

Genesis 11:10-32

From Shem to Abram

In the classic movie, *Jurassic Park*, the character Ian Malcolm (played by Jeff Goldblum) says the famous line “life finds a way.” His point is that even though the scientists have used every possible technological means available to safely contain the dinosaurs, even to the point of engineering the dinosaurs so they are all one gender and cannot reproduce, this means of controlling them will not work. All the cages, electrical wire, and genetic manipulation in the world cannot stop the course of events. Life will find a way. This philosophy has become something of a meme in our society. Modern culture believes in the eventual success of humanity. It believes that despite adversity, humankind will somehow survive. It believes that no matter what happens, humanity will continue to move forward. Nothing could be further from biblical truth.

If the early portion of Genesis concluded with the Tower of Babel story, it would be pessimistic indeed. It would seem that the failure of humanity was emphasized. But in Scripture, we always see that the failure of humanity is buttressed by the grace of God. And so it is with the passage today. As we look at the genealogy of the line of Shem as it traces its way to Abram, we see unfolding the sovereign plan of God for the redemption of fallen humanity. Life does not find a way; God makes a way.

Despite the sin on the plains of Shinar, God’s purposes continued. In fact, the line of Shem was first mentioned in Genesis 5, when the line of Seth, son of Adam, was traced to Noah. Now, here in Genesis 11, the line of Shem, the son of Noah, is continued through to Abram. The purpose of the author is to make clear the link from Adam to Noah to Abram. The continuity of humanity, the continuation of the *imago dei*, is clearly outlined in these seemingly mundane lists of names.

Descendants of Shem

The *tōlēdōt* formula we have seen before is used to frame the narrative. However, in this case, we also have some chronological details given. In addition to the standard, “these are the records of the generations of Shem. Shem was one hundred years old, and became the father of Arpachshad”, the author records that this occurred “two years after the flood” (v. 10).

However, some have found this statement to present a chronological inconsistency. The Bible states that “Noah was five hundred years old, and Noah became the father of Shem, Ham, and Japheth” (Genesis 5:32). Also, we read that “Noah was six hundred years old when the flood of water came upon the earth” (Genesis 7:6). Taken together, this implies that Shem was one hundred years old when the Flood began. However, in our passage it seems that Shem is one hundred years old, two years after the Flood. If we consider the Flood itself to have lasted a year, then the Bible is off by three years.

In fact, the idea that Noah was five hundred years old when he became the father of his sons does not imply that he was *exactly* that age when all three were born. In fact, the sons were not likely triplets, so at least a few years must have intervened. This solves the apparent chronological discrepancy.

In the narrative, the pattern of the genealogy generally follows that of Genesis 5 in that it is, largely, a linear form of genealogical descent. There is, for example, a similar literary formula, where the name of each patriarch is given and then the announcement of the birth of their descendant. So we have, “Seth lived one hundred and five years, and became the father of Enosh” (Genesis 5:6). And we also have “Arpachshad lived thirty-five years, and became the father of Shelah” (Genesis 11:12).

Also, there is the familiar phrase “and other sons and daughters.” This reflected the continued blessing of God as mankind was fruitful and multiplied. There is also the pattern of naming only one descendant in each generation, until the conclusion where three sons are named. Consider,

“Noah was five hundred years old, and Noah became the father of Shem, Ham, and Japheth” (Genesis 5:32).

“Terah lived seventy years, and became the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran” (Genesis 11:26).

That is, the genealogy of chapter 11 is a linear genealogy that ends with a segmented genealogy. This is much like the genealogy of Genesis 5 which progressed from generation to generation until it came to Noah where it ended: Noah

