

ABRAM, THE FRIEND OF GOD

PLEASE do not read these comments until you have read the Scripture for this lesson. First let the Holy Spirit teach you directly from His Word.

There are two major divisions in Genesis: one gives a universal viewpoint and the other a specific viewpoint. Genesis 1-11 gives the general history of the universe: the creation of man, the fall, the flood and the origin of various nations. Genesis 10 traces the descendants of the sons of Noah, Japheth, Ham and Shem, to the respective nations which they founded. Genesis 11 says that God confounded their original language and this caused these descendants to scatter over all the earth (11:1-9). The genealogy list of Genesis 11 focuses on those descendants of Shem (Semites) that finally gave birth to Abram. This chapter sets the stage for the beginning of the second major division of Genesis - the specific history of the patriarchs that form the nation of Israel (Gen 12-50).

There are two extremely important historical events in the formation of Israel as a nation. The first event happened around 2000 B.C. when God called Abram to leave Ur of the Chaldees to become the father of the nation of Israel (Gen 12:1-3). This gave Israel an ethnic distinction. Genesis 12-24 reveals Abram's faith in God and obedience, making him the friend of God, in spite of some failures in his life. The second major event in Israel's history happened around 1440 B.C. when God gave Moses the Law at Mount Sinai. This gave Israel a political basis - it was a theocracy (Exodus 20-40).

I. Description of the Nations — 10:1 - 11:32

A. Descendants of Noah — 10:1-32

Note: This chapter serves more than just a dry genealogical list. It serves three purposes: (1) to reveal the descendants of Noah; (2) to present the origin and dispersion of the nations; and (3) to present Shem as the progenitor of the people from which God would select one man (Abraham) through whom He would send His Son to be the Savior of sinners in all nations.

1. Japheth — 10:2-5

10:2-4 — Recall that Japheth's blessing (9:27) indicated he would spread far and wide to inhabit great portions of the earth. They spread westward to the Aegean area, northward into Europe, and eastward into Asia. They generated great material gain and much power. Some Japhethites can be identified as the Medes, Greeks, Cypriotes and Russians.

10:5 — This verse indicates the division of lands among the sons of Japheth and their families.

2. Ham — 10:6-12

10:6ff — Many of Ham's descendants became enemies of Israel sometime during the course of her history. This is indicated by the following names of his descendants: Mizraim (Egypt); Canaan, Babel (Babylon), Nineveh (Assyria), Philistines, Zidon (Phoenicia), Jebusites (Jerusalem).

10:8-12 — "Nimrod" - a descendant of Cush who populated Assyria and built several significant cities in that area. His name signifies he was rebellious. Many believe that he established the first kingdom and perhaps explains the phrase "a mighty hunter before the Lord!" That is, he was a mighty hunter of souls to enslave men and thereby build a kingdom.

3. Shem — 10:21-31

10:21ff — Shem is presented lastly because the Bible focuses upon his descendants. The majority of Bible history is centered upon his descendants which includes Elam (Persians), Asshur (Assyrians), Aram (Arameans or Syria), Lud (Lydians), and Eber (progenitor of the Hebrews). Peleg receives a more detailed discussion since his descendants include Abraham. Many believe that the division spoken of in verses 25 and 32 may speak of the division of the earth into its separate continents. Others believe the division is speaking of language groups which resulted from the Tower of Babel incident.

B. Division of the People — 11:1-9

1. Man's rebellion — 11:1-4

11:1, 2 — The entire human post-flood race spoke one language. This event must have happened before the division of the nations indicated in chapter 10. The land of Shinar has reference to northern Mesopotamia in the Fertile Crescent.

11:3, 4 — Two reasons are indicated for the construction of this tower -- both indicating man's selfish and sinful ambitions:

- a. **"Let us make us a name"** — this is a sin of pride. A great high tower would cause the people of the earth to look to them.
- b. **"Lest we be scattered"** — this was a sin of defiance against God's clear command to populate all the earth (cp. 9:1). They wanted the tower to be the rallying point around which unity and hence strength would come.

This tower was not intended (as thought by some) to reach unto heaven (note the italicized words in v. 4 are inserted by the translator), but rather it was a religious tower and its top was dedicated to heaven, that is, the sun, moon and stars of heaven. It would be used for the worship of the heavens as gods. Archaeology has discovered several ziggurats which were probably late types of this initial tower. It had a foundation made of brick with steps leading to the summit which then served as a cult center for the worship of false gods. Ur was a center for the worship of Sin, the moon god. This tower was made in rebellion against the Lord.

