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Abstract Idrimi of Alalakh lived in Syria about a century after Abraham and left an autobiographical inscription that is the only such item uncovered archaeologically from Middle Bronze Age Syro-Palestine. The inscription of Idrimi and the Book of Abraham share a number of parallel features and motifs. Some of the parallels are a result of similar experiences in their lives and some are a result of coming from a similar culture and time.

ABRAHAM AND IDRIMI

JOHN GEE



Comparing examples of literature produced in the same time and place is useful in a number of ways. Such a comparison can reveal something about that time and place and can also highlight distinctive features of individual authors.

In order to compare the Book of Abraham with other literature from its time and place, we need to first establish when and where Abraham lived. Fortunately, research on both the time¹ and place² of Abraham has already been done and needs only to be summarized.

Let us start with place. In the Bible, Abraham is told to leave his native land (Genesis 12:1); later he sends his servant back to his native land (Genesis 24:4-7)³—“back to,” as the Hebrew text states, Aram-Naharaim and the city of Nahor (Genesis 24:10).⁴ Aram-Naharaim (“Aram of the two rivers”), in all its biblical attestations, is located in upper Syria, probably in the land bounded by the great western bend of the Euphrates and the Balikh or Khabur Rivers.

With the place identified, it is relatively easy to determine the time. Historically Egyptians were in the area of Aram-Naharaim during only three time periods: in the Middle Kingdom during the reigns of Sesostriis III and Amenemhet III,⁵ during the New Kingdom between the reigns of Thutmosis I and Amenhotep III,⁶ and during the reign of Ptolemy III.⁷ Ptolemaic times are much too late for Abraham, since the literature mentions Abraham before that time. Situating Abraham in the New Kingdom allows no time for Joseph and the Exodus story. The Middle Kingdom dates (2000-1800 BC) fit best for Abraham.

With an approximate time and place resolved for Abraham, it should be relatively simple to compare the Book of Abraham with other autobiographies of the same time and place to see if the literary forms are similar.

Unfortunately, only one such autobiography is known to exist.⁸ It belongs to Idrimi, the ruler of the town of Alalakh, thus placing him in the vicinity

of Abraham’s homeland. A statue of Idrimi covered with an inscription was discovered in 1939 at Tell Atchana/Alalakh in Syria, and the text was published in 1949.⁹ “It has become one of the principal sources for studying the history of Syro-Palestine in the middle of the second millennium B.C.E.”¹⁰ Fortunately, Idrimi’s autobiography compares well with Abraham’s autobiography in both subject and form, even though Idrimi’s autobiography dates about two hundred years later.¹¹

These ancient works are called autobiographies because they are presented as first-person narratives. Nevertheless, we do not know if such ancient autobiographical texts were written by the individuals themselves, dictated to scribes, or ghostwritten by scribes. Ancient Egyptian autobiographies, for example, can often be so formulaic that one might be forgiven for wondering if the individual is reflected in the text at all.¹² In other words, it is unlikely that Idrimi carved the words on his statue, but he may have been directly responsible for the content of the text.

Similarities

The Book of Abraham and the autobiography of Idrimi both deal with similar topics. Abraham’s autobiography records that he had to leave his homeland and travel to another land with his family. Later he left that land and traveled again in hopes of finding a place for himself and his posterity. Likewise, Idrimi’s autobiography also relates that he had to leave his homeland and travel to another land with his family. Later he left that land and traveled again, hoping to find a place for himself and his posterity. His journey ended at Alalakh, where he was made king and reigned for thirty years.

Not only are the general themes of the two autobiographies similar, but they also open in a similar manner. The first verse of the Book of Abraham divides neatly into four clauses, parallels to each of which appear at the beginning of the autobiography of Idrimi:

Opposite page, left: At the time Abraham begins his travels, he must have been a young man. This image portrays him as a vibrant, young man. *Abraham*, by Emily Gordon. Used by permission. Opposite page, right: Statue of Idrimi. Late Bronze Age/Syrian, 16th century BC from Tell Atchana (ancient Alalakh), modern Turkey. © The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved.

FROM THE EDITOR:

Thanks to John Gee we might now be able to say of Abraham, “He’s been there and done that.” Only a John Gee would have noticed the close parallels between Abraham of the book of Genesis and Idrimi, a ruler in northern Syria during the Middle Bronze Age. So unheralded and unique are the parallels that Gee has found that we had to commission a new map just to situate the places into their geographical context.