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Shem -- Ham -- Japheth

In Genesis 11 the genealogy ends: Terah

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Abram -- Nahor -- Haran

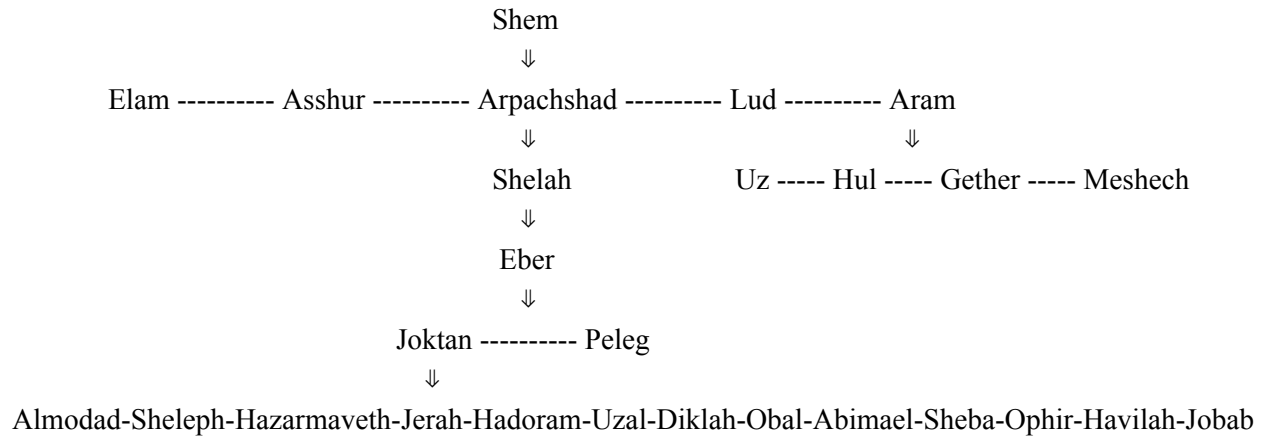
Despite the Flood and the building of the Tower of Babel, there remained a predictable pattern of human descent. The wickedness of man could not foil the plans of God.

Yet, we must notice that there are some variations in the different genealogical narratives. One is that Genesis 11 omits the total years of the life of the patriarch. For example, the statement that “so all the days of Seth were nine hundred and twelve years, and he died” (Genesis 5:8) is absent when discussing the patriarchs in Genesis 11. Perhaps more importantly, the phrase “and then he died” is also not used in Genesis 11. This may seem insignificant, but perhaps it is important in streamlining the narrative and pushing it forward to the birth of the chosen Abram. More than that, though, is that it may reflect a new optimism that came with the choosing of Abram as the conduit through whom “all the families of the earth will be blessed” (Genesis 12:3).

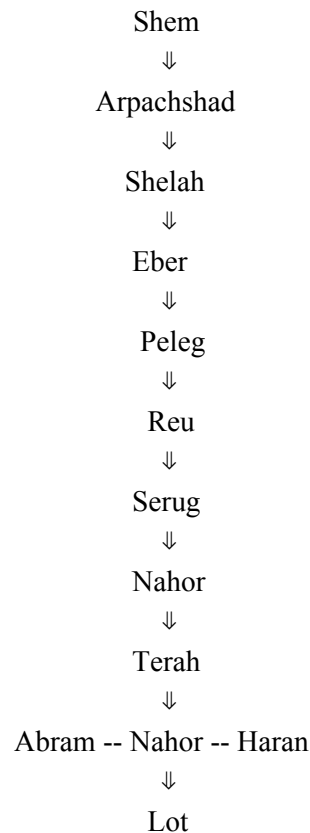
When considering the Table of Nations in Genesis 10, the genealogy of Genesis 11 differs in that the genealogy of chapter 11 is concerned only with firstborn sons. This was more common in the ancient world where primogeniture was the norm. To demonstrate,

Genesis 10:21-31

The family tree of the line of Shem as presented in the Table of Nations looks like this:

Genesis 11:10-32

In tracing the line of Shem to Abram it is described as:



By combining the two genealogies in Genesis, we notice that Abram is the tenth in the line from Shem and the twentieth from Adam. Therefore, Shem is the midpoint between Adam and Abram. Also, we can see that Abram is seventh from Eber, the person from whom the Hebrews were thought to have taken their name. And Eber, himself, is fourteenth from Adam. Furthermore, the holy Enoch who “walked

with God” (Genesis 5:24) is seventh from Adam, and thus the midpoint between Adam and Eber. All of this is not to suggest some sort of numerological mystery. We must remember that it is not possible to assert that the list was intended to designate every generation, but rather a significant descendant. That is, this was not a ‘closed’ genealogy, which is an exclusive listing of descendants, but rather an ‘open’ genealogy, which permitted gaps in the historical record. So the significance of particular males at regular intervals was a helpful tool in keeping track of the genealogy in its entirety. Such devices as this were often used in early societies as mnemonic supports.

Another point worthy of notice is the diminishing lifespans of the patriarchs. For example, “¹²Arpachshad lived thirty-five years, and became the father of Shelah; ¹³and Arpachshad lived four hundred and three years after he became the father of Shelah, and he had other sons and daughters” (v. 12-13). This would give Arpachshad a long life of some 438 years. Yet, Shem, his father, had lived to the ripe, old age of 600 (v. 11). By the time we get to Peleg, we see that “¹⁸Peleg lived thirty years, and became the father of Reu; ¹⁹and Peleg lived two hundred and nine years after he became the father of Reu, and he had other sons and daughters” (v. 18-19). This means Peleg lived a mere 239 years, just more than one-half of Arpachshad. And when we reach Nahor, we see that he lived an almost reasonably human 138 years, “²⁴Nahor lived twenty-nine years, and became the father of Terah; ²⁵and Nahor lived one hundred and nineteen years after he became the father of Terah, and he had other sons and daughters” (v. 24-25).

