprepossessing aspect. From the top of the ziggurat one looks out in every direction upon a flat barren plain virtually devoid of plant life or human habitation. But four thousand years ago, when the city and its environs encompassed about 10 sq km (4 sq mi) and had a population of 300,000 to 400,000, the vast plain must have been a patchwork of irrigated fields, orchards, and gardens.

Twice in its history, during its 1st and 3rd dynasties, Ur was “capital of the world.” Doubtless the end came when the Euphrates, which originally flowed along the western side of the city in a bed several feet above the level of the plain, broke through its banks and ultimately assumed its present course 19 km (12 mi) to the east. If this catastrophe occurred during the declining years of Ur’s history, when the inhabitants of the city were either too poor or too weak to remedy the situation, oblivion would have been swift and sure.

Earlier excavations were carried out at Ur and nearby Tell el-Ubaid by J. E. Taylor (1854), H. R. Hall (1918–19), and R. Campbell Thompson (1918); their finds were minor but provided evidence of the importance of the ruins. A joint expedition of the British Museum and the University Museum of the University of Pennsylvania, under the direction of C. L. Woolley, excavated at Ur for twelve seasons between 1922 and 1934. In addition to the ziggurat and royal tombs (see III and IV below), the excavators recovered the palaces of Ur-Nammu and Šulgi of the 3rd Dynasty, the palace of the Chaldean king Nabonidus, temples from various historic periods for Nanna, Ningal, and Enki, and many private houses from both the Old Babylonian and Neo-Babylonian periods.

## II. Prehistory and History

Ur was one of the oldest and most important cities

in the Sumerian era of Mesopotamian history. Its occupation goes back, however, to the prehistoric Ubaid period. Sedentary occupation in what is now southern Iraq seems to have begun ca 4000 b.c., when Eridu was first inhabited. The prehistoric Ubaid culture gradually developed in Eridu and at several other sites, including Ur. Although no buildings from this period have been uncovered at Ur, the number and variety of Ubaid pottery types found there indicate a sizable population. The next prehistoric periods, Uruk and Jemdet Nasr, are also represented at Ur by pottery and fragmentary walls.

At the very dawn of recorded history there were three important centers in the part of Mesopotamia known as Sumer: Kish, Ur, and Uruk (biblical Erech). From the Early Dynastic I period several hundred archaic cuneiform tablets have been recovered at Ur.

One document relates that Mes-anne-pada of Ur defeated Agga of Kish and thus established the 1st Dynasty of Ur ca 2600 b.c. Mes-anne-pada and his son Mes-kiag-nunna are both mentioned in later chronicles as kings of this dynasty, and the former name has been found on several seal impressions at Ur. This Ur dynasty is the first historical dynasty in Mesopotamian history known from both later chronicles and contemporaneous archeological materials (see IV below). After about a century of hegemony, however, the 1st Dynasty of Ur fell to the superior power of Gilgamesh of Uruk. There followed a long period in Sumerian history, including a 2nd Dynasty of Ur, for which no names or events survive.

For an illustrious period of nearly a century the kings (or governors) of Lagash and Girsu, of whom Gudea is best known, ruled Ur. Gutian invaders cut this period short, but Utu-hegal of Uruk eventually repulsed them ca 2120 b.c. A few years later Ur-Nammu of Ur defeated Utu-hegal to found the 3rd Dynasty of Ur, which lasted until ca 2000 b.c. An able general and administrator, Ur-Nammu conquered Lagash and extended his power over Nipur, Uruk, Adab, and Larsa. He also built or rebuilt temples and ziggurats all over Sumer, repaired canals, and restored Ur’s foreign trade. He is credited with the first known law code in history. Unfortunately the extant text of this code is brief, containing only a large part of the prologue and five short paragraphs of law.

From a broken tablet describing Ur-Nammu’s arrival in the underworld it appears that he died

defending Ur against the Guti. In any event, his sixteen-year reign was followed by the forty-eight-year reign of his son Šulgi. Šulgi extended the royal power of Ur over Elam to the east and even over Asshur to the far north. His queen, an able woman with the Semitic name of Abisimti, continued as dowager under Šulgi's successors. Šulgi, like Ur-Nam-mu undertook many building projects throughout his realm.

