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A New Look at the Pearl of Great Price: Part 7: The Unknown Abraham (Continued)

Author(s): Hugh Nibley

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The Unknown Abraham

A New Look at The Pearl of Great Price Part 7 (Continued)

By Dr. Hugh Nibley

● Abraham's particular objections, according to the Pearl of Great Price account, were to idolatry and human sacrifice, which went together in the system, ". . . offering up their children unto their dumb idols, and hearkened not unto my voice, but endeavored to take away my life. . . ." (Abr. 1:7.) According to the traditions, "in the days of Terah the people began to sacrifice their children to the Devils and to worship images."⁶⁰ In one account Abraham sees a vision of human sacrifice on an altar and receives the surprising explanation: "This is God's temple, but the image in it is my wrath against the people who sprung from me, and the officiating priest is he who allures people to murderous sacrifices."⁶¹ The episode might almost be illustrated by our own Facsimile 1. It was in the days of Serug, Abraham's great-grandfather, that the people "began to look upon the stars, and began to prognosticate by them and to make divination, and to make their sons and daughters pass through the fires."⁶² So here they were, as the Book of Abraham reports, "offering up their children unto their dumb idols (Abr. 1:7), with Abraham protesting and thereby getting himself into serious trouble. Nimrod's sacrifice of 70,000 babies may well be an echo of the practice, and have nothing to do with the story of Herod.

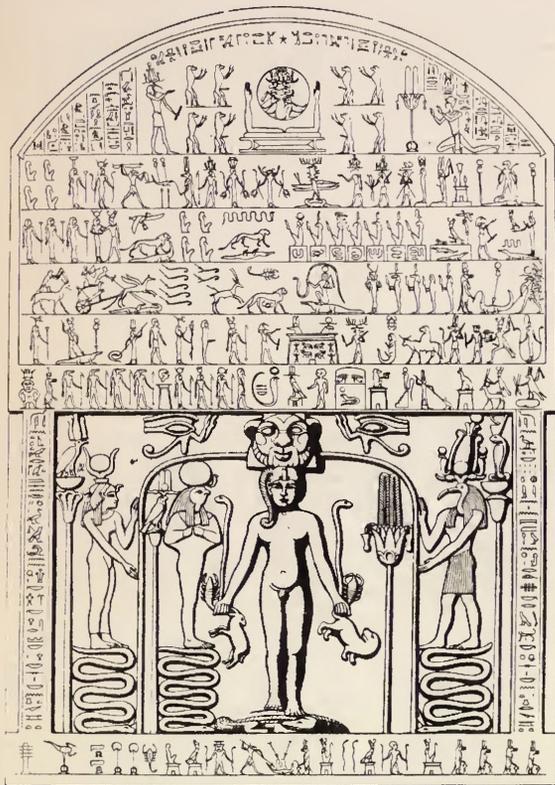
A recent study of J. G. Fervier quotes an ancient source describing how the sacrificing was carried out, and traces the survival of the atrocious practices among Semitic peoples right down to the end of the ancient world. Indeed, there has been considerable discussion in recent years as to whether the sacrifice of Isaac is not itself clear evidence of a custom of human sacrifice prevailing in Abraham's time, a custom to which he put an end.⁶³ As the rite is described in the Fervier document, the parents would "hand the child to a priest who would dispatch it in a mystic manner, i.e. according to a special rite; after the child had passed down the length of a special trench . . . then he placed the victim on the extended hands of the divine statue, from which it rolled into a brazier to be consumed by fire," while the crowd

went wild.⁶⁴ It is not a pretty picture. Indeed, Albright finds the picture in Egypt shortly after this time "singularly repulsive. . . . Ritual prostitution . . . was rampant. . . . Snake worship and human sacrifice were rife."⁶⁴