This might be explained by environmental factors resulting from the changing ecology of the planet following the Flood. It is also, though, clearly part of the curse of Genesis 6:3, “then the Lord said, ‘My Spirit shall not strive with man forever, because he also is flesh; nevertheless his days shall be one hundred and twenty years.’” That is, the diminishing longevity of man was due to the consequences of his increasing sin.

The Family of Terah

After a rather un-descriptive listing of names, the author devotes more space to describing the immediate generations of Terah and his offspring. Terah is the transitional link from early Genesis to the age of the patriarchs. “Terah lived seventy years, and became the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran” (v. 26). Terah is the father of three sons - Abram, Nahor, and Haran. But notice that Terah fathered his children at a late age compared with previous generations. This would be something that would haunt his son Abram.

When looking at this generation, not only are the men mentioned, but also their wives.

“²⁷Now these are the records of the generations of Terah. Terah became the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran; and Haran became the father of Lot. ²⁸Haran died in the presence of his father Terah in the land of his birth, in Ur of the Chaldeans. ²⁹Abram and Nahor took wives for themselves. The name of Abram’s wife was Sarai; and the name of Nahor’s wife was Milcah, the daughter of Haran, the father of Milcah and Iscah. ³⁰Sarai was barren; she had no child” (v. 27-30).

Scripture states that Haran had at least two daughters and one son. The daughters were Milcah and Iscah; the son was Lot (v. 31). No mention is made of Haran’s wife. Nahor married his niece, Milcah the

daughter of Haran. This was not as uncommon as it may seem. It was often done in ancient societies as a means of offering protection to otherwise deserted young women, and it was seen as a way of maintaining family ties and even keeping property within the family.

Abram married Sarai, of whom we are told that she was unable to bear children. This would be seen as a great hardship in the ancient world. Not only was a sizable family a benefit to a pastoral and agricultural existence, but without an heir, particularly a male heir, the inherited property and belongings of the family would be dispersed to distant relatives. This also explains why extended family groups, like that mentioned here, were common in the ancient world. Life was safer, and economically more stable, in larger family groups.

For a reason that is not mentioned in Scripture, Terah and his family left their homeland.

“³¹Terah took Abram his son, and Lot the son of Haran, his grandson, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Abram’s wife; and they went out together from Ur of the Chaldeans in order to enter the land of Canaan; and they went as far as Haran, and settled there. ³²The days of Terah were two hundred and five years; and Terah died in Haran.” (v. 31-32).

Not all of the family group made this journey. Notice that the family of Nahor and Milcah remained behind. Whether there had been a family dispute, or perhaps the resources of the family were strained by the growing numbers of children, we are not told. Perhaps Terah was simply more adventurous and thought the prospects might be better in another location. At any rate, whatever the human motivations, we know that this was part of God’s sovereign plan to prepare Abram for his special calling to head the family from whom all the world would be blessed.

To discover more about these ancestors of the chosen people, we must devote some attention to history and culture. In the ancient world, much like today, people named their children for particular reasons. The name Terah, is related to the word, *yārēah*, which means moon and *yeraḥ*, which means lunar month. This might suggest that the Terah and his family worshipped a moon god or goddess.

Sarai, is the Akkadian equivalent of *šarratu*, which means queen and is the name for Ningal, the female partner of the Sumerian moon god. Milcah is the same name as the goddess Malkatu, the daughter of the moon god. Also, the city of Haran was a center of moon worship, and therefore it is no exaggeration to suggest that the family was likely devoted to the cult of the moon god in their worship.

The location of Ur is another point to consider. For years it was assumed that Ur of the Chaldeans was the commonly known city of Ur located on the Euphrates River in lower Mesopotamia. The city was first built by the Sumerians in the third millennium BC. However, recent scholarship has challenged that assertion, and now it is suggested that the Ur of Abram was located much farther north in Upper Mesopotamia, perhaps Ura in what was Hittite territory.

Arguments against the traditional location of Ur are that a journey from southern Mesopotamia to Canaan by way of Haran in northern Mesopotamia, while certainly possible, is a remarkably long journey for a family to undertake. Also, while the traditional city of Ur is referenced hundreds of times in cuneiform

texts of the period, it is never once referenced as Ur of the Chaldeans. In fact, the Sumerian city of Ur could not have been called that, since the Chaldeans as a separate ethnic group related to the Arameans do not appear in history until much later in history. In Scripture, the Chaldeans are not mentioned until Genesis 22, where their ancestor, Chesed, is identified.