This map traces the journey of Abraham from Ur to Haran to Shechem and Idrimi's journey, about two hundred years later, from Aleppo to Emar to Alalakh. Map by Bob Cronan, Lucidity Info Design, LLC.

"In the land of the Chaldeans, at the residence of my fathers, I, Abraham, saw that it was needful for me to obtain another place of residence" (Abraham 1:1). We will consider each of these clauses in turn.

"In the land of the Chaldeans"

The first clause in the Book of Abraham specifies the general geographic location at which the action initially takes place. For Abraham that location is "the land of the Chaldeans"; for Idrimi it is "in the city of Aleppo" (*ina al Halab*^{ki}).¹³ Contemporary Egyptian autobiographies do not record the location where the action takes place because the Egyptian officials generally remained in one place. Abraham and Idrimi both moved about, and the major portion of their careers did not occur in the place where they were born and raised. This means that both need to report how it was that they ended their lives in a different place and requires them to specify the place where the initial action takes place. The similarity of their life stories explains why both autobiographies mention the location where the initial action occurs.

"At the residence of my fathers"

Abraham not only designates the land but also explains that it was at his ancestral home. Idrimi likewise specifies that the action occurred "in the house of my fathers" (*bīt abiya*).¹⁴ This phrase is a typical expression for an "ancestral home."¹⁵ The family was extremely important in the ancient world. As Idrimi's autobiography shows, he went to stay with

his mother's family when he left Aleppo. What will distinguish Abraham's record as unusual is that he later leaves all his family and strikes out on his own.

"I, Abraham"

Abraham identifies himself simply by stating just his name. Idrimi begins the same with "I, Idrimi" (*anāku Idrimī*)¹⁶ but adds his father's name and the names of the gods that he worships: "son of Ilimilimma, servant of Teshub, Hebat, and Ishtar, lady of Alalakh, my lady."¹⁷ Abraham omits the names of his fathers and their gods, perhaps because he has rejected the local gods and his fathers' worship of them (Abraham 1:5) and because his father has tried "to take



The names Abraham and Idrimi as they might have appeared in cuneiform.

away [his] life" (Abraham 1:30). Introducing an autobiography with this sort of identification clause (i.e., "I, Abraham") is common in West Semitic inscriptions but is not known in Mesopotamian inscriptions until Neo-Assyrian times under the influence of Aramaic. This demonstrates that Abraham is not from Mesopotamia.¹⁸

"Saw that it was needful for me to obtain another place of residence"

Idrimi gives his reasons for departure from Aleppo as follows: "an incident occurred and we fled to the people of the city of Emar, my mother's brethren, and we dwelt in the city of Emar."¹⁹ Idrimi does not elaborate on the incident that led to their abrupt departure. The term used, *mašiktu*, refers to something bad or a bad reputation.²⁰ The late distinguished Assyriologist, A. Leo Oppenheim, referred to this as "guarded understatement" on Idrimi's part.²¹ This masking of mistakes is typical for ancient Near Eastern literature. Abraham goes into much more detail about why he left (Abraham 1:5-30) but only touches on how his own actions precipitated his near sacrifice (Abraham 1:5, 7). Idrimi "fled"; his

The Autobiography of Idrimi Translation

1-14 In Aleppo, my ancestral home, a hostile [incident] occurred so that we had to flee to the people of Emar, my mother's relatives, and stay there. My older brothers also stayed with me, but none of them had the plans I had. So I, Idrimi, the son of Ilimilimma, devotee of IM, Ĥebat, and my lady Ištār, lady of Alalāḥ, thinking to myself, "Whoever <seeks> his patrimony is a great nobleman, but whoever [remains] among the citizens of Emar is a vassal," took my horse, chariot, and groom and went away.

14-20 I crossed over the desert and came among the Sutu warriors. I spent the night with them in my covered chariot. The next day I set forth and went to Canaan. The town of Ammiya is located in Canaan.

20-27 People from Aleppo, Mukišḥe, Ni'i, and Nuḥašše were living in Ammiya, and when they realized that I was their lord's son, they gathered to me. I said the following: "I have become chief, I have been appointed."

