

Chapter 1

A thousand years had passed since the dawn of mankind when Adam and Eve were born. The Great Flood was 600 years past, but still a fresh memory in the minds of people everywhere. "What will we do if another flood comes?" was a constant question. Noah was extremely old, but living. His answer to the fear was usually received in one of two ways.

"Not to worry, Noah has said that God gave his promise never to allow that again."

"Ah, what does he know? He's so old, his brains have dried up." So, the conversations went.

Floods weren't the only problem. Ironically, the skies were becoming drier. Plowed fields were no longer fertile. This led to a rash of religions based on human sacrifice...anything to placate the gods. As Noah watched all this from his home, he asked himself, "What do people want? Don't they realize what caused the original flood? Bad behavior and worshiping false gods. When will they wake up?"

Whatever. But, failing crops meant that tax revenues were poor, and the city of Ur no longer could afford the expensive army needed to repel marauders. Among these looters was a man known as Nimrod. Born of Noah's grandson, Cush, he had become a great warrior who invented many new weapons. Because of his passion for hunting, many of them were originally tools of prey. But, from killing animals, it was just a short distance to killing men. He was also a clever leader of men. He himself was an idolater who was very adept at making men forget their true God. He could also entice men into confessing crimes. For example, he might ask a suspect, "Who was with you when you committed your crime?" Thinking that Nimrod knew most everything about what had happened, the suspect confessed everything. Such were his political skills in military maneuvers and judicial leadership, and he was continually expanding his realm. He became so successful in everything he did that he came to believe that he, himself, was God.

Among those in his court was an idol-maker called Tehrah. Because of his business background, he could read, write and do numbers. His trade brought him into contact with people from many lands. Because of this background of literacy and business ability, his family was ranked among the *Commoners* class. As such they owned property and had some political power. In Sumer, they were represented in the *Lower House*. Religiously, Tehrah had no strong attachment to Noah's God, which was a big political advantage in the polytheistic culture of the day. Consequently, he was a valuable person for Nimrod's court that worshiped a variety of gods. As is true with people everywhere who succeed by attracting profitable royal contacts, Tehrah's connection with Nimrod was of great value. However, today, it brought disturbing news...disturbing enough for him to hurry home at his first opportunity.

"Amathlai, come quickly to the courtyard where none can hear us."

Tehrah's wife, who had joyously given birth to her first son, heard a note of anxiety in her husband's voice that left no room for shilly-shallying. Her husband was always very calm and to be upset meant that something serious had occurred.

"What is it, Tehrah?" The worry in her voice was clear. Tehrah's gesture to remain quiet further disturbed her. Lowering her voice to a whisper, she asked again, "What is it Tehrah?"

Tehrah looked about to ensure they were alone, and when assured that it was so, he said quietly, "We must think carefully about what must be done before even our most trusted servants can know."

Now, Amathlai was becoming frustrated. "For God's sake, tell me."

"Terrible, the king has decided that Abram must die."

Amathlai's face went white. "What?" Keeping her voice quiet was a task that was almost beyond her.

"Yes, it seems on the night that Abram was being born, Nimrod's astrologers read the stars and determined that a baby will be born shortly who will be his rival...perhaps even to conquer him. Well, who should come in the next morning and bragging about his son...yes, me. So, Nimrod decided that my son

was his rival. Consequently, he called to me. Not knowing what to expect, of course, I entered his chambers ready to tell the king our great news.

"This isn't the worst of it. The king had the audacity to offer me money for my son so he could personally kill it. This meeting meant nothing more to him than a normal business deal. I mean, it was a houseful of gold, but for a little child? What is life worth to him? Nothing...

"So, what did you do?" demanded Amathlai.

"Well, the first thing was to keep my composure. Hard? You have no idea. But, the King was in a business mode, and I had to play along with it. My insides were crying, but my face would have done a gambler proud. It never blinked. Not once. Of course, Your Majesty."

"You said what? Repeat that again if you dare."

"I do dare, and if you'll be quiet, I'll tell you why. Essentially, at that point, I had no choice. You know how the King is when his mind is made up. If I'd have complained or denied the astrologers, I wouldn't be here now, and Abram would be dead."

"Along with me," agreed Amathlai.

"That's true. But, it did buy time for me until I could think of something. As we were discussing other business, I thought of a tactic."

"Which is?"