A shell-inlay mosaic set in bitumen on the end of a lyre sound-box. Celebratory scenes (from top to bottom) show: a bull-man wrestling with two bulls, a lion and a dog acting as servants, a bear dancing to a lyre played by a donkey, and a scorpion-man walking in front of a gazelle who carries two drinking glasses (25th cent b.c., from the king's grave) (courtesy of the University Museum, University of Pennsylvania)

Šulgi was succeeded by his two sons Amar-Sin and Šu-Sin, each of whom reigned for nine years. They both served apprenticeships as governors of lesser cities during Šulgi's reign. Both Amar-Sin and Šu-Sin faced increasing migrations of Amorites, which virtually amounted to invasions of whole tribes. Abraham's ancestors probably came to Ur from their original home in Haran at this time. During the rule of Ibbi-Sin, who followed Šu-Sin, droves of Elamites joined the Amorites. Although Ibbi-Sin held on to his throne for twenty-four years, the power of Ur waned, and the cities that it once controlled were forced one by one to fend for themselves. With the downfall of the 3rd Dynasty of Ur came the rise of the Amorite city-states, which soon led to the 1st Dynasty of Babylon and its illustrious king Hammurabi. His accession marks the end of Sumerian political control of Mesopotamia.

The 3rd Dynasty of Ur was the most prosperous and most literate of the Sumerian period, if not of the entire history of Mesopotamia. A century of relative peace allowed business, agriculture, and the arts to develop. Ur's population is conservatively estimated at about 300,000. Roughly fifteen thousand cuneiform tablets have been published of the approximately 100,000 excavated from many cities during this period. They contain information regarding every conceivable aspect of life; family affairs, government, religion, business, agriculture, medicine, law procedures, arts and crafts, building, mathematics, and various types of literature.

Ur was never again a leading city, although the cult of the tutelary deity, the moon-god Nanna, always retained an important place in the life of Sumer and

later Babylonia. Records indicate building in Ur by Old Babylonian, Kassite, Assyrian, Chaldean, and even Persian monarchs. And the city must have had a sizable population down to the time of Cyrus. The latest dated tablet found there is from the twelfth year of Alexander the Great. Afterward, and possibly largely because the river shifted its course, the region disappeared from history.

### III. Ziggurat

The ziggurat of Ur is the best-preserved example in Mesopotamia. The various levels of the terrace indicate that it had antecedents during the Uruk and Early Dynastic periods, but they remain buried beneath the core of the Ur III structure. Ur-Nammu began and Šulgi finished the Ur III ziggurat (2100 b.c.), which was the prototype of many built at this time in other major cities controlled by the kings of the 3rd Dynasty of Ur. A stele celebrating the construction of this ziggurat was restored from many broken pieces found in the debris at its base. It pictures Ur-Nammu receiving instructions (or authorization) for the project from the moon-god Nanna and his consort Nin-gal.

The Ur-Nammu ziggurat apparently consisted of three stages, with a temple to Nanna on the top. The overall measurements were 62 by 43 by 20 m (203 by 141 by 66 ft). A long central staircase and two long flanking staircases led to a gatehouse on the first stage. Smaller staircases led to the temple.

The function of the ziggurat is by no means clearly understood. It was neither a tomb nor an observatory. The separation between the temple at the top and that at the base might have represented the distance between the heavenly and earthly residences of the deity.

### IV. Royal Tombs

Perhaps the best-known discoveries at Ur are the treasures from the royal and private graves and tombs. Surely they are among the richest finds in the history of archeology. These burials span the Early Dynastic and Sargonid periods, including the 1st Dynasty of Ur. A team found them during the first season in 1922 while searching for the Nin-Mah Temple. But digging was suspended until 1926, when the workmen were better trained and more information was available.

By Woolley's reckoning there were over eighteen hundred private graves and tombs and sixteen royal tombs, including six "death pits" that contained mass burials of retainers. Several of the so-called private tombs, however, rivaled even the royal

tombs in the wealth of their funerary furniture. Three of the royal tombs are identified with specific persons (Mes-anne-pada, A-kalam-dug, and Šubad [see picture in Ornament]) by inscribed seals and vessels. Nearly all the royal tombs were plundered by robbers in antiquity, but the quantity of the remaining gold and silver vessels, jewelry, and other richly inlaid furniture testifies both to the skill of the ancient craftsmen and to the wealth and power of the aristocracy, since excellent techniques of working stone and metal were employed, and the raw materials were imported from great distances.

