

THE GRAND ESCAPE.

No. 1. A Nation in Embryo.

How old is the universe? How big is it? Scientists will tell us that there are a trillion stars in a billion galaxies, a million light years away, all accelerating at enormous speeds, courtesy of dark energy, whatever that may be! I can't help wondering, through my amazement, how relevant is size in space that is endless? What does age count for in a universe billions of years old?

I feel more connected to the statistics of the earth we inhabit. If this planet, the third from the sun and the densest in the Solar System, were to move in its orbit too far from its mean distance of 150 million kilometres from the sun, it would be uninhabitable. But it is in exactly the right spot for it to bear plant life sufficient to maintain its animal life, with the required balance of hydrogen, oxygen, carbon dioxide and sunlight. Its lands and oceans are endowed with everything needed by mankind and it is decorated with enough grandeur and delicate beauty to lift the spirit and the soul.

But let me turn from science to apologetics and say that what signifies more to me is the "who" of the universe. My Bible tells me that it was made by God, and I bow in humble worship before the magnificence of this Creator. By scientific exploration man reaches up to God, yet he can never quite make the distance. He may "climb the mountain because it is there," but he can never work out *why* God put it there. In God's order of things it is His prerogative to reach down to us, to provide us with all we need to lead a good and full life on this earth, and to reach Him simply through faith, obedience and our innate desire to worship.

It heartens us to know that God does have a plan for the universe and a plan for our own small planet: He alone is the guide who can teach us how to live. Because He is love itself He created mankind to be the recipient of that love and placed him in a world with everything he could desire to live a satisfying life. Mankind wasted no time in messing things up but God wiped the slate clean with the Flood and began again with the God-fearing Noah and his family. The story is in Genesis chapters 6-9.

How can we reconcile our concept of God, the mighty Creator of the Universe, with the God Who condescends to coping with the frailties of mankind? Why do you think God gave mankind the gift of freewill, knowing what would be the result?

In thanks for deliverance from the Flood Noah built an altar and worshipped God. His patriarchal declaration concerning his sons apportioned to his eldest son Shem the greatest blessing and dominance over his brothers. In time Shem had 5 sons and lived to the good old age of 600, to see the birth of his great-(to the power of 7) grandson, a man upon whom God had set His hand for a unique role in history, a man whose family would grow into a nation and spread its influence throughout the world. His name was Abram.

Abram lived in the city of Ur, whose civilization and culture had already reached high levels. Over four millennia the Rivers Tigris and Euphrates built up a vast plain of silt but in Abram's day Ur was a port where the Euphrates ran into the Persian Gulf. Traders sailed their dhows as far as the Indus Valley and possibly as far as Ceylon. Here they could have met the junks of China and established far eastern trade. To Ur's west, caravans would follow the Fertile Crescent – northwest along the Euphrates, then west and southward to Damascus and other river-valley civilizations such as Egypt, which looked across the Mediterranean to the cultures of prehistoric Europe. The city of Ur, the centre of manufacturing, farming, shipping and extensive trade, also had a huge library; it would have been a stimulating place for a man of intellect. Modern excavation has revealed the famous royal

cemeteries, dating c. 2500 B.C., yielding jewellery and art treasures of unbelievable beauty, head attire, personal jewels and a golden tumbler and cup of Queen Shubad.

But Ur was also a centre for the worship of the moon-god Nannor and his consort Ningal and according to Joshua 24:2, Abram's father Terah was among the worshippers. Yet we see in Genesis 12:1 (and repeated by Stephen the martyr in Acts 7:2,3) that God came to Abram in that city with a very definite call to leave it all behind and begin another civilisation to the west.

We wonder how God spoke, and how Abram knew that it was God. It seems that Noah had died 2 years before Abram was born, making Shem the oldest father alive at that time and therefore a priest and a king to his own family. We can imagine that as such, he took it upon himself to visit the city of Ur. Amid all the gods of the surrounding nations of which Abram would have been aware, did Shem talk to his great-great-etc-grandson of the one true God and the need to worship Him alone? Could it have been Shem's influence that made Abram, and his father, willing to leave the comforts of Ur for a hard trek to an unknown destination? Perhaps Abram, aware of a world lost in degrading views of God, longed for something purer, better, holier, a desire to begin again in a new place with a new vision and worship of God. In any case, by Genesis 12:1 we know that Abram did indeed know God enough to recognize His voice.

In how many ways does God speak? In as many ways as there are individuals willing to listen to Him! Consider how God speaks to you, and how you know it is God's voice. God can use whatever method He knows is most effective for you – through friends, advisors, circumstances, inner convictions, strong urges. One reliable way to check the veracity of a call is to ask, does it concur with the principles laid down in Scripture? Does it have the potential to bring glory to God, and not just fulfil our own desires? Does it, in the light of God's plan for us, make sense? (The Holy Spirit has common sense far beyond our own!) Satan will trick us into wrong decisions if he can: we need to ask God selflessly and trustfully, what is His will for us – and be ready to accept His answer!

We see in this Genesis passage that God's message to Abram came with a mind-boggling promise. First, there was a cost. "Leave *your* country, *your* people and *your* father's household and go to the land I will show you." This was no mean task. Abram was already wealthy, with a retinue of servants and livestock. Food for the whole company would magnify the baggage. Without the convenience of on-line reservations and credit cards, travelling arrangements would have been horrendous, apart from the grief of leaving behind all his nearest and dearest, and life as he knew it.