"A question. Essentially, I told the King of a bargain that was offered to me last night by a racing gambler. Specifically, I was told that a gambler offered me a house-full of barley for all of my camels if I would sell my finest camels to him. I agreed, but only after I pass this proposition by my king who is very wise in financial matters. The King was clearly confused by my question. No one sells fine camels for a bit of barley. Usually, not even for money. He asked, 'Are you stupid or something to even consider it?' I replied, 'Sire, my question is about something else. It is the same thing as your offer to buy my son for 'a bag of barley' when he is my posterity.'"

Now, the King really became angry as he realized that I had no intention of selling my son, or at least readily. Now, he was threatening to kill me, his viceroy. So, again, I had to soothe him by saying my question was simply a jest and, without question, the boy was for sale. "But," I asked, "could I have the night to discuss the situation with my wife and reconcile her to your needs?" Grumbling, he agreed, and here I am.

"Well, you'll play hell in getting me to agree to this devil's bargain, even for all the gold in the world."

"I know that, so what I intend to do is to go into the market where the hags live and buy a baby. They have so many brats, they can't keep count, and a shekel will keep them quiet until they get some beer to forget they ever had an extra."

And that is how Abram survived his first days on earth. Nimrod was presented a baby, whom he promptly killed and that was that. Another day's business routinely concluded. But, Amathlai took extreme care for months to ensure that any babies from her house were not discovered. She found a cave nearby where she and a trusted nurse tended to this new infant until Tehrah was assured that the incident was entirely forgotten in the court. Abram's days of wandering were just starting.

Chapter 2

The months following their scare passed anxiously, but without incident. Tehrah and Amathlai began to relax and, in short order, two more boys were born. They were Nahor and Haran. Nahor was named after his grandfather while Haran's name meant "Parched" or "Traveler."

By the time of Haran's birth, Abram was being brought into his father's business as was the custom for all boys at that time. His first tasks were learning to read, write and do sums for financial transactions. Behind all that was for him to learn his father's art: making idols. This meant for him to play with clay while pretending to be "just like my father."

Idols were a serious business in those days. Tehrah was a skilled artisan and he got orders from all parts of the known world. His figures were designed after the needs of each customer whose requirements ranged from images of supernatural beings; magic amulets; ritual representations of fertility, birth and death; or representations of ancestors. Some were given to children as toys. Fertility idols were frequent orders and were often very graphic. Women were represented with large breasts or vulvas. One showed a mother giving birth. Male genitalia were often comically exaggerated.

The point for these images was an attempt by people to understand and control the world about themselves. Life and death were literal events that were caused by forces beyond understanding. Control was very limited, and so, appeals to outside gods and spirits were the norm. By giving these gods form, they could be seen; personal relationships could be formed. Wind, sun, birth, time, rain water were identified with controlling beings and appealed to for help.

In this environment, the three boys developed quickly, and as is true with all siblings, different. Haran was a simple follower of the family. A bit sickly, he developed slowly. Nighttimes were often ordeals of rocking and crooning to a crying baby. Nahor also followed his father, but with real skill. His technique for molding clay figures matured very early. More importantly, he took his work seriously. Idol-making was a sacred task for him. His questions were always directed at doing better.

Abram was the question-mark. Normally, the eldest son would assume his father's business, and while he excelled at learning, his heart was not really into what he was doing. When he was three years of age, he started to wonder about what his father's idols really meant. If they were really the controllers of the universe, then he needed to pray to them. Days followed with intensive effort. By contrast, Nahor had a real talent for idol-making, and he loved his work. As Abram watched Nahor do his work, he saw a gleam of love in his brother's eyes. Why didn't he feel the same love? When he made idols or prayed to them, nothing happened. The sun and moon continued to rise and fall as usual. The rains soaked the ground on schedule. Prayers brought no changes.

"Father, I have been praying to these idols for some time now. I've also been watching Nahor's love for his work. But, I am confused."

Turning from his table, Tehrah looked upon his son and asked, "Yes, Abram, what is your question?"

"Well, do these idols really work? That is, when I pray to them, nothing happens. So, I'm wondering, which of them are real and which are false? Are there other gods we don't know about who are really in charge?"

Nahor could see that his young son was really interested in a serious answer, so he took some time to consider what he would say.

"Abram, my son, you have asked a really profound question. It is one that has mystified mankind for years. My answer may not satisfy you, but it's the best that I can give. No, not all gods are alike. You have seen how I make many different kinds of idols for these various gods. Egyptian idols are different from Syrian ones. Local villages have their own unique gods. Which are real; which are forceful; whether there are others, I can't say. Your brother, Nahor, accepts them all. They are all equal in his eyes, and he loves them all. Obviously, I can't tell you to be like him. You're you, and you must remain so. As for me,

I accept them all by making them in accordance with my customers' desires. I don't question. It's a business for me and not a search for final truth. So, now son, I hope I've answered your question as it's the best that I can do. Meanwhile, let's get back to work. You've got a trade to learn, and I've got orders to fill."

