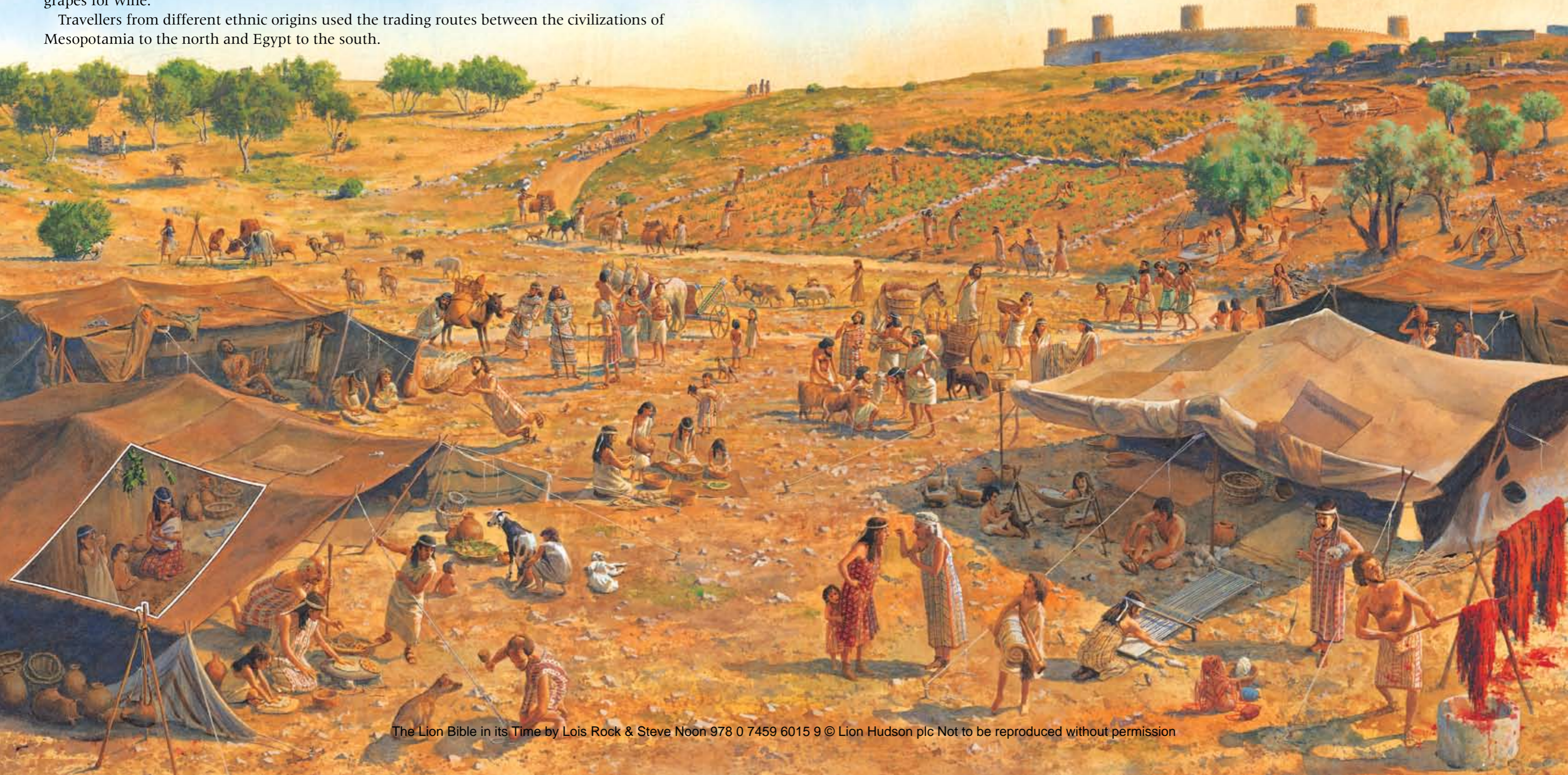


ABRAHAM: A NOMAD IN CANAAN

Abraham's household consisted of his wife, Sarah, and servants and their families. Their flocks provided them with meat, milk, wool, and leather. They were able to trade some of these goods with the local Canaanite farmers, who grew crops including grain, olives for oil, and grapes for wine.

Travellers from different ethnic origins used the trading routes between the civilizations of Mesopotamia to the north and Egypt to the south.



JACOB AND HIS FAMILY

The people of Israel

When Jacob journeyed home from where Laban lived to Canaan, he met a stranger who challenged him to a fight. The struggle lasted all night, and at the dawn light Jacob understood that he had been fighting with God. The stranger gave him a new name to mark the event: Israel. Jacob had twelve sons, and from them emerged twelve great families: the twelve tribes of Israel.

ישיר ישראל

The word for "Israel", shown here in Hebrew, sounds like the Hebrew for "he struggles with God". Many Bible names have a soundalike meaning.

When Abraham grew old, he was anxious that his son Isaac should not marry a Canaanite. He asked a trusted servant to travel north to find a wife for Isaac from among his relatives. The servant's journey was so successful that he believed God had blessed him and helped him find the right woman: Rebecca. The young woman's brother, Laban, agreed that she should go and be Isaac's bride.

Esau and Jacob

Isaac and Rebecca had twin sons. Esau was the elder of the two. He was a strong huntsman and Isaac admired him. However, Jacob was Rebecca's favourite. Jacob was jealous of his older brother and, with his mother's help, schemed to win for himself the rights and privileges due the firstborn.

Esau was furious at being cheated, and Jacob had to flee for his life. He headed north and offered to work for his uncle Laban. The older man tried to squeeze as much work from his nephew as he could for little reward, and the misery of being cheated changed Jacob. After many years, he returned to Canaan rather wiser.

He had worked hard for the wealth he now had: flocks of his own, two of Laban's daughters as wives – the plainer Leah and the beautiful and dearly loved Rachel – and a large household. Jacob's brother Esau had also prospered. The two made peace with each other and agreed where each should settle.

Joseph

Jacob had twelve sons, but his favourites were those born to Rachel: Joseph and Benjamin. Joseph was the elder, and one day Jacob gave him a wonderful brightly dyed coat. It was a clear sign that he was the privileged son.

The ten elder brothers were jealous. The more Joseph boasted of dreams in which his family bowed down to him, the more they hated him. One day, when Jacob sent Joseph to find out if the ten were looking after the flocks properly, they seized him and threatened him. They ended up selling him as a slave to traders on their way to Egypt.



As a slave, Joseph found out what it was like to have no privileges. In spite of his hard work, he was thrown into prison because someone told lies about him. However, he believed that God had given him wisdom to explain dreams, and people grew to respect him.

One day, he was hauled from prison to explain a dream puzzling the pharaoh, the king of Egypt. Joseph understood that the dream predicted seven years of good harvests and seven of famine. The king put Joseph in charge of storing food for the lean years.

During the famine, his ten brothers came to buy food for the family. They bowed to their brother Joseph, not knowing it was him. Joseph schemed for them to fetch his true brother, Benjamin. In the end, he forgave them all and invited his family to Egypt.

Egypt

Egypt was one of the wealthiest civilizations of the ancient world. Its rulers, the pharaohs, displayed their riches proudly. One of the great status symbols was the chariot.

The Bible says that the pharaoh rewarded Joseph for his wisdom by allowing him to use his second chariot. It was a sign of the respect that everyone who saw it should give him.

THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL IN EGYPT

In Egypt, Jacob's descendants enjoyed the benefits of living in a rich and fertile land for many years. However, the reason for them being in a foreign land was forgotten. A new pharaoh came to power who ordered that they join the ranks of slaves.

