

Abram Led Out of Ur of the Chaldeans

Genesis 11:27-12:3

The History of Terah

The last family in the register of the God-fearing generations of Shem that have kept the holy tradition pure is that of Terah, whose best known son was Abram (later called Abraham). After that we move on to what is called “the generations of Abraham.”

Little attention will be given to the ages which are mentioned. If we add them we could conclude that they covered a time span of 292 years, counting from the flood to the birth of Abram. But we noted already that in the Biblical listings some, or even many, generations are skipped and we have to consider the possibility that this may be the case also in Genesis 11. According to information obtained from excavations in the Middle East, a Babylonian empire existed already eight centuries before Abraham. How many then may have been the centuries from the flood to Abraham?

Generations came and died. Population density caused people to search for other places to live. Wars broke out and alliances were contracted. Offerings were burnt, very soon already for gods of human fantasy: first for images and eventually for sun, moon, and stars. The whole world was shrouded in the darkness of heathendom. The men who no longer remembered God concentrated all their efforts upon their culture and — no Word of God was heard, no prophet arose to proclaim new things. When Abraham is born Egypt has already many pyramids, and in the land of the two rivers many cities have appeared, built around the ziggurats (temple towers) with their idolatrous cults. One of the most famous was Ur, the city of the moon worshippers. With every new moon hundreds

of people would ascend the temple tower in solemn procession to bow down at this high level for the first visible crescent.

In such times Terah lived. After reaching the age of seventy, Terah got three sons: *Abram, Nahor, and Haran*. The latter died in the land of his birth, in Ur of the Chaldeans. He was survived by three children: Lot, *Milcah*, and *Iscah*. The fact that Ur is called the birthplace of Haran but not of Terah indicates that Terah came from elsewhere and did not belong to the people of Ur. Terah was a son of the plains, a nomadic prince, who had lived in tents during the wandering life (compare 9:27; 46:34; Hebrews 11:9). This had been in keeping with the tradition of his people. Later, however, he had settled inside the city walls, as Lot would do in Sodom. From the marriages of Abraham and Nahor within the confines of the family it becomes apparent that Terah held on to the religion of his fathers even though he lived in Ur. Abram married his half-sister *Sarai* (20:12) and Nahor married *Milcah*, daughter of his deceased brother. And yet Terah's household, although it attempted to avoid assimilation with the heathens, was not free from the influence of idolatrous religion, as is clearly shown in Joshua 24:2 (compare also 31:19).

But then we read that Terah, taking the initiative to leave Ur, took Abram, Lot, and Sarai and made them go in a westerly direction towards Canaan. And having arrived in the territory of Haran, in northeast Syria, where they found a suitable place to live, they made camp and stayed there. Also Terah, who had come along, settled there, and later we read that Nahor did the same (24:10, 15). This then became the great turning point.

Abram Called to the Land of Canaan

The history continues with the calling of Abram in chapter 12: "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you." According to the sequence in the narrative, this calling took place in Haran. But it is remarkable that elsewhere the Scriptures make a close connection with Ur; so in 15:7: "I am the LORD Who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans" (compare also Nehemiah 9:7). And see especially Acts 7:2-4, where Stephen on the ground of Scriptural information and in accordance with Jewish tradition stated that God appeared to Abram when he was still in Mesopotamia (where Ur was

located) “before he dwelt in Haran,” and that the command to move away came to him there in Ur.

The one story does not seem to harmonize with the other.

The *Statenvertaling* solves it in this way, that there was only one call which came in Ur, and the original text 12:1 is translated as: The LORD *had* said unto Abram. That is, earlier, in Ur.

However, there are more arguments (also linguistic ones) in favour of the reading—which we also find in the new translation—”The LORD *said* to Abram,” that is, in Haran.

That means then that there has been a *twofold* call, first in Ur and after that in Haran.

The first time, in Ur, there was a divine appearance and the command was: Leave your country and your relatives and “go into the land which I shall show you” (Acts 7:3). Literally, the original text says: “. . . hither, to the land that I shall show you”; the command was short. In that land, waiting for His servant, was God. That indicates that the way for Abram had been prepared and that God was ready, as it were, to receive him in that other land, which must have been a very comforting thought. But it also tells us that not Terah organized everything, but that the LORD right from the beginning kept it all in His hands and guided and prepared all things.

The trek had to be westward for obvious reasons, for eastward the road would lead to the waters of the Persian Gulf, to the south there was the Arabian desert, and in the north was a mountain range. And indeed the name of the promised land was not mentioned yet, but God would Himself point it out. This divine calling was the reason why Terah, according to Genesis 11, *made* Abram, Sarai, and Lot depart. Without a doubt Abram had informed his relatives of the divine appearance, and we see how Terah provided fatherly leadership

The second time that God called was in Haran. When Stephen says that it was after Terah’s death, then this must be understood so: that Genesis

11 first completed the history of Terah with the mention of his death and that after that the story of the second call is given. For a comparison of 11:26 with 12:4 and 11:32 teaches us that Terah lived another sixty years after Abram's departure from Haran, approximately until shortly before Isaac's wedding.