And Abram did learn his trade. Slowly, his fingers began to mold the pile of terra cotta clay into recognizable idols. But, as he looked at Nahor's work, he knew sadly that he would never be his brother's equal. Even now, after a few years of training, Nahor's pieces were exceeding his father's work. Indeed, when special orders came in for the best quality idols, Nahor got the job.

One day, Abram was stuck on a technical aspect of forming a complex idol, and he asked for some help. "Nahor, how do you do this?"

"What do you mean?"

Showing Nahor what was needed to complete the piece, Abram's brother exclaimed, "Oh, that's easy. Here, let me show you." With a few deft movements of his fingers, the problem was solved like a bowtie unknotted.

Abram leaned back and sighed, "Honestly, Nahor, I don't know how you do it. You've got far less experience than even Father, and yet, you surpass him in skill. Your pieces are truly works of art."

Nahor blushed at such complements from his older brother, and then said, "I don't know either. It's as if someone was guiding my hands; someone whom I can't see, but I know he's there."

"These are idols who represent the gods. Are they your guides?"

"Could be. I can't really say, but I do believe that there is someone inside of me who has blessed me."

"Blessed you?"

"Yes, I really believe so. Otherwise, how could I do what I do?"

"Well, if that's so, then you really are blessed. Haran and I do our work, but it's just a job for filling orders. We give our best work, but we'll never be your equal."

The art that Nahor made was a product of terracotta. The raw material was a clay that held up to kneading and molding. Ordinary dirt just fell apart. Once molded, it was fired in an oven to create a permanent shape. If the object was meant to hold water, then it would be glazed beforehand. Generally, however, idols were left in a raw fired state.

It was finding and harvesting this clay where Haran made his mark. "Father, you have us digging the ground for the clay that we need for making idols."

"So?"

"Well, that seems to me to be a waste of production time."

"Yes, but without clay, we can make no idols for sale."

"But, why don't we have someone else dig up the clay and deliver it to us?"

"Good idea, but we'd have to pay for it and that cuts profits."

Haran was expecting these arguments. "Father, what is our real objective?"

"Making idols, of course. What a silly question."

Abram was idly listening as he worked on a piece, but the drift of Haran's thinking caught his attention. "Father, I think Haran is on to something very important. Just listen to what he has to say. You can always reject his ideas later after you've thought about them, but if you don't hear them in the first place, you'll lose the chance perhaps to pick up a good idea."

Terah laughed and shook his head as he said, "Abram, you could sell the skin off a snake. So, Haran, what's your idea?"

"It's pretty simple actually. If we didn't have to dig clay, we could make more idols. As things are now, we can hardly keep up with demand, particularly for Nahor's pieces. But, if the clay were always available, our production could continue without a break. Our profits per piece might be a bit less

because, as you say, we'd have to pay for our clay. But, if we sold more pieces, then our overall profits would be greater."

By now, Tehrah was nodding his head. "And I assume you have someone in mind who can provide the clay to us?"

Ah, got him. "Yes, Father. You know Yaakov ben Yaakov?"

"Yes."

"Well, he must leave the family farm. There's not enough room for him there as a younger son, and he needs to find another profession. He's not too bright, but he can learn dirt and how to dig it. Besides, there's another aspect of our business that we should consider that would make things better for all of us."

"And that is?"

"How about making kitchen items such as clay pots, pitchers, bowls and other things?"

"There are others already who are making those things."

"You're right. But, while Abram and I can't match Nahor's quality of work, you've taught us well enough that we can beat anyone for good quality products that will take a lot of wear. It will be a good, easy supplement to what we're already doing."

"You've made your argument, and it sounds good. But, now, let me think about it."

That evening, Abram and Nahor met with Haran to congratulate him on a sales job well done.

"Honestly, Haran, your ideas are really good," exclaimed Nahor. "Now, I can concentrate on making my idols without having to dig dirt, which I really hate doing."

Haran replied to both of his brothers, "Yes, I really hate digging dirt as well. But, Abram, thank you for stepping in when you did. Your comments about listening were right on target. I couldn't have sold my ideas without your help."

"Anytime brother."