Abraham's two attacks on the idols are both very well attested in the documents. In one story the hero at the age of 10 or 12 or 20 or 40 or 50 or 60 goes forth to sell the idols that his father and brother have made, in order to help out the stringent finances of the family; in discussing things with his customers, he points out to them the folly of worshipping "dumb idols" made by men and ends up converting some of them and even dragging the idols in the dirt.⁶⁵ In the other story Abraham arises by night and burns all the idols in the shop, and even the house and family! This, according to some, was when the lukewarm Nahor, the brother of Abraham, who had announced that he would wait to see who came out on top in the struggle between Abraham and Nimrod and declare his allegiance to the winner, was burned to death trying to put out the fire.⁶⁶ But the most common version has Abraham plead sickness when the family goes off to the great festival at Nimrod's palace; and being left behind and finding himself alone with the idols, he destroys them. Terah on his return is enraged, and Nimrod even more so when he learns what has happened; but Abraham answers all questions by insisting that the idols fought among themselves and destroyed each other—if the objection to that is that the idea is impossible and absurd, then Abraham's accusers have called the idols helpless with their own mouths.⁶⁷ This is the sort of clever Aggadah that the schoolmen love; in one tradition Abraham goes right into the national shrine and smashes idols;⁶⁸ the soberest version is that of Maimonides, that Abraham when he was 40 "began to refute the inhabitants of Ur of the Chaldees. . . . He broke the images and commenced to instruct the people. When he had prevailed over them with arguments, the king sought to slay him. He was miraculously saved and emigrated to Haran."⁶⁹ The stories of selling the idols

or smashing them in the shop or the shrine may be regarded as aetiological tales (Aggadah), explaining how it was that Abraham came to argue with the people, and how he finally came to his dramatic confrontation with Nimrod. Everything leads up to that.

At first Nimrod tried to silence Abraham by locking him up in prison to starve to death. There Gabriel sustained him for ten days, or an entire year—or for three years or seven or ten.⁷⁰ Maimonides says that Abraham continued to combat false doctrine while in prison, so that the king finally had to banish him to Syria after confiscating all his property.⁷¹ But the usual story is that Abraham was taken out of prison



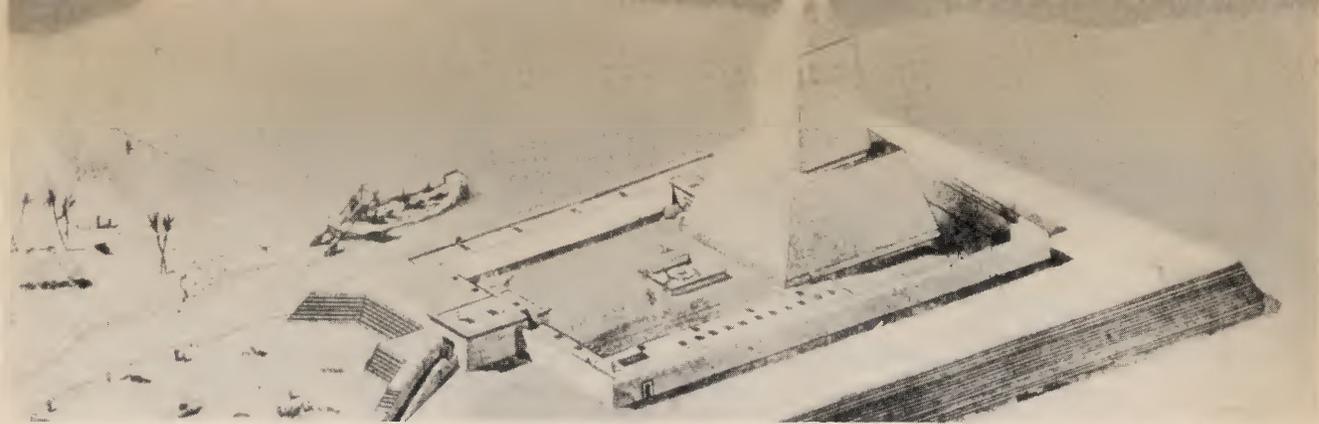
The Metternich Stele, containing dramatic episodes from the childhood of Horus that closely match legendary accounts of the infancy of Abraham.

only to be delivered for sacrifice. It is said that with the aid of Jectan, a sympathetic official in the court of Nimrod, 12 of Abraham's companions who were in the prison with him were able to escape to the mountains, "until the anger of the populace should cool," but Abraham refused to escape with them.⁷² Abraham was to pay for his opposition to the local cult by himself becoming a sacrificial victim of that cult. According to the Book of Abraham, he was not the first to be punished in such a manner, for "this priest had offered upon this altar three virgins at one time . . . because of their virtue; they would not bow down to worship gods of wood or of stone, therefore

they were killed upon this altar, and it was done after the manner of the Egyptians" (Abr. 1:11); accordingly "the priests laid violence upon me, that they might slay me also, as they did those virgins upon this altar. . . ." (Abr. 1:12.) The three virgins, we are assured, were "of the royal descent directly from the loins of Ham . . . and it was done after the manner of the Egyptians." (Abr. 1:11.) It is necessary to specify this last point repeatedly, because the drama is unfolding not in Egypt but in Canaan, and indeed the particular rites we are discussing seem to have been common to Egypt and Syria if not the whole Near East.⁷³ What rites? Rites in which young women were obviously supposed to act as hierodules.