2. God's judgment — 11:5-9

11:5-6 — The Lord knew the purpose of this sinful tower that the people were building. They were united in the project as one people with one language. Nothing would stop them in their idolatrous pursuit unless the Lord took action to stop it.

11:7 — Notice, the Lord is more than one person as indicated in the plural pronoun, "us."

11:8-9 — The Lord confused the people by dividing the one language into many languages. By doing this the Lord divided the people. This stopped the construction of the sinful Tower and scattered the people throughout the earth. Sinful man still wants to unite all people in rebellion against the Lord, who wants all people to be scattered and separated into smaller groups. The United Nations is a modern attempt to put all nations under one government. Antichrist will finally unite the nations by the power that Satan gives to him in the Tribulation (Rev 13:4-9), but the Lord will not let this happen until that day. Babel itself means to confuse or to scatter. God instantly and miraculously changed the language and the people began to collect with those who had the same language. Then they would look for a place where they could live together. So the scattering slowly, but surely, took place as the Lord planned it.

C. Descent to Abram — 11:10-32

11:10ff — The author of Genesis now reveals the development of the Hebrew nation. Moses is particularly interested in Terah, the father of Abram. There are many strong indications that this genealogy is not strictly chronological and inclusive.

11:27ff — Terah's descendants are noted and will serve as the subject of later Bible history. Abram of course, is the ethnic father of the Hebrews. Sarai (v. 30) was barren -- a fact that was important to the faith of Abram. Lot, Abram's nephew, was also mentioned because he had a significant part in Abram's life. Nahor and Milcah provide offspring from which Rebekah (Isaac's wife) and other women would come (Jacob's two wives and two concubines).

11:31, 32 — Abram left Ur of the Chaldees following God's command (see 12:1-3). Joshua indicates that Abram's relatives were pagan idolaters (Josh 24:2). Archaeology has revealed some of the conditions of Ur at the time of Abram's call. Ur of the Chaldees (Ur III) was a Mesopotamian power that had highly developed law codes.

As to Abram's date, Bible chronology can affix clearly the dates surrounding Abram's life. Abram's birth was in 2165 B.C. (cp. Gen 12: 4, 21:5). He lived about 150 years before Hammurabi who is known for his famous law code. Abram was obedient to God's call and began his journey to Canaan by taking the normal route through Haran. It is not scripturally correct to indicate that Abram lapsed in his faith by stopping there because of Terah's ill health (11:32). He did not know where God was leading him, but followed the Lord until he got to the land that the Lord had promised him.

II. Declaration of a Nation — 12:1-14:24

A. Call of Abram — 12:1-3

1. God's command — 12: 1

12:1 — God clearly gave Abram a call to leave his native land to a land that would be given to him as a reward for his obedience. Three reasons have been suggested as the basis of this unique call: (1) to test Abram's faith (Dt. 8:2ff); (2) to sever him from his pagan friends and environment; and (3) to shift God's workings from Mesopotamia to Canaan. Canaan, which became Israel, is a land-bridge between Europe, Asia and Africa. The armies of these three continents marched over this land-bridge repeatedly. God used these armies later in Israel's history to punish them for disobedience, and when they repented, He would deliver them from these armies. In addition, much of Israel is a marginal agricultural land which means rains were essential to productivity. Obedience would bring God's blessing of abundant crops, but disobedience would bring drought and famine.

2. God's blessing — 12:2-3

12:2, 3 — God also promised to make of Abram a great nation (v. 2). He would be blessed and his name would be great. In addition, Abram was singled out as the means of universal blessing. Those who blessed him would be blessed, but those who cursed him would be cursed. He would be a blessing to all families of the earth (v.3). This would come through prophets in his nation that recorded God's Word and through the two comings of Messiah, first to save sinners and then to rule the world.

B. Character of Abram — 12:4 - 14:24

1. Tested by his faith — 12:4-9

12:4 — "Abram departed" - He had faith in the Lord's word to give him a land, even though he did not know where it was. He had the option to obey or to disobey and he chose to obey God's call. As a result he became known as the friend of God (James 2:23). He is an excellent example of living faith. Faith is not blind hope, but abiding trust. True faith has God, as He is revealed in His Word, as its object (cp. Rom. 4:16-24).

