**Lesson 1**

**20, 21 September 2021**

**Genesis 11:10-32**

A picture containing silhouette

Description automatically generated**Another Perspective:**

1. Do the **“In Class Assignment”** on the two genealogies found in Genesis 5 and 11.
2. PowerPoint presentation:

**Why “Another Perspective”?** – I wanted to share some thoughts about Abraham and Sarah from the very first Bible class I taught here at FBC, back in 2016. But I also wanted us to look at the events at the end of Genesis 11 through the eyes of the narrative’s *participants*. In the past we have considered the *original audience* and the *present day audience*, but there is a third viewpoint that we must also understand and that is the viewpoint of the people who are actually experiencing the story we are reading. For Genesis chapter 11, the ***original audience*** *is the generation of Israelites* who are about to enter the Promised Land at the end of Moses’ life. But the ***narrative’s participants*** *are Abraham and his family*, who lived several hundred years earlier than Moses.

**Sarah** – I want us to consider Sarah in particular. We need to see her in the contexts of the *cultural mandate* as she understood it, of her *knowledge of scripture*, and of the *time* in which she lived. We will start by placing her in history as we review key events recorded in Genesis. (See Chart 2b.) As you can see, she lived sometime after the tower of Babel, when the nations were scattering out over the world. We will look at this a little more closely in a few minutes, but for now let’s consider her knowledge of Scripture.

**Sarah’s “Bible”** – What did Sarah’s Bible consist of? That is, how many books of Scripture had been written when Sarah was living? None! What Sarah had was 2000 years of oral tradition, passed down from generation to generation. And as we saw from our in-class assignment today, she had all those repetitions of “…and had other sons and daughters” ringing in her ears as a painful reminder of her own inability to conceive. Another related question we need to ask is: how many commandments did the people of Sarah’s time have to obey? There were two *prohibitions* regarding blood: 1) don’t eat animal blood and 2) don’t shed human blood. And there were two *positive commands*: 1) be fruitful and multiply and 2) rule over all the earth.

**The Cultural Mandate and Sarah** – So with that in mind let’s consider how the cultural mandate impacted Sarah’s life. Remember that she is barren. What are the ramifications of that fact for Sarah? The devastating reality is threefold:

1. **Personal heartache** because she cannot have a baby of her own.
2. **Public shame** because she cannot meet the expectations of carrying on the family line.
3. **Sense of being excluded** because she cannot be part of fulfilling God’s stated plan.

**Arpachshad’s Line** – We will come back to the issue of Sarah’s infertility and its impact on her life next week, but for now let’s bring Abram into the picture. Abram and Sarah lived about 300 years after the Flood, ten generations removed from Noah. Shem’s son Arpachshad settled somewhere southeast of Mount Ararat, and succeeding generations moved into the Fertile Crescent. By the time Abram was born, some of Arpachshad’s descendants had traveled all the way to Ur. At the beginning of Genesis 11, we read the account of the Tower of Babel, so we have to ask ourselves, “What does the Tower of Babel have to do with Abram and Sarah?” How would that event have impacted their lives?

**Babylonian Culture** – For one thing, we can tell from a map that the cities of Babel and Ur were not that far from one another, and they were both large cities on a prominent trade route along the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. Babel, which came to be known as Babylon, and Ur were part of the Babylonian empire, which means that they shared the *same culture*. So let’s stop for a moment and consider the Babylonian culture. Jen Wilkin will address this issue later, but I thought it would be helpful to have a visual picture of what Abram and Sarah would have seen when they entered Babylon on their travels. The gates to the city were impressive and beautifully decorated. This is a picture of an actual entrance gate that has been excavated and is now part of an elaborate museum exhibit. Art would have surrounded them, not only on the gate itself but also on all the walls of the city. Babylon was also the home of gorgeous hanging gardens, collectively known as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Imagine coming upon this in the middle of the desert! Think how it would have delighted the eyes, after all that sand. Babylonian culture was not only very artistic, but also technologically advanced. For example, the Babylonians built and maintained a large moat that surrounded the city and also constructed bridges across it.