One of the oldest Abraham sources reports that it was Nimrod's courtesans who persuaded him to get the best of Abraham by inviting him to attend a great year-feast that the king and his court were wont to celebrate in the territory of Koutha-Rya, but that Abraham refused to come, pleading sickness.⁷⁴ This gives us the larger ritual setting of the drama—the now well-known year-rites in which we are on more or less familiar ground. Then while Abraham was in prison for his recalcitrance, the courtesans and the court again met for the year-feast, and this time they advised Nimrod to make a sacrifice of Abraham by throwing him into an immense brazier.⁷⁴ It is interesting that in the Egyptian royal rites it is the lady and courtesan Hathor who advises the king to sacrifice his enemies: As the throat of the victim is cut, Horus (the king) says: "I have slain thine enemies who are massacred by thy knife . . . slain upon thine altar!" To this the lady replies: "Your Majesty! I burn . . . thine enemies. This is Hathor . . . the Lady of Heaven, *Wsr*t the burning flame against thine enemies."⁷⁵

Classical writers have described Egyptian sacrificial rites as witnessed in various lands. In Ethiopia, Achilles Tatius reports, a virgin with hands bound behind was led around an altar by a priest chanting an Egyptian hymn; then "all retired from the altar at a distance," the maiden was tied down, and a sword was first plunged into her heart and then slashed her lower abdomen from side to side, after which the remains were burned, cut to pieces, and eaten.⁷⁶ The Pseudo-Plutarch tells how the first Pharaoh in bad years was ordered by the oracle to sacrifice his own daughter and in grief threw himself into the Nile.⁷⁷ This may be an indication of the antiquity of the rite. As Heliodorus explains it, the Egyptians of the late period selected their sacrificial virgins from among people of non-Egyptian birth, and so the Greek heroine of Heliodorus's romance is chosen to be sacrificed to Osiris. The rule was that men were sacri-



The famous shrine of the sun god Re at Abusir. The sun-stone stands upon an artificial mound or hill, before which stands an altar. The setting is like that described in Abraham 1:8-10.

ficed to the sun (so Abraham, in Abr. 1:9), women to the moon, and virgins to Osiris, equated here to Bacchus.⁷⁹ Here the girls are plainly meant as consorts of the god, in the usual ritual marriage of the year-rite, common to Egypt and Syria.⁸⁰ Indeed, there is a legend that Nimrod's own daughter Radha fell in love with Abraham and tried to come to him in the sacrificial fire.⁸⁰ The name is interesting; since Rhodha, Rhodopis, a name popularly given the Sphinx in late times, was the Egyptian sacred hierodule.⁸⁰ This is a reminder that from the 21st Dynasty onwards, the title "God's Wife," formerly reserved for the wife of the Pharaoh, was "transferred to a king's daughter who became the consecrated wife of the Theban god, and to whom human intercourse was strictly forbidden."⁸¹ This was "the line of virgin priestesses . . . who enjoyed a position which at Thebes was virtually royal. . . ."⁸² So here we have the august virgins of the royal line set apart as spouses of the god, and as such expected to engage in those activities which would make them ritual hierodules. Strabo says that "the Egyptians sanctified the fairest princess, a virgin of the royal line, to be a hierodule until her physical purification, after which she could marry."⁸³ Here is plain indication that such princesses "of the royal descent" as described in Abraham 1:11 were expected to jeopardize their virtue, and if they refused to do so they could still be forcibly dispatched in the manner of the hierodules. Herodotus and Diodorus tell of the king of Egypt named Pheros (here Pharaoh is actually the *name* of the king) who exactly like Nimrod desired to rule not only the human race but the elements as well, and was chastised for his presumption with blindness. A seer from Bouto told the king that his only hope of cure would be through a woman of perfect and proven virtue. The king's wife failed the test and so did many others: only one woman passed with flying colors and the king married her, subjecting all the pretenders to a sacrificial death "in the city of the Red Soil."⁸⁴

