

FROM SHEM TO ABRAM (1)

A Meditation on Genesis 11:10-26

God's Word is reliable, therefore it can be trusted *to the letter*, and we Christians need not apologize or blush for tenaciously holding this conviction. This is the lesson I hope to impart in this chapter.

Theologians refer to the inerrancy of Scripture, which simply means the Bible is without error in the original manuscripts. Psalm 19:7 states, "The law of the LORD is perfect." This being the case, John's warning concerning the book of Revelation can be applied to the Bible as a whole: "I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book" (Rev. 22:18-19). God is serious about not tampering with His holy Word.

Given the testimony of the Bible about itself, along with Jesus' exhortation to live according to every word that comes from the mouth of God (Matt. 4:4), we should give the genealogies of Genesis 5 and 11 conscientious consideration. Together they provide us with the names and the years that took place from the creation of the world to the birth of Abraham—2008 years to be exact.

When you compare the two genealogies, a couple of differences stand out. Genesis 5 adds up the total number of years each person lived, and then closes with the stark reality: "And he died." Genesis 11 doesn't add up the number of years each person lived (except for Terah), we have to add them up ourselves. Nor does Genesis 11 include the repeated and ominous epitaph: "And he died."

There are good theological reasons for these differences. Genesis 5 is stressing the end of life, and the death that sin brought into the world. Genesis 11, on the other hand, emphasizes "a movement away from death toward promise, and it stresses life and expansion, even though longevity was declining" (Allen P. Ross, *Genesis*, p. 252).

You'll notice that Shem lived to be 600 years old, but eight generations later Terah lived to be only 205, followed by Abraham who lived to be 175 and then Joseph who lived to 110. Nevertheless, Genesis 11:10-32 begins with Shem who was blessed by his father, and it ends with Abram, who will be called to be a blessing for all the families of the earth. Genesis 11 marks a glorious transition with another decisive move toward the realization of Genesis 3:15 in Abraham's seed, Jesus Christ. I hope you remember the promise of Genesis 3:15, since it's one of the main controlling verses in the entire Bible (if not *the* controlling verse), in this sense: OT biblical history, which includes world history, is progressing toward the fulfillment of Genesis 3:15, while NT history is its outworking in the world.

In Luke 3:23-38 we're provided with the genealogy of Jesus all the way back to Adam. It's a tight chronology, and perfectly reflects the genealogies of Genesis 5 and 11, with the exception of Cainan in Luke 3:36, who doesn't appear in the Genesis 11 genealogy. Many reasons have been advanced to explain this discrepancy. Cainan could be the result of a scribal addition. Perhaps a scribe's eye looked at Cainan in Luke 3:37 and accidentally added it again in verse 36 in the Greek Septuagint. Maybe Cainan is purposefully omitted in Genesis 11, because he was unfaithful. If this is the case, Arpachshad fathered Shelah his grandson. To be honest, I don't know why we have this difference, but I'm still not ready to reject the reliability of the genealogies and fill them with large, arbitrary gaps.

Sometimes there are apparent contradictions in the Bible that can be explained, if we understand the intent of the author. James B. Jordan writes in *The Theology of Biblical Chronology*, "The doctrine of inerrancy does not mean that there are no symbolic, ironic, or poetic statements in the Bible. The doctrine means that *rightly understood*, the Bible does not contradict historical reality. Thus, King Saul's son is named Ishbosheth in the book of Samuel, but Ishbaal in the book of Chronicles. Ishbosheth means 'Man of Shame,' and clearly was not the name he was called in life (to his face, anyway); while Ishbaal means 'Man of the Lord,' and doubtless was his real name. For theological reasons, the writer of Samuel has made an ironic pun on Ishbaal's name. The Bible itself makes this clear, so understanding this irony does not modify the doctrine of inerrancy. It would be a mistake to think, however, that because the writer of Samuel has altered Ishbaal's name, therefore no such person as Ishbaal ever existed" (p. 20). Admittedly, there are difficult passages to reconcile, like Luke 3:36, but many are easily harmonized with a little, prayerful study.