27-29 Then I stayed among the Ĥapiru warriors seven years. I released birds and practiced extispicy.

29-34 In the seventh year IM became favorably inclined toward me, so I made ships and had *auxiliary* troops board them and proceeded via the sea to Mukišḥe. I reached land at Mount Casius and went ashore.

35-42 Now, when my country heard of me they brought me large cattle and small cattle, and in one day, in unison, the countries of Ni'i, Nuḥašše, Mukišḥe, and my own city Alalāḥ became reconciled to me. When my allies heard, they came to me. And when they concluded a treaty with me, I established them truly as my allies.

42-51 Now for seven years Barattarna, the mighty king, the king of the Hurrian warriors, was hostile to me. In the seventh year I sent Anwanda to Barattarna, the mighty king, the king of the Hurrian warriors, and told him of the treaties of my ancestors when they were allied with them, and that our actions were pleasing to the (former) kings of the Hurrian



Idrimi's autobiography was carved on his statue. Ancient Near Eastern cuneiform inscriptions on statues and bas-reliefs often continue across the sculpted features.

warriors for they had made a binding agreement between them.

51-58 The mighty king heard of the treaties of our predecessors and the agreement made between them, and with the treaty they read to him the words of the treaty in detail. So on account of our treaty terms he received my tribute. Then I *pr<esented>* the (*gestures of*) loyalty, which were considerable, I made great sacrifices, and restored to him a lost estate. I swore to him a binding oath as a loyal vassal.

58-63 Then I became king. Kings from all around attacked me in Alalāḥ. Just as they had heaped up on the ground the *corpses* of (my) ancestors, *corpse* upon *corpse*, so I, too, caused (their *corpses*) to be heaped up on the ground thus putting an end to their warfare.

64-77 Then I took troops and attacked Hatti-land. As for the seven cities under their protection, namely, Paššaḥe, Damarut-re'i, Ĥulahḥan, Zise, Ie, Uluzina, and Zaruna, these I destroyed. Hatti-land did not assemble and did not march against me, so I did what I wanted. I took captives from them and took their property, valuables, and possessions and distributed them to my auxiliaries, kinsmen, and friends. Together with them I took (booty).

77-86 Then I returned to Mukišḥe and entered my capital Alalāḥ. With the captives, goods, property, and possessions which I brought down from Hatti I had a palace built. I made my regime like the regime of kings. I made my brothers like royal

brothers, my sons like their sons, and my relatives like their relatives. The inhabitants who were in my land I made to dwell securely, and even those who did not have a dwelling I settled.

86-91 Then I organized my land, and made my cities like they were before. Just as our ancestors had established regular *rites* for the gods of Alalāḥ, and just as our forefathers had performed sacrifices, I constantly performed them. These things I did, and I entrusted them to my son IM-nirari.

92-98 Whoever *effaces* this statue of mine, may the Heaven god curse him, may the Earth below destroy his progeny, may the gods of heaven and earth *diminish* his kingship. Let them have him executed (lit., measure him by a rope). Whoever changes or erases it, may IM, the lord of heaven and earth, and the great gods extirpate his progeny and seed from his land.

98-101 Šarruwa is the official scribe. He has written, copied and reviewed (the text). And now may the gods of heaven and earth keep Šarruwa, the scribe, who has written (the text of) this statue for him, in good health; may they protect him and be his *guardian*. May Šamaš, lord of the upper and nether worlds, lord of the spirits, be his *protector*.

102-4 I reigned for 30 years. I inscribed my achievements upon my statue. Let [the people read it] and continually bless me.

Edward L. Greenstein and David Marcus, "The Akkadian Inscription of Idrimi," *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* 8 (1976): 67-68, italics in original, line numbers corrected. Used by permission. Greenstein has updated excerpts of the narrative portion in "Autobiographies from Western Asia," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Jack M. Sasson (New York: Macmillan, 1995), 4:2426.

account employs a verb (*ḥalāqu*) that is normally used of runaway slaves, deserting soldiers, and fugitive criminals.²² Abraham says simply that he “left” (Abraham 2:4) or “departed” (Abraham 2:14).