According to Wainwright, the ladies in the story represent the "spirit of fertility . . . an adulteress is one in whom this spirit is emphatically incarnate."⁸⁵

In the annual fertility rites, Wainwright explains, royal princesses, even the queen herself, were expected to function as courtesans.⁸⁵ The rationale for such behavior has become household knowledge since Frazer—we need not expatiate on it here. An example would be Nephthys, "a fertility goddess of the Old Religion, and very reminiscent of [the later] Nitocris, who . . . accomplished the sacrifice in the fire . . . and was later thought to have been a courtesan. Seshat [the king's private secretary] was one of her forms." In the beginning she was no less than the Mother Goddess herself, and as such, consort to the king.⁸⁶ In short, "after the manner of the Egyptians" royal princesses sacrificed both their virtue and their lives on ritual occasions as indicated in the Book of Abraham.

In the Jewish legends are a number of remarkable parallels. Thus, a Pharaoh who treats Moses exactly as Nimrod does Abraham, who builds a great tower, as does Nimrod, which falls as does Nimrod's, who is alarmed by Moses's preaching against him and puts to death Moses's converts, etc., sacrificed his own daughter "because she no longer honored him as a god"—again the uncooperative virgin put to death.⁸⁷ One thinks here of the daughter of Nimrod with the Egyptian name of Ratha who fell in love with Abraham, a treasonable virgin if there ever was one, and sought to join him in the sacrificial flame. Most suggestive is the account of how the three virgin daughters of Lot were sacrificed ("burnt upon a pyre") in Sodom because the eldest of them would not follow the wicked customs of the land.⁸⁸ The first daughter was called Paltit, a name that clearly designates her as set apart to be a ritual hierodule.⁸⁹ According to the Book of Jubilees, Tamar (a doublet of Paltit) was condemned to death by fire for playing the harlot with Judah, "according to the judgment of Abraham."⁹⁰ The *three* virgins remind one of the three daughters of Minyas who, when they refused to join in the Dionysian revels, were driven mad, one even devouring her own son in a cannibalistic rite of human sacrifice.⁹¹

Diligent research into the pattern of ritual and myth in the ancient Near East has made it clear just what

sort of goings on are here indicated; but until the efforts of the Cambridge School began to introduce some sort of sense and order into a scene of wild and meaningless confusion, such passages as those about the virgins in the Book of Abraham could only appear as the most wanton fantasy: "Now, this priest had offered upon this altar three virgins at one time . . . because of their virtue; they would not bow down to worship gods of wood or of stone . . . and it was done after the manner of the Egyptians." (Abr. 1:11.) What nonsense, to be sure—but historical nonsense just the same.

The ancient and honorable designation of Abraham as "he who came forth from the fire of the Chaldees" has been explained by almost anybody who has had access to a Hebrew dictionary as a misunderstanding of the expression "Ur of the Chaldees." Thus, one of the latest commentators writes, "Ur of the Chaldees, not then known to be a place-name [!], was translated by the Rabbis into 'the fire of Chaldea. . .'"⁹² But the fiery element is not so easily brushed aside; references to sacrificial fires in the Abraham traditions (such as the Haran episode and the story of the fire-bricks) are much too numerous and explicit and the historical parallels too many and too obvious to be traceable to the misunderstanding of a single monosyllable.⁹³ The constant references to both the sacrificial knife and the fire make no difficulty, however, since the normal procedure in human and animal sacrifice in Egypt as elsewhere was to cut the victim's throat and then cast the remains on the fire.⁹⁴ H. Kees notes that the Typhonian enemy of Osiris is always slaughtered and then burned, both rites being considered sacrificial.⁹⁵ In the Levitical sacrifices, the *zebah* (with the knife) and the *kalil* or *'ola* (holocaust) did not usually go together,⁹⁶ but then Abraham is careful to specify that everything he is reporting is "after the manner of the Egyptians." There is evidence that the Egyptians practiced dedicating victims by passing them through the fire, and even knew the practice of ritual fire-walking.⁹⁷ This point deserves mention because of the peculiar persistence of strange fire-motifs in the story of Abraham, biblical and legendary. It is interesting, however, that the Book of Abraham makes no mention of fire in connection with the attempted sacrifice of Abraham; the *earliest* sources likewise make no mention of it and nearly all scholars agree that it is a later addition.⁹⁸ ○

(To be continued)