The mass burials of the death pits pose intriguing questions. Some of them contained chariots and oxen as well as humans, and one contained seven men and sixty-eight women. At first it was thought that these burials were related to the celebration of the “sacred marriage” at the annual New Year Festival. Now, however, they are thought to reflect a time when the servants of the deceased monarch were put to death and buried with him so that he would be properly equipped in the next world. In this respect the burials have parallels in Egypt, where the furniture was customarily included even in private graves; profuse wall reliefs and paintings are also common to the tombs of both Ur and Egypt. In fact, excavations at Saqqârah from the 1st Dynasty of Egypt have shown sacrificial customs similar to those at Ur.

#### V. Relationship of Ur to Abraham

Since the discovery and excavation of Tell el-Muqayyar, particularly by Sir Leonard Woolley, it has popularly been identified with Ur of the Chaldees. According to the tradition which Stephen accepted, Abraham was in Mesopotamia before he lived in Haran (Acts 7:2), further described as “the land of the Chaldeans” (v 3). In Gen. 12:1 God said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house.” The word translated “country” is more accurately rendered “land of your birth” (so RSV in 11:28). This is followed by the statement, “Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran” (v 4). Accordingly, some scholars have held that the call of Abraham, therefore his origin, was in Harran. Hence the connection with Ur of the Chaldeans is a later tradition.

But Gen. 11:28 indicates that Haran (or Terah?) was born in Ur of the Chaldeans, as were Abram and Nahor. Abraham’s wife Sarah came from the same place, and Abraham and Sarah accompanied Terah and his family from Ur of the Chaldeans

“to go into the land of Canaan,” but they settled at Harran, possibly because of Terah’s ill-health, which eventuated in his death (11:31f). The call of Abraham, it would seem, preceded the decision to leave Ur of the Chaldeans, since the goal was Canaan, not Harran (cf. Gen. 15:7).

Some scholars (e.g., Gordon) have questioned whether “Ur of the Chaldeans” was in southern Mesopotamia, since the Sumerian city of Ur, identified with Tell el-Muqayyar, is never called “Ur of the Chaldeans” in ancient texts. It is simply “Ur”. Therefore, it is reasoned, “Ur of the Chaldeans” must have been used to distinguish it from the better-known Ur in southern Mesopotamia. But if not there, then where? A Sumerian word *uru*, written with another logogram, means “city,” and was used of a number of cities (much as we might say, “I’m going to the city,” meaning any nearby city not named but understood by the hearer). “Ur of the Chaldeans” could mean a city occupied by or in the region of the Chaldeans.

A region in eastern Turkey, in the general vicinity of Lake Van, was occupied by the Khaldi (or Chaldeans; other scholars claim that this was the name of the deity, not of the people, who are more properly called Urartians. The route from this region to Canaan by way of Harran would be reasonable, whereas the most likely route from the Sumerian Ur, it is claimed, would not go by way of Harran. An older identification of Ur was Urfa, a city 35 km (20 mi) NW of Harran, but, as has been pointed out, the linguistic problems in equating Ur with Urfa are formidable. It should also be noted that Khaldi was an Indo-Aryan deity and the Urartians were not Semites; Terah and his family were clearly Semites (Gen. 11:10).

The Kaldû, on the other hand, are well known from antiquity, and while it is true that the name often refers to the Neo-Babylonian (or Chaldean) kings, it also can refer to the people of the Sea-Land at least as early as the 10th cent b.c. Ashurnasirpal II (883–859 b.c.) placed the Kaldû S of Babylonia (ARAB, I, § 470), and Shalmaneser III spoke of the sea of Kaldû, “which they call Bitter Sea,” i.e., the Persian Gulf (ARAB, I § 641).

Thus the biblical evidence strongly favors the location of Ur of the Chaldeans in a region such as Sumerian Ur, although to claim that this identification is certain would be going beyond the evidence.

Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, (electronic edition.; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001, c1979-1988).