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FROM SHEM TO ABRAM (2)

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Probably the biggest problem for evangelicals today is that if you take the genealogies at face value, then you obviously have a young earth—6000 years old or so. Frankly, Christians who hold to this view are mocked and laughed out of academia. High school students in government schools are taught that “Neanderthal man” dates back 60,000 years. Egyptian civilization is said to have begun around 4000 B.C. However, if there was a global flood around 2350 B.C., then a date of 4000 or 3000 B.C. is out of the question. But these are the unquestionable dates given by the “respectable scholars.”

Throughout its history, what has the Church believed about the age of the earth? Bear in mind that while church tradition isn’t infallible, it is instructional. Since the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, the Spirit has been leading the Church into all truth (Jn. 16:13). Thus, to despise church history would be to despise the work of the Holy Spirit since the first century. Some Christians act as if the Holy Spirit was poured out twenty years ago, instead of two thousand years ago. Jordan writes, “So, what do our forefathers tell us? In the ancient church, we can look at the two great schools of Antioch and Alexandria. Theophilus of Antioch, founder of the Antiochene school of exegetical theology, set the date of creation at 5509 BC, using the Septuagint. Augustine of Hippo, a follower of the rival Alexandrian school of interpretation, accepted the chronology and labored to construct it systematically, seeking to clear up problems created by his Septuagint version.

“The Eastern Christian Church set the creation in September of 5509 BC, based on the Septuagint, despite Eusebius’s attempt to shorten the chronology somewhat. Meanwhile, in the West, the Masoretic text, rendered by Jerome into Latin, produced a shorter chronology. The chronology of Bede set the creation at 3952 years before the birth of Christ, and this became the standard in Western Christendom before the Reformation.

“How about the Protestant Reformers? Martin Luther’s positive assessment of the chronology is seen in his remarks on Genesis 11:

But Noah saw his descendants up to the tenth generation. He died when Abraham was about fifty-eight years old. Shem lived about thirty-five years after Abraham. Shem therefore lived with Isaac about 110 years and with Esau and Jacob about fifty years. It must have been a very blessed Church that was directed for so long a time by so many (pious) patriarchs who lived together for so many years.

Luther was in fact wrong about these dates, but his statement shows that he took the chronology seriously.

“John Calvin was very clear in his commitment to Biblical chronology. In the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* he noted that ‘the world, now declining to its ultimate end, has not yet attained six thousand years.’ In another amazing passage Calvin likened the truth of chronology to the doctrines of the Trinity and of predestination:

Profane men, I admit, in the matter of predestination abruptly seize upon something to carp, rail, bark, or scoff at. But if their shamelessness deters us, we shall have to keep secret the chief doctrines of the faith, almost none of which they or their like leave untouched by blasphemy. An obstinate person would be no less insolently puffed up on hearing that within the essence of God there are three Persons than if he were told that God foresaw what would happen to man when He created him. And they will not refrain from guffaws when they are informed that but little more than five thousand years have passed since the creation of the universe, for they ask why God’s power was idle or asleep for so long” (Ibid, p. 28-29).

Now why in recent days (i.e. the late 19th century) has the church departed from this view? There are two possibilities. First, the Church was wrong. “For instance, for a long time, dating from fairly early in the Christian era, pastors and theologians took a dim view of feasting, of sexuality, and of music. These were viewed with suspicion because of their emotional nature, but this suspicion arose from the Greek and stoic philosophical currents in the ancient world, certainly not from the Bible. Happily, the Church has reformed in these areas in recent times. Thus, it is possible that the Church has also been wrong to hold to Biblical chronology, possible that there are things in the Bible that the Church did not notice until provoked to do so by 19th century science. That is possible” (Ibid, p. 28).