FOOTNOTES

⁹⁰Cave of Treasures, 20:10.
⁹¹Apocalypse of Abraham, Vol. 25, pp. 2-7.
⁹²Philo's Biblical Antiquities, Vol. 4, p. 16.
⁹³Already in the seventeenth century H. Witsius, *Aegyptiaca* (Herborn in Nassau, 1717), p. 299, saw the main theme of the Abraham story to be "God's disapproval of human sacrifice among the Phoenicians, Egyp-

tians, and surrounding people." The theme is much discussed today, e.g. A. Z. Idelsohn, *Jewish Liturgy and Its Development* (New York: Henry Holt, 1932), p. 3; D. S. Shapiro, in *Tradition*, Vol. 4 (1962), p. 218.

⁹⁴J. C. Fervier, in *Revue des Etudes Juives*, Vol. 3 (1964), p. 16.
⁹⁵Beer, pp. 9ff; Chapira, *Revue des Etudes Juives*, Vol. 69, pp. 97f; E. A. W. Budge, *Kebra Nagast* . . . (British Museum, 1922), pp. 9-11.
⁹⁶According to Jubilees, this was when Abraham was 60 years old, *Jubilees*, 12:12-14.
⁹⁷Tha'alabi, p. 53, on Koran, 37:90-95; 21:56-61; *Maase Abraham* b. Elia Cohn, in Beer, pp. 13-14; *Apocalypse of Abraham*, 5:4, 9-11; 6:7, etc.
⁹⁸*Apocalypse of Abraham*, 1:3-6.
⁹⁹Cited by N. N. Glazer, in *Faith and Knowledge*, 1963, p. 37.
¹⁰⁰Ginsberg, *Legends of the Jews*, Vol. 1, p. 199 (1 year); *Babba Bathra*, fol. 21a (10 years); Beer, p. 14, for the other lengths of time.
¹⁰¹Mainonides, *Dalalat*, III, xxix (ed. O. Zeller, Osnabruck, 1964), Vol. 3, p. 20.
¹⁰²*Biblical Antiquities of Philo*, Vol. 6, pp. 5-15. In contrast, the 12 servants of the hesitant Haran were consumed by fire, *Bet ha-Midrash*, Vol. 1, pp. 32-34.
¹⁰³G. Rinaldi, in *Aegyptus*, Vol. 34 (1954), pp. 193-210.
¹⁰⁴Cit. Chapira, *Revue des Etudes Juives*, Vol. 68, pp. 98-99.
¹⁰⁵Philo Derchain, *Le Sacrifice de l'Oryx* (Brussels: Fondation Reine Elisabeth, 1962), p. 43.
¹⁰⁶Achilles Tatius, Vol. 3, p. 15. Among the Scythian Taurians, "a princely stranger . . . is killed with a sword by the goddess's virgin priestess; and she throws the corpse into the sacred fire," though some say it is not the priestess that does the killing. The rite was Egyptian, and the sources are given in Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths* (Penguin Books, 1955), Vol. 2, pp. 74, 77.
¹⁰⁷Fs. Plutarch, *De fluviis*, Vol. 16, p. 1 (in Th. Hopfner, *Fontes Historiae Religionis Aegyptiacae* (Bonn, 1922), Vol. 1, p. 397).
¹⁰⁸Herodorus, Vol. 1, p. 18; Vol. 10, pp. 7-8; discussed by Lefebure, in *Bibliothèque Egyptologique*, Vol. 36 (1915), p. 275.
¹⁰⁹G. Rinaldi, in *Aegyptus*, Vol. 34 (1954), pp. 193-210.
¹¹⁰B. Beer, *Leben Abrahams*, p. 112.
¹¹¹A. H. Gardiner, *Egypt of the Pharaohs* (Oxford, 1961), p. 343.
¹¹²J. W. B. Bams, in *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, Vol. 52 (1966), p. 191.
¹¹³Strabo, *Geography*, Vol. 17, p. 1 (816).
¹¹⁴Herodotus, *History*, Vol. 2, p. 111; Diodorus, *Lib.*, Vol. 1, p. 59. It is interesting that Herodotus calls the place of sacrifice "Red Soil," while Diodorus calls it "Sacred soil," indicating access to separate—and Egyptian—sources, since the words for "red" and "sacred" are the same in Egyptian in this case, *dsr.t*.
¹¹⁵G. A. Wainwright, *The Sky-Religion in Egypt* (Cambridge Univ., 1938), pp. 89-90.
¹¹⁶Wainwright, in *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, Vol. 26 (1941), pp. 30-31.
¹¹⁷G. Weil, *Biblical Legends of the Muslims*, p. 120.