**Babel**

**Haran**

**Ur**

**Ur—Like Babylon Only “More So”!** – The city of Ur was very similar to Babylon. It was the largest city in the world at the time, and it enjoyed unparalleled wealth. The Bible Study Fellowship handbook adds this: “Excavations common to this area and time have uncovered two-story villas with as many as 14 rooms with plastered, whitewashed walls. Not even houses in Babylon…compared with those of Ur. Archaeologists have discovered materials from libraries and schools. Thousands of tablets record everything from hymns to the gods of Ur to business contracts.”

Moreover, the Great Ziggurat of Ur still exists today. The BSF handbook tells us, it “was built to honor the moon god Nanna, perhaps earlier than the first pyramids on the Nile. The top of the temple rose about 100 feet above its courtyard.”

**Great Ziggurat of Ur**

To summarize, the Babylonian culture was technologically advanced, extremely affluent, and defiantly anti-God. Does this have a familiar ring to it?

**Enroute to Canaan** – Abram and Sarah lived almost half of their lives in Ur, but they did travel to Haran with Abram’s father Terah. If you look at the map, you can see that Haran was approximately two-thirds of the way to Canaan. That is where chapter 11 ends, so we will leave them there for now.

**A Take Away from This Portion** – The Lord did *not* tell Abram to leave Ur because it was so ungodly. In many ways Canaan was just as ungodly as Ur and Babylon ever were. Similarly the Lord Jesus told His disciples that He did not pray that the Father would take us out of the world . . . but that the world and its values would be taken out of us!

**Jen Wilkin, *God of Covenant* video #1, “Introduction” (36:41 minutes)**

**Why Study Genesis? –** Why should we study the book of Genesis? One of the biggest reasons is that we think we already know it! It is true that we may be familiar with many of the stories contained in it, but we often haven’t seen how these stories fit into the “Big Story” of the Bible. Genesis is the “seed plot” of the Bible, the place where the seeds of many themes of scripture are planted. The Bible tells one Big Story throughout all sixty six books, the story of creation, fall, redemption and restoration. Genesis is the ultimate context giver for the entire Bible. So hopefully we will look at the “familiar stories” of Genesis with different eyes as we go through the book this time, seeing how they all fit into the entire narrative.

Another good reason for studying Genesis is understanding how Jesus viewed the book. In John 5:39-47 Jesus told His listeners that Moses was writing about Him! So we should be asking ourselves where we see Christ as we study Moses’ writings. That’s what we will be doing in the upcoming weeks.

**Overview of the Book –** The first eleven chapters of Genesis cover four major *events*: the creation of the universe, the fall, the Flood and the tower of Babel. The last thirty-nine chapters cover four major *figures*: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. Each new section of the book is introduced with the phrase “these are the generations of…”

**Explanation of the Workbook –** Each week’s homework is divided into five days. The first day of each week asks us to summarize each chapter we have read. This is *not* busywork! It forces us to consider what we have read so that we can put it into our own words. The first day may also include some overarching question about all the chapters we are to read for the week. The next four days will ask us to look at smaller portions of scripture and answer specific questions about them. Some of the questions begin with “What do you think…?” This means precisely that, what do YOU think? So there is not necessarily a “right” answer. We are commanded to love God with all of our own mind, not someone else’s mind!

**Overview Questions (pages 14-15 in the workbook) –** Moses is the author of Genesis, as well as the rest of the Pentateuch (first five books of the Bible). Jesus Himself affirmed Moses’ authorship.

Genesis was written about 3500 years ago. It was written to the generation of Israelites about to enter the Promised Land under Joshua’s leadership. Moses wanted to ground his people so they would understand their history, i.e. who they are. And he wanted to give them the Law to point them to who they should become. They are heading into pagan territory where no one will share their worldview.

But Genesis was also written to us. Bear in mind, however, that the books were written to a *collection* of people, not individuals. So we need to be careful about making personal application from these stories. Often they apply more to the whole family of God.

Genesis was written as historical narrative, meant to be taken as fact. These are not fictional characters, they are real people. Their stories are deceptively simple, with deeper meanings than are immediately apparent. Their stories are archetypal in nature. We also need to keep in mind that we have a modern, western concept of how history should be written. We think that it should be totally objective. But biblical writers—indeed all ancient near-Eastern authors—wrote to convince their readers of some particular idea. So Moses was intending to convince us of something, and we should be on the alert to see what it is.

Another thing to keep in mind is that Moses does not express horror over the terrible events he writes about…because he *assumes* that you will know to be horrified. So we need to ask ourselves what his assumptions were as we read through the various accounts we will encounter.

The central theme of Genesis is that it is the book of beginnings: of the world, of history, of sin, of redemption, of God’s chosen people. Moses also wanted to answer a question that loomed very large in the minds and hearts of his original hearers: “How is it that the people of God came to be in Egypt?”

**Summary of Genesis 11 –** The chapter begins with the account of the Tower of Babel, which is the story of dispersion. Mankind builds a tower, trying to reach to the heavens; God laughs at that idea and scatters people all over the earth, dividing them into different language groups. Immediately after that account, we see a genealogy, which seems a bit of an odd thing. But what Moses is doing is *expanding and contracting* his narrative. He began Genesis with the account of two people, Adam and Eve, and then used genealogies to show how the population expanded and sin proliferated. The account of the great flood reduced the population to just eight people. And then in chapter 10 we saw how the population once again expanded and how people spread all over the earth. The genealogy in chapter 11 contracts once again to focus our attention on Abraham.

**Shem’s Genealogy –** Notice how the life spans in Shem’s genealogy are shortening. By the end of the list we see life spans that are very similar to what we experience today. When the focus shifts to Terah, Abram’s father, we see some interesting details to take note of. Terah had three sons originally. One of them, Haran, had a son named Lot before he died. So Lot is Abram’s nephew. Abram’s brother Nahor married their niece. No comment is made about this because marriage to close relatives was not forbidden at that point in history and was a very common practice. We are also told that Sarah (Sarai) was barren, which will prove to have great bearing on future events in the narrative. And lastly we are told that Terah started out on the journey with Abram but died sometime after they reached the city of Haran.

**Abram’s Call and Obedience –** Abram was called to go to the land of Canaan, but he stopped along the way in Haran and lived there for some time. So there seems to be more than one step to Abram’s obedience to God’s call. When we pick up the story in chapter 12 next week, we need to keep in mind these two points: Abram is heading into the land of Canaan, and he has a wife and a nephew who will play major roles in the story. We also know that Sarai cannot have a child.

The story line has narrowed to this one family, the family of promise to whom God will speak His covenant. We will see the faithfulness of God play out in the lives of Abram and his descendants throughout the rest of the book. The sovereign plans of God move forward because He is faithful to do all that He promised He would do. And we will see that Jesus speaks truthfully when He says, “Moses wrote of Me!”

**TAKE AWAYS and FURTHER COMMENTS:**

* Some further notes on the marriages to close relatives we see in Abram’s family. Abram’s brother Nahor married his niece, the daughter of Haran. It may well be that this was a way of providing for her after the death of her father. It seems that Abram took in Haran’s son Lot, and Nahor married Haran’s daughter Milcah. Abram himself married his half sister. (Genesis 20:12 makes it clear that Abram’s father Terah had at least two wives, one of them Sarah’s mother and the other one Abram’s mother.) One of Nahor’s granddaughters was Rebekah, who became Isaac’s wife.
* Another thing I see in all of this is the significance God places on marriage. No matter what the previous relationship of a man to a woman had been (his half sister, niece, second cousin, etc.), once he married her, she was referred to in Scripture only as his wife.
* “Abram and every person face the same defining decision: how will I respond to God? **First and foremost, God calls you to Himself** . . . His call includes facing sin and our need for God. Mankind’s need to *repent* or *renounce* former ways is not optional to God. God’s call also brings a promising way forward, an invitation into a new life of faith . . . Abram grew in faith as he experienced God’s faithfulness.” BSF handbook on Genesis, Lesson 8, page 2