Attention should also be given to the fact that this time the LORD said, "Go" and did not repeat the previously heard "hither." He was still as it were the waiting God, Who gave Abram a command to move on. And this time there was added, "and from your father's house." Terah with all that belonged to him had to stay behind. And the object of all this was "*to give you this land to possess*" (15:7).

But more was revealed in Haran, namely, the *blessing* which the LORD would bring over Abram (12:2, 3).

The first part of this blessing was, "*I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you.*" The contents of that blessing was given in the second part: "*. . . and make your name great,*" which indicated its riches, namely, that he personally would be a blessing for many, "*so that you will be a blessing.*"

This is yet further developed in the *third* part: "*I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse,*" to which is added: "*and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.*" Abram would have universal significance.

In this blessing we see a surprising progress in God's revelation.

First of all, the word of the blessing falls like an abundant rain upon a dry and arid land. It is true that Noah with his sons also received a blessing and that the pronouncement regarding Shem has to do with future blessings (9:1, 26). But the direct statement, "I shall bless thee," is not found in the Bible prior to this. Furthermore, the blessing of Noah and his sons was primarily pertaining to the natural life.

In the second place, we must notice that this blessing is tied to a *person*, to Abram. To partake in God's blessing is therefore only possible by partaking in Abraham. And that does not just apply to Sarah and Lot, and to

Abraham's household and others of that time, but it applies also to us, yes to all believers, for "in you all the families of the earth will be blessed" . . . *in* you. Therefore there must be a spiritual fellowship with Abraham.

Undeniably, "Abraham does not know us and Israel does not acknowledge us" (Isaiah 63:16). How then can we live in this close fellowship with him? Yes, the question arises whether a promise is not given which *cannot* be fulfilled in any human being, not even in Abraham.

But now let us read on. After Abraham's sacrifice on Moriah God said, "By your descendants shall all the nations of the earth be blessed" (22:18). And so it is said to *Isaac*: "By your descendants all the nations of the earth shall be blessed (26:4). And also to *Jacob* the LORD says: "By you and your descendants . . ." (28:14). We see then that the promise is passed on from father to child and even to a numerous people in the far future (26:4; 28:14; compare 27:29).

Yet the "in you" does not point to a whole nation, but to a person, in the case of Abraham and primarily also in that of Isaac and Jacob ("in you and in your seed"). This becomes apparent again when Jacob blesses *Judah* (49:8, 10), from whom would come forth Shiloh; which name may mean "the eligible one," "the one who had a right to it."

We understand already what person is always meant as the one in whose fellowship we will receive the promised blessing. Paul has clearly stated it: "that in *Christ* Jesus the *blessing of Abraham* might come upon the Gentiles" (Galatians 3:14).

The promise to Abraham, which was carried over to Isaac and Jacob, concerned the Christ. It was Messianic.

When God spoke to Abraham, He regarded the coming Messiah. Upon Him, Who has become a curse on account of our sins and in our stead, the blessing has come down for us. He has become a fountain of blessing for all those who by the Holy Ghost are implanted into Christ, by faith, and who now in *Him*, that is in His fellowship, have life.

Abraham the Father of the Believers

We have seen before that the writer of Genesis has subdivided his book into the parts from 2:4 on, and that all these parts have the title “These are the generations (the toledoth) of” You can look it up again at the beginning of Outline 4.

It is remarkable that this title is not found above chapter 12. We would expect there, “These are the generations (the toledoth) of Abram.” But it is absent and that cannot be a mistake. Actually these “generations” had started with the history of Terah (11:27-32), and the history carries on without a new heading in the next chapters from 12 to 25:11.

We will have to see the actual reason for this in this: that Abraham in the Bible is not in the first place significant as the ancestor of Israel, but especially as the father of the believers.

To say it differently — Abraham’s significance is not to be seen in genealogical terms as was the case with Terah, Isaac, and Jacob, but in religious ones. He is not so much father of the Jews, who are his descendants according to the flesh; but rather, he is the father of all those who live by the same faith as Abraham did.

Abraham is “our father,” the father of all who believe, out of the Jews as well as the gentiles (Romans 4:1, 11b, 12, 16, 17; Galatians 3:7; John 8:39; 40; 44).

“It is men of faith who are the sons of Abraham” (Galatians 3:7-9), and “if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise” (Galatians 3:29).

Thus in our form for baptism Abraham is rightly called the father of all believers, a name which applies to nobody else. Not the blood relation is decisive here, but the faith relation. Thus the New Testament teaches us — and also already the Old Testament. We will see more of this later on.

Questions

1. Does Abram's settling in Haran indicate lack of faith?
2. Do you notice the progress in the revelation when you compare Genesis 12:3 "in you" with Genesis 3:15?
3. In what manner does the blessing of Christ (promised to Abraham) come to the gentiles and in what does it consist?
4. Who emphasize strongly their genealogical descent from Abraham? Mention some examples. Does it also happen among us that there is boasting about, or even that there is trust placed in, descent from believing ancestors?