12:5-9 — Abram entered Canaan and God told him that this land would be given to his descendants. Thus begins Bible history with special significance given to the cities of Shechem, Bethel and Hebron. Abram finally settled in the south in what is known as the Negev.

2. Tested by famine — 12:10-20

12:10 — Famines, especially in the Negev, were common. In fact, today a good crop is expected in only one out of four years. Egypt, on the other hand, used the Nile's annual flooding and manmade canals to ensure relative stability in food production. So Abram journeyed to Egypt to escape the famine. The Lord had protected and supplied for Abram throughout his journey to Canaan but now Abram's faith in the Lord was low and he trusted his own wisdom to provide for his needs.

12:11ff — Abram told his wife to tell a half-truth -- a whole lie. Abram feared that Pharaoh would kill him so he might take his wife. Again this was not showing much faith in God. It is never right to do wrong-- this presumes that God is limited. It is true that his wife was his half-sister (20:12), but she was also his wife. Abram would rather let the Pharaoh take his wife than trust God. Abram was correct about the Pharaoh wanting his wife, but God intervened and spared Abram the permanent loss of his wife. This was a rebuke to Abram's lack of faith.

3. Tested by his family — 13:1 - 14:24

a. Separating from Lot — 13:1-18

13:1-4 — Notice that Abram returned to Israel and there he called upon God (v. 4). This characteristic phrase is absent in 12:10-20.

13:5ff — God had materially blessed Abram and Lot so that their combined livestock exceeded the ability of the land to provide enough food for their cattle. Abram suggested that they separate. Abram evidenced his spirituality by giving Lot first choice even though that right belonged to him as the older member of the group. Lot evidenced selfishness by choosing first and choosing "the best."

Materially speaking, Lot made the wise choice because he chose the well-watered plain of Jordan. However, this area included the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Today this area is arid and unproductive — probably the result of God's destruction of those cities. Lot's "good" choice served to be his final undoing (Gen 18-19).

Abram evidenced his faith both by allowing Lot to choose first and by accepting the less attractive land of Canaan (13:12). Abram had learned by this time that God would provide for his needs. After Abram's separation from Lot, God reaffirmed His covenant to Abram. He promised him and his seed all the land he could see as a permanent possession and He promised that his seed would become as great in number as the dust of the earth (13:14-17).

b. Rescuing Lot — 14:1-24

1) Lot's capture — 14:1-13

14:1ff — Chedorlaomer, a king from the east, had enslaved the people of the region of Sodom and Gomorrah for twelve years. Probably he was interested in their copper, manganese and asphalt deposits. After twelve years of subjection, three kings of the region joined the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah and revolted against Chedorlaomer. He in turn persuaded three other kings from the east to join him and put down this revolt. They were successful and carried away captives and goods from Sodom and Gomorrah. Lot was among those who were taken captive.

2) Lot's rescue — 14:14-17

14:14-17 — Abram took his own trained servants and journeyed as far as Dan to recapture Lot and the goods of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abram had faith that God would enable him to take on the four eastern kings, who had defeated the five kings of the Jordan Valley, and be victorious. His faith in the Lord was justified. He was victorious.

3) Abram's worship — 14:18-24

14:18 — Upon his return from battle, Abram was met by two kings. Melchizedek was king of Salem (peace) which is Jerusalem. Scripture does not indicate his background, but he also was a priest of the most high God. Abram recognized the priestly function of Melchizedek and gave tithes to God through him from his conquest and Melchizedek blessed him. Since the lesser is blest by the greater, so Melchizedek is greater than Abraham and all his descendants, including Aaron. That would make Melchizedek's priesthood greater than Aaron's. Also, Melchizedek was the king of Salem, but Aaron and his priests could never be a king. Christ was made a priest after the order of Melchizedek (Ps 110:4; Heb. 7), which allows Him to be a king, yes, and He is the King of kings.

14:21-24 — The second king that met Abram was the wicked king of Sodom who lived by the things of this world. He appreciated Abram's deliverance so much that he offered him all the booty that he had recaptured. All he wanted were the captives. But Abram again evidenced his faith and trust in God. God had blessed him and he did not need the benefit of a wicked king. Abram may have been tempted by wealth but he rejected it in favor of a godly testimony. Abram proved that he was truly looking to God for a fulfillment of His promises (Heb. 11:13, 14).