¹¹⁸*Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*, Vol. 25, pp. 182-85; Ginsberg, *Legends of the Jews*, Vol. 1, p. 255; B. Beer, *Leben Abrahams*, p. 41. Another virgin, the daughter of Admah, was ritually executed (stung to death by bees) for refusing to conform to the evil practices of the Sodomites, Ginsberg, Vol. 1, p. 250. In some versions it is Lot who refuses to participate in the orgies, and to purchase immunity he offers both the virtue and the lives of his daughters; bin Gurion, *Sagen der Juden*, Vol. 2, pp. 220-23, 226-28. Also, Abraham's first convert was a woman who denounced Nimrod as a fraud and was sacrificed; Maase Abraham, in *Bet ha-Midrash*, Vol. 1, p. 31.
¹¹⁹Ginsberg, Vol. 1, p. 249. Paltit is the same as Palakis, whence the name Bilqis, borne by the Queen of Sheba as royal companion of Solomon in a large cycle of tales dealing with ritual prostitution.
¹²⁰*Jubilees*, 41:28. The Tomyris of the Cyrus story, Herodotus, Vol. 1, pp. 205f, 212-14, is the Bilqis (Tadmor-T amar) of the Solomon cycle, in Tha'alabi, pp. 216ff (also published in Brunnow's *Arabic Chrestomathy*).
¹²¹R. Graves, *The Greek Myths*, Vol. 1, p. 105, citing Plutarch, *Greek Questions*, p. 38. The Minyans were people living in the area of Sodom and Gomorrah.
¹²²G. Abrahams, *The Jewish Mind*, p. 49.
¹²³Abraham was thrown into a furnace of fire-bricks for refusing to make fire-bricks; *Biblical Antiquities of Philo*, Vol. 6, pp. 3-5. G. F. Moore, *Judaism*, Vol. 2, p. 106, notes suspicious parallels between Nimrod's furnace and the three youths in Nebuchadnezzar's furnace—both were in the Plain of Dura. J. Garstang, in *Annales du Service*, Vol. 8, p. 146, discusses the ritual conflagrations in the brick royal tombs of the 20th Dynasty.
¹²⁴Lefebure, in *Bibliothèque Egyptologique*, Vol. 36, p. 283; a typical instance is given in Herodotus, Vol. 2, p. 40. Amon's enemies are slaughtered each morning on a sacrificial block at the place of burning, S. Morenz, in *Aegypt. Ztschr.*, Vol. 82 (1958), pp. 63f; the adversary is pierced with a spear and "hurled into a fiery pit daily," E. A. W. Budge, *Egyptian Hieratic Papyri in the British Museum* (1910), Pt. 1, Col. ii, pp. 14-18; the main year rites of the Egyptians were called "the Great Burning" and "the Little Burning," according to A. H. Gardinaie, *Revue d'Égyptologie*, Vol. 10 (1955), p. 29. In Babylonia the cutting of the throat and sacrifice by burning "seem to have been in use absolutely contemporaneously," E. D. VanBuren, in *Orientalia*, Vol. 24 (1955), p. 30.
¹²⁵H. Kees, *Totenglauben . . . der alten Aegypten* (Leipzig, 1926), pp. 44-45, noting however that royal cremation was an "unegyptian" practice.
¹²⁶J. C. Fervier, in *Revue des Etudes Juives*, Vol. 3 (1964), p. 9.
¹²⁷G. Jequier, in *Recueil de Travaux*, Vol. 32 (1910), p. 169; L. Koenen, in *Chroniques d'Égypte*, Vol. 37 (1962), pp. 167-74; and *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, Vol. 27 (1941), pp. 189f; G. A. Wainwright, *Sky Religion*, pp. 55, 89, and *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, Vol. 18 (1932), p. 164.
¹²⁸M. R. James, *Biblical Antiquities of Philo*, p. 46, notes that the older word of Jubilees "seems to show . . . and intentional avoidance" of the fire-theme. B. Beer, *Leben Abrahams*, p. 114, notes the absence of the fire-motif in the earlier versions, and cites Nachmanides as saying that Abraham was rescued "from great danger and from Nimrod in the land of the Chaldees," but that we do not know what the danger was.