These four clauses are found near the beginning of both autobiographies, but their order is not necessarily the same in various translations.²³

Other Similarities

Both Abraham’s and Idrimi’s autobiographies report their journeys through Canaan. For Idrimi, Alalakh is part of Canaan,²⁴ and so Canaan seems to have included the whole Levant. Abraham, after leaving Ur, dwelt more within the southern end of the land of Canaan (Abraham 2:15-18).

Both Abraham and Idrimi emphasize in their autobiographies that their travel to their new residence was the result of divine inspiration; for Abraham it was the Lord speaking to him (Abraham 1:16) and appearing to him (Abraham 2:6); for Idrimi it was the result of consulting omens.²⁵

Both Abraham and Idrimi refer in their autobiographies back to promises made to their ancestors for whom they have records. Idrimi refers to his ancestors’ treaties in dealing with the Hurrian king Barattarna.²⁶ “The biographical inscription of Idrimi states clearly that good relations, which formerly obtained between his ancestors and the kings of Ḫurri, were interrupted for a time until Idrimi returned to the fold.”²⁷ Abraham refers back to the “records of the fathers” that were “preserved in mine own hands” (Abraham 1:31).

Both Abraham and Idrimi describe in their autobiographies that they worshipped the way that their fathers did. Idrimi emphasizes the performance of the sacrifices,²⁸ while Abraham makes the distinction that he worshipped not as his immediate fathers did but as his more distant ancestors did (Abraham 1:2-7).

Both Abraham’s and Idrimi’s autobiographies deal in covenants. Idrimi’s inscription has been used to show how covenants worked in the ancient Near East.²⁹ One of Idrimi’s covenants, found on another tablet from Alalakh,³⁰ deals mainly with the return of fugitives; this is somewhat ironic since Idrimi himself was a fugitive, as was Abraham. Abraham records a covenant that God made with him (Abraham 2:6-11).

Thus both autobiographies are shaped around similar themes. While their lives have certain similarities, they also have distinctive differences. Yet the



Reverse side of clay tablet with stamp seal of Idrimi on the middle portion. © The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved.

autobiographical form seems to require the mention of certain topics, including (1) continuity with the past tradition through references to the house, gods, and records of their fathers and (2) piety to the gods they serve by describing their explicit service and following the revelation they receive from their god.

Wider Contrasts

According to Edward Greenstein and David Marcus, “The story of Idrimi is unlike Mesopotamian literature both in content and style.”³¹ The story, as Oppenheim describes it, is “without parallel in texts of this type from Mesopotamia and Egypt.”³² This led him to conclude that “all this seems to me to bespeak the existence of a specific literary tradition, totally different in temper and scope from that of the ancient Near East.”³³ Thus Oppenheim considered the autobiography of Idrimi to be unusual even for the ancient Near East. But the Book of Abraham belongs to the same specific literary tradition as Idrimi’s autobiography. More inscriptions like Idrimi’s from Syria dating to the Middle Bronze Age would enable a better comparison, but it is at least worth asking, How did Joseph Smith manage to publish in the Book of Abraham a story that closely matched a Middle-Bronze-Age Syrian autobiography that would not be discovered for nearly a hundred years? ■



