

I

The Idol Shop

Note: This story is derived from ancient Jewish tradition outside of Holy Scripture.

And Joshua said unto all the people, "Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, 'Your fathers dwelt on the other side of the flood in old time, even Terah, the father of Abraham, and the father of Nachor: and they served other gods.'" Genesis 24:2

And Haran died in the presence of his father Terah in the land of his nativity, in Ur of the Chaldees. Genesis 11:28

It is very hot and dry most of the year in Chaldea, but for a short period in winter, it is cool with a higher possibility of rain. It was one of those cool, rainy days when Mashda was told by his mother to go deliver a package to his great grandfather, Terah, at his idol shop in the city. Mashda dutifully obeyed and headed down the slippery clay road alongside the river bank of the great Euphrates towards Ur. The rainy season raised the river level only a very small amount. It was later in the spring when the snow melt high in the mountains of Anatolia would cause the rivers downstream to periodically flood. Mashda's family's home of tightly bound reeds had to be rebuilt a number of times as a consequence of these floods. And during the springtime, they would pray fervently before the idols of their many gods for protection. But now the light, gentle rain was not something to be feared, but something to be enjoyed and was very pleasant to the senses. The fields were especially green and the air was sweet and fragrant. The insects sung and the birds excitedly fluttered about, chirping and adding to the chorus. Mashda only had to be careful not to lose his footing on the slippery mud of the road.

Fishermen continued to work along the banks of the river, casting their nets in the rain. And boats continued to transport goods, but covered with oiled cloth for protection. Mashda reached the high ramparts and walls of Ur and entered through the narrow, yet extraordinarily tall gates into the city. From there he headed straight to his grandfather's shop in the merchant district close to the gates.

Terah was well-known and respected among the residents of Ur. He had been in business for decades and knew almost everyone of importance in the city. On this particular day, when Mashda entered Terah's shop through the front door, he was startled by the mess of broken idols strewn about, and by his great-grandfather's angry voice yelling in the back room, "What have you done to me! How could you publicly dishonor me like this! I left you in charge of the store while I had to do an errand and what did you do! How do you think I felt when Gishkim, whom I have known for decades, came to me on the street very visibly distressed and loudly complaining in front of everyone about how you, my very own son, mistreated him and showed disrespect to the gods?! He was upset with the way you asked his age and then shamed

him by questioning how he could worship a day-old statue! And if that is not enough! I immediately heard from others about Gashan, a Lady of one of the most pious and renown families in Ur, who also came into the shop wanting to make an offering to the idols. And what did you do to her??? You took a stick and smashed all of the idols in front of her, except for *An*, the largest of them, and you put the stick in its hands. Are you trying to destroy my reputation here? And now you have the gall to tell me that it was the idols themselves who made this mess in my shop when they argued about which should eat the offering first! With *An* destroying all the smaller ones so that it could have the offering completely to itself! Do you think I am a fool?! That I am so stupid?! They are only statues and have no knowledge! You treat me, your elder, as an idiot!

Mashda then heard his uncle's voice, Abram, calmly respond, "You deny their knowledge, yet you worship them."

Terah, at this point, was completely beside himself with rage and dragged Abram into the front of the store, not even noticing Mashda, and out the front door. As he left, he gruffly yelled, "That's it! I am taking you to Nimrod!"¹

Mashda felt compelled to follow, but kept a safe distance behind. When they reached the central court of the city next to the palace, Terah sent a messenger to bring King Nimrod. They were mutually acquainted and also being relatives, the king responded quickly to Terah's request. After hearing Terah's formal complaint, Nimrod turned to Abram and said, "We worship fire." Abram responded, "Water puts out fire." Nimrod said, "We worship water as well." Abram responded, "The clouds hold water." Nimrod declared even more intensely, "And we worship clouds!" And Abram returned, "The wind pushes the clouds." Then Nimrod, losing patience, said in a stern tone, "Well, we worship the wind too!". And Abram again calmly responded, "People withstand the wind." This was too much for Nimrod and in his anger, he demanded that Abram be cast into the fire. "If Abram is correct, if there truly is only one God and our gods are false, then his God will save him!" Soldiers grabbed Abram and casted him into the fire. But he remained standing and did not burn. When Abram's brother, Haran, saw this, he was amazed and declared Abram's God to be true and the gods of the Chaldeans to be false. He also was thrown into the fire. But he was not saved and died as a martyr at the side of Abram, before Terah.

Terah was dumbfounded and grief-stricken by what had just happened and the loss of his son, Haran. He was angry at Abram, but he did not expect to lose his other son, Haran. Yet, this event caused his heart to soften and come to repentance. What he had witnessed of Abram's faith while standing before Nimrod deeply affected him for the rest of his life. He closed his shop and put away his idols at home. When Abram told him that he had received the word from God: "Get thee out of thy country, and

¹ According to Genesis, Nimrod was the grandson of Ham and the great-grandson of Noah. Nimrod started his kingdom in Babylon (Genesis 10:10) but Jewish tradition places him as the king of Shinar (Sumer) in Ur at the time of Abraham's youth.

from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto the land I will show thee," (Genesis 12:1), Terah realized he must follow Abram.

Mashda immediately ran home, falling a number of times in the slippery mud but not caring. He excitedly told his family what he had just witnessed. Though they deeply sorrowed for the loss of Haran, a very close relation, this event helped give them the courage to leave the secure life they had always known in Ur, to put away their own idols, to walk in faith on unfamiliar paths, and follow Abram towards an unknown future.