But with the cost came a sevenfold promise in Genesis 12:2,3 - "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." Notice that this blessing was not only for Abram himself, but that through him, blessing might flow to the rest of the world. Abram believed God's promise, enough to act upon it, and with this uncomplicated trust he set into action the amazing plan of God.

We don't know why Terah went too, for it was to Abram that God gave His call, but the company also included Sarai, Abram's wife and Terah's grandson Lot, whose father had died in Ur. They left with the intention of going to Canaan, but for this they had to travel the route of the Fertile Crescent and once having made it to Haran, Terah put his patriarchal foot down and decided to stay. City life would have been strong in the tribe and Haran, a flourishing caravan city enriched by local resources such as iron, copper, ivory and timber, and whose inhabitants also worshipped the moon god, would have supplied the temptation of safety and satisfaction to the ageing Terah. So there the whole family settled and it was not until Terah died that Abram felt himself free to go on and follow his dream. (See Acts 7:4, Stephen's speech.)

Was Abram wrong to let family ties, vitally important in that culture, delay his pilgrimage to the land God had set apart for him? Was it a compromise with the imperfect faith of Terah? How many young people aspiring to godliness have been put off by parents who failed in their own walk with God? But the important lesson here is that, whether Abram was right or wrong, God waited! He didn't discount his reluctant follower in favour of a better one. In His infinite grace He waited until Abram was ready to obey, the covenant He had made with him still intact. Such mercy from God still rescues us today.

Genesis 12:4-9 tells the story. It was around 2,000 B.C., at the age of 75, that Abram set out once more, southward towards Canaan, with his wife Sarai and nephew Lot, for whom Abram now felt responsible, and whom Abram may have envisaged as an heir in light of his own childless state. Verse 5 notes all the possessions and people they had acquired in Haran.

They travelled as far as Shechem, a Canaanite settlement to the west of the Jordan River, roughly halfway between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea. It is interesting to speculate whether Shem, if he did preach to Abram, told him of Noah's prophecy to Ham, his youngest son and father of Canaan, in Genesis 9:25 – "Cursed be Canaan! The lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers. Blessed be the Lord, the God of Shem! May Canaan be the slave of Shem." In years to come, the Semite nation coming from Abram would indeed conquer Canaan, in fulfillment of the promise that God gave to Abram at Shechem, "To your offspring I will give this land." Responding in faith, and with his new-found freedom, Abram built an altar of worship there and then proceeded onto Bethel, built another altar and worshipped God. Both Shechem and Bethel were to figure prominently in the history of the nation of Israel.

A challenge came in the form of a famine and here Abram's faith wavered to the extent that he left this promised land for the tempting fleshpots of Egypt. To protect himself he lied to Pharaoh that Sarai, still beautiful at 65, was his sister rather than his wife. Pharaoh gladly responded to the overture but this incurred God's punishment in the form of disease within Pharaoh's own household and his rebuke that Abram should have deceived him so. "Here is your wife. Take her and go!" he ordered, and Abram left Egypt like a whipped dog (with a very relieved wife, I imagine) and went right back to where he should have stayed, at Bethel; here in repentance he once more worshipped God.

The temptation to manage our own affairs is as old as history, with the usual unsatisfactory results. What does it take to make us realise that God knows best?

In chapter 13 we learn that Abram had become very wealthy in livestock, in silver and gold, and Lot had also acquired flocks and herds to the extent that there was not enough grazing for the two of them to stay together. It would be best to part company as there was plenty of land to share. Abram gave Lot first choice and self-centredly Lot chose the fertile, well-watered plain of the Jordan. It was a choice that would bring much regret in future years.

But God had not forgotten His promise and gave Abram magnificent encouragement in verses 14-17 – "Lift up your eyes from where you are and look north and south, east and west. All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted. Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you." And Abram, once more with childlike trust, built another altar at Hebron and continued his worship of God.

It did not take long for farmer Lot to move into the comforts of the city of Sodom, infamous for its wickedness. In chapter 14 a battle between 2 groups of local kings resulted in the sacking of Sodom and the capture of Lot and his family. When this was reported to Abram he quickly mustered 318 trained men born in his household – a measure of his wealth! – and using some brilliant guerrilla tactics he was able to rescue Lot, family, possessions and all.

Returning from the battle in triumph, he was met by the mysterious Melchizedek, king of Salem, and priest of God Most High (verse 18), who gave Abram a blessing while Abram gave him a tribute of one-tenth of his plunder. In gratitude for deliverance the king of Sodom offered Abram the rest of the plunder but Abram refused to become obligated to this head of an evil regime. The writer of Hebrews in chapter 7 portrays Melchizedek as a type of Christ; in essence Abram's homage was to God alone.

In chapter 15 God responds to Abram's faithfulness with a vision and a message, "Do not be afraid, Abram" (i.e. of reprisals from the vanquished kings after his victory), "I am your shield, your very great reward," - (greater than the land he had sacrificed to Lot.) Yet Abram could not understand how he, still childless, could father a nation, and the Lord reassured him that a son coming from his own body would indeed be his heir. God took him outside and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars - if indeed you can count them. So shall your offspring be."

Abram did look up at the stars: there are more than 8,000 stars that are clearly visible in an Eastern sky - and his response in verse 6 has come down to us through the ages as a benchmark of faith - "