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NOTES

1. For time, see Kerry Muhlestein and John Gee, “An Egyptian Context for the Sacrifice of Abraham,” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 20/2 (2011): 72.
2. Paul Y. Hoskisson, “Where Was Ur of the Chaldees?” in *The Pearl of Great Price: Revelations from God*, ed. Donl Peterson (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1989), 119–36; John Gee and Stephen D. Ricks, “Historical Plausibility: The Historicity of the Book of Abraham as a Case Study,” in *Historicity and the Latter-day Saint Scriptures*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2001), 69–72.
3. Both the Wycliffe and the Matthew Bibles are more accurate in their translations of Genesis 24:7: “fro the lond of my birthe” and “from the lande where I was borne,” respectively.
4. The King James translation “Mesopotamia” for Aram-Naharaim is misleading because “Mesopotamia” today usually denotes the land between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers—that is, Babylonia and Sumeria.
5. James P. Allen, “The Historical Inscription of Khnumhotep at Dahshur: Preliminary Report,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 352 (November 2008): 29–39; John Gee, “Overlooked Evidence for Sesostriis III’s Foreign Policy,” *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 41 (2004): 26–30.
6. Nicolas Grimal, *A History of Ancient Egypt* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 213–16; Donald B. Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 148–77.
7. Günther Hölbl, *Geschichte des Ptolemäerreiches* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1994), 46–50.
8. Edward L. Greenstein, “Autobiographies from Western Asia,” in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Jack M. Sasson (New York: Macmillan, 1995), 4:2421–32. Note that the inscription of Azatiwada is significantly later.
9. A. Leo Oppenheim, “The Story of Idrimi, King of Alalakh,” in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, ed. James B. Pritchard, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 557; Sidney Smith, *The Statue of Idrimi* (London: British Institute of Archaeology in Ankara, 1949).
10. Edward L. Greenstein and David Marcus, “The Akkadian Inscription of Idrimi,” *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* 8 (1976): 59.
11. M. B. Rowton, “The Date of Hammurabi,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 17/2 (1958): 105; Donald B. Redford, “A Gate Inscription from Karnak and Egyptian Involvement in Western Asia during the Early 18th Dynasty,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 99/2 (1979): 278.
12. For the formulas, see Elmar Edel, “Untersuchungen zur Phraseologie der ägyptischen Inschriften des Alten Reiches,” *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Instituts für Ägyptische Altertumskunde in Kairo* 13 (1944): 1–90; Jozef Janssen, *De traditioneele egyptische autobiografie vóór het nieuwe rijk* (Leiden: Brill, 1946); Nicole Kloth, *Die (auto-)biographischen Inschriften des ägyptischen Alten Reiches: Untersuchungen zu Phraseologie und Entwicklung* (Hamburg: Buske, 2002).
13. Inscription of Idrimi, line 3, author’s translations throughout. The Akkadian version is conveniently located in Greenstein and Marcus, “Akkadian Inscription of Idrimi,” 64–66; see sidebar for their translation, 67–68. For the reading “city,” see the comments in Greenstein and Marcus, “Akkadian Inscription of Idrimi,” 69, under *āl Alalakh*.
14. Inscription of Idrimi, line 3.
15. Greenstein and Marcus, “Akkadian Inscription of Idrimi,” 69–70.
16. Inscription of Idrimi, line 1.
17. Inscription of Idrimi, lines 2–3.
18. Greenstein and Marcus, “Akkadian Inscription of Idrimi,” 68–69.
19. Inscription of Idrimi, lines 4–6.
20. *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary (CAD)*, M 1:323–24; *Concise Dictionary of Akkadian*, 199; see also the commentary in Greenstein and Marcus, “Akkadian Inscription of Idrimi,” 70.
21. A. Leo Oppenheim, review of *Statue of Idrimi*, by Sidney Smith, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 14/3 (1955): 199.
22. *CAD*, H 38.
23. See, for example, Greenstein and Marcus, “Akkadian Inscription of Idrimi,” 67.
24. Inscription of Idrimi, lines 18–20, 38; see also Greenstein and Marcus, “Akkadian Inscription of Idrimi,” 74.
25. Inscription of Idrimi, lines 28–30.
26. Inscription of Idrimi, lines 42–51.
27. Michael C. Astour, “Ḫattušiliš, Ḫalab, and Ḫanigalbat,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 31/2 (1972): 107.
28. Inscription of Idrimi, lines 86–91.
29. Erhard Gerstenberger, “Covenant and Commandment,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 84/1 (1965): 40, 47.
30. Alalakh Tablet 3, in D. J. Wiseman, *The Alalakh Tablets* (London: The British Institute of Archaeology at Ankara, 1953), 31–32; Erica Reiner, trans., “Treaty between Idrimi and Pilliya,” in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 532; Richard S. Hess, “Agreement between Pillia and Idrimi,” in *The Context of Scripture*, ed. William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 2:331–32. See also Rowton, “Date of Hammurabi,” 105; Donald L. Magnetti, “The Function of the Oath in the Ancient Near Eastern International Treaty,” *American Journal of International Law* 72/4 (1978): 819; Redford, “Gate Inscription from Karnak,” 278; Eva von Dassow, “Archives of Alalakh IV in Archaeological Context,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 338 (2005): 22.
31. Greenstein and Marcus, “Akkadian Inscription of Idrimi,” 64.
32. Oppenheim, review of *Statue of Idrimi*, 199.
33. Oppenheim review of *Statue of Idrimi*, 200.