A further argument against a southern location for Ur is that Scripture seems to indicate the birthplace of Abram as being in Upper Mesopotamia.

“²Abraham said to his servant, the oldest of his household, who had charge of all that he owned, ‘please place your hand under my thigh, ³and I will make you swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and the God of earth, that you shall not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I live, ⁴but you will go to my country and to my relatives, and take a wife for my son Isaac.’ ⁵The servant said to him, ‘suppose the woman is not willing to follow me to this land; should I take your son back to the land from where you came?’ ⁶Then Abraham said to him, ‘beware that you do not take my son back there! ⁷The Lord, the God of heaven, who took me from my father’s house and from the land of my birth, and who spoke to me and who swore to me, saying, “to your descendants I will give this land,” He will send His angel before you, and you will take a wife for my son from there”’ (Genesis 24:2-7).

9. The World of the Old Testament



The servant is commanded to go to the the land where Laban then resided, in Paddan-Aram, to acquire a bride for Isaac. This is the referred to by Abraham as “my country,” a frequently used phase for the land of one’s birth.

In response to these arguments, those scholars who still support the traditional location of southern Mesopotamia for Ur argue that such a long journey, while exceedingly difficult, would not be impossible for a people who were herders with livestock. In addition, to take the longer route through the Mesopotamian river valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates would make more sense than to cross the desert directly, where grass and water for their valuable animals would be scarce.

Also, the Ura of the Hittites, is not a particularly productive area for livestock and is, therefore, an unlikely place for a family of herdsmen to make their home. Finally, many others, especially Amorites, journeyed from southern Mesopotamia to Canaan during the second millenium BC, and so Terah and his family may have been part of a larger migratory experience.

Genesis 11:26-32 and Acts 7:4

Another issue to consider is this. According to Genesis 11:26-32, Terah was seventy years old when Abram was born, "Terah lived seventy years, and became the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran" (v. 26). Terah died in Haran at the age of two hundred and five, "the days of Terah were two hundred and five years; and Terah died in Haran" (v. 32). So Terah lived another one hundred thirty-five years after giving birth to Abram. According to Genesis 12, Abram left Haran when he was seventy-five years old, "so Abram went forth as the Lord had spoken to him; and Lot went with him. Now Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran" (Genesis 12:4). That means that Abram left Haran while his father still lived, in fact Terah lived on another sixty years after his son, Abram, had followed God's command to,

"Go forth from your country,
And from your relatives
And from your father's house,
To the land which I will show you" (Genesis 12:1).

However, when making his defense before the Sanhedrin, Stephen gave a history of the people of Israel from their beginnings. In doing so, Stephen declared,

""²Hear me, brethren and fathers! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, ³and said to him, "leave your country and your relatives, and come into the land that I will show you." ⁴Then he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. From there, after his father died, God had him move to this country in which you are now living"" (Acts 7:2-4).

This seems to state that Abram only left Haran for Canaan after Terah had died. Several attempts have been made to reconcile these two passages. First, is that the Samaritan Pentateuch (as opposed to the Masoretic text more commonly used) has Terah dying at one hundred forty-five years of age. If that were the version of the Old Testament with which Stephen was familiar, the inconsistencies disappear.

A second approach is to suggest that the text in Genesis does not state that Terah was exactly seventy-five years old when Abram was born, but that he was that age when he began to have children. He "became the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran" (v. 26). There is no indication that the boys were triplets, so this

is also a plausible argument. Terah could have been one hundred thirty years old when he fathered Abram, and again the discrepancies are reconciled.

A final option is that Stephen could simply have misremembered the chronology. He was, after all, on trial before the Jewish High Council for his life and could be forgiven if he made an error in his historical narrative. This does not, by the way, mean that there is a error in Scripture. Luke, writing Acts, could have accurately recorded Stephen's speech, including the error Stephen made while speaking. This argument does not mean that the Bible is wrong, it means that Stephen was.

Takeaways

We can see from our study of the early chapters of Genesis that it is not that life has found a way to go on; it is that our sovereign God has planned a way of salvation. It is His perfect purposes and His divine decrees, that have unfolded throughout His plan of history. Circumstances have not just randomly happened to work out a certain way. Instead, God has used individual men, specific nations, and even entire people groups to accomplish His will for humanity. Scripture does not suggest that man will succeed despite adversity. Quite the contrary, it insists that man is fallen and entirely incapable of achieving anything on his own. Humanity cannot take care of itself, let alone reconcile itself to the God it has infinitely offended. The Bible teaches that God has planned everything for His purposes, and that plan includes a plan of salvation that began to be revealed in the Garden, was continued despite the sins requiring the Flood and the foolishness of trying to build the Tower of Babel, and manifested itself in the call of Abram.