

gods”. The massive ziggurat, decayed by centuries of neglect and by those who wanted cheap building materials, was revealed by archaeologists after the First World War to be work of Ur-Nammu, king of Ur. It is believed to have been a temple to the moon-god.



After the death of Nahor, Terah migrated with his family up the Euphrates valley to Haran. That’s a journey of some 1200 km. No clear reason is given for this move. Apparently, Haran was as much a centre of moon-worship as the city they had left. It has been suggested that looming threats made it prudent for Terah to leave – about 1950 BC the Elamites destroyed Ur.

According to Stephen, “The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran. ‘Leave your country and your people’, God said, ‘and go to the land I will show you’.” (Acts 7.2-3). Already Abraham had heard the call of God.

Reflect:

- We see God’s purpose working out through the history of families and nations. What incidents can we name from the experience of our own family where, in retrospect, we can see the guiding hand of God?
- At what points have we been specifically aware of the call of God on our lives? How do we respond to God’s call? In what ways is God calling us right now?
- Scattered and brought together... In what ways do we see God at work in the world to bring people together?



Studies in Genesis chapters 1-11
by Peter J Blackburn

9. Scattered!

Reading: Genesis 11

Again and again people feel the urge to “do their own thing” with little or no reference to how it may affect others and their needs. We found this illustrated while camping at Hall’s Gap in the Grampians, Victoria, on 31 December 1987 –

We were in Stawell this afternoon to shop and to dine out. As we prepared to return to Hall’s Gap, we could see dark clouds and rain in the direction of the Grampians.

Proceeding along the road, we added wind to that list. Some five kilometres from our destination, we ran into heavy rain. It poured, slowing us down to a safe speed.

By the time we reached the caravan park, the rain was easing and we were relieved to see our silver-green tarp still in place, even if the tears we had patched in Adelaide had re-opened and two of the corner ropes had given way.

Some bedding was damp and we faced the task of drying it – along with other moist campers. One tent, we were told, had had “a foot of water through it”.

But it was New Year’s Eve – storm or no storm, the revellers still wanted to revel. In the laundry the washing machines and driers were laden with stubbies, chips and other food for celebration, and the room was filled with celebrators and their chairs!

The other laundry was also beginning to fill with wine-drinkers. The conflicting needs of the revellers and of the water-logged!

Of course, when we are reflecting on other people’s thoughtlessness, we need to be aware of our own tendency to fall into the same trap. On 6 January we were in desperate need again – our tent burnt down – and we were supported by the kindness of many people.

Still, it all causes us to consider what it is that binds us together and what drives us apart. Our society seems to be such a strange mixture. Except for a few people whom we would call “odd”, most of us “need” others – for company, friendship and for what they can do. Society is a sharing of resources and skills. We don’t have to be a combination of farmer, butcher, plumber, builder, food-processor, baker, pastry-cook, leather-worker, carpenter, blacksmith, watchmaker, herbalist... Society is a combination of “specialists”.

On the other hand, we value people of “like mind” and look forward to opportunities to “get away from it all”, to take a break.

Reflect:

- What is a “society”? What holds us together? What are the factors that drive communities and nations apart?

The Tower of Babel

Read: Genesis 11.1-9.

“Now the whole world had one language and a common speech” (v. 1). When we first study a language other than our own, we are impressed by the vast differences – we seem to be in a different world. Yet modern linguistic studies talk of “Indo-European” and find many subtle indications of an original “common speech”.

Derek Kidner helpfully comments –

The primeval history reaches its fruitless climax as man, conscious of new abilities, prepares to glorify and fortify himself by collective effort. The elements of the story are timelessly characteristic of the spirit of the world. The project is typically grandiose; men describe it excitedly to one another as if it were the ultimate achievement – very much as modern man glories in his space projects. At the same time they betray their insecurity as they crowd together to preserve their identity and control their fortunes (4b). (*Genesis* 109)

The plan was to erect a building which would withstand any future flood – well-baked (not sun-dried) bricks (stone wasn’t readily available in that area), and tar for mortar. The “tower that reaches to the heavens” expressed their lack of trust in God’s promise never to destroy the whole earth in another flood. But the stated aim was “so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth” (v. 4).

There is so much good that human beings can achieve together. But what might combined human unbelief and rebellion begin to do? “One people, one language; why, this is only a first step. No telling what they’ll come up with next – they’ll stop at nothing!” (v. 6 *The Message*). It all has a very “modern” ring to it!

The end reveals the decisive hand of God in human affairs. Mutual incomprehension has admittedly its natural causes, such as the very attitudes of pride and fear expressed in verse 4 (which could be a motto of modern nationalism); but ultimately it is God’s fit discipline of an unruly race.

Pentecost opened a new chapter of the story, in the articulating of one gospel in many tongues. The final reversal is promised in Zephaniah 3.9: “Yea, at that time I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call on the name of the Lord and serve him in one accord” (RSV). (Kidner, *Genesis*, 110)

The city was called Babel, meaning “confusion”. We have already heard of Babel (Babylon) in reference to Nimrod (10.10). The Old Testament Babylon was located about 82 km south of present-day Baghdad. In the book of Revelation (14.8; 16.19; 17.5; 18), Babylon symbolises human might set up against God and represented at the time by imperial Rome.

Reflect:

- In what ways do human beings still endeavour to “make a name for themselves”? To what extent do modern scientists and technologists have the goal that “nothing they plan to do will be impossible to them”? Name some of the areas where this is happening today.
- Since the Creator’s original intention was that human beings “rule over” the creatures of the earth (Gen. 1.26), what is the inherent danger of some of our modern scientific endeavour? At what point does it “step over the line”?

Shem to Abram

Read: Genesis 11.27-32.

Derek Kidner helps us through verses 10-26 –

The chosen line now leads out of the old world into that of the patriarchs. Of the names in 10.22ff only the ancestors of Eber reappear; thereafter it is Peleg, not Joktan as in 10.25ff, who is the growing-point. Ten generations are shown, perhaps to match the ten named from Adam to Noah; but the growth of nations in chapter 10, apart from any other considerations, makes it clear that great intervals lie between them.

The life-span is steadily contracting from the antediluvian level towards the 175 years of Abraham and the 110 of Joseph. More significantly, in view of the promised birth of Isaac, the age of parenthood has dropped to a point not far above its present level. (*Genesis* 111)

Terah and his family lived in Ur, some 200 km further down the Euphrates from Babylon. In Joshua 24.2 we read of the LORD telling the people through Joshua, “Long ago your forefathers, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the River and worshipped other