The other possibility is that we have capitulated, because the so-called scientific community scorns the young earth view. Thus, Christians are afraid that they will be modern-day “flat-earthers,” and lose credibility. Nobody likes to be seen as a “flat-earther”—I don’t. But here’s the difficulty as I see it: either way, we lose respect. Let me quote Jordan once again: “The evangelical world has lost credibility on this point anyway. For nearly a century, the evangelical world has maintained that there are ‘gaps’ in the Biblical chronology, and that therefore we cannot say the world was created around 4000 BC. This belief makes possible an accommodation to the proposals coming from the world of secularist speculation and scholarship.

“Far from making orthodox Christianity more acceptable, this accommodation has made it seem silly. Secularists and moderns can read Genesis 5 and 11, and they can see clearly that these chapters both intend to provide a chronology and in fact do provide a chronology. They don’t believe this chronology is accurate, but they can see that it is present. As a result, they regard the modern evangelical position as stupid and ridiculous. ‘If you really believe the Bible is inerrant,’ they say, ‘then you have to take this chronology seriously. You’re just making fools of yourselves by trying to evade the information contained in these chapters’” (Ibid, p. 23).

Perhaps, I and church tradition are wrong about the genealogies, but let’s not be coaxed into accommodating the secularists because we’re embarrassed by the Bible. Could it be that God is using Genesis 5 and 11 to test us? Maybe God wants to see if we’ll stand up and be fools for Christ?

One thing is for sure, we’ll never be strong witnesses for Christ if we’re embarrassed by the Bible on any issue. In *Black and Tan*, Douglas Wilson shows how embarrassment of the Bible can neutralize Christians. The issue he addresses is slavery, not genealogies, but the principle is the same. He wrote, “Dr. Jerry Falwell was once in a television debate with a liberal Episcopalian bishop, and sad to say, the liberal bishop mauled Dr. Falwell. They were debating some issue like abortion or sodomy, and Falwell was maintaining the biblical position, and the bishop responded by saying, ‘Yes, but the Bible allows for *slavery*.’ Now what was Dr. Falwell going to do on national television? Does he say that the bishop is correct, the Bible does allow for slavery, and that he has no problem with it? We can see the headlines of the *New York Times* now: “Falwell Fires on Ft. Sumter.” Or perhaps he could have said that the bishop was wrong—but the good bishop was right. So he did the only thing he could do in such a situation, which was to hem and haw.

On another occasion, a Christian man was handing out tracts at a gay and lesbian dance. Those attending the dance did not appear to be pleased with this, and someone apparently called a liberal Methodist pastor to come and deal with him. The minister came down, and in the course of discussion, the Christian man said that Leviticus condemns homosexuality as an abomination. The liberal pastor responded by saying, “Yes, but the Old Testament allowed for *slavery*.” The Christian responded by saying, “Yes, it certainly did. So what’s your point?” If those who hate the Word of God can succeed in getting Christians to be embarrassed by *any portion* of the Word of God, then that portion will continually be employed as a battering ram against the godly principles that are *currently* under attack. In our day, three of the principal issues are abortion, feminism, and sodomy. If we respond to the “embarrassing parts” of Scripture by saying, “That was then, this is now,” we will quickly discover that unembarrassed progressives can play that game even more efficiently than embarrassed conservatives can. Paul prohibited eldership to women? *That was then, this is now*. Moses condemned sodomy? *That was then this is now*” (p. 44-45).

I hate to say it, but as Christians who take the Bible seriously we better get comfortable with the idea of being considered fools by the world, since they will always perceive us as such, unless they are converted. “For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Cor. 1:18).

We could go on and on about the different issues, doctrines or teachings that the world considers foolish: Unbelievers spending an eternity in hell, the doctrine of the Trinity, Jonah being swallowed by a great fish, Jesus being the only way to the Father, Creation in six literal days and the Second Coming of Christ, followed by judgment. But regardless of what the world thinks, let’s state with conviction, as Martin Luther did, “Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason—I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other—my conscience is captive to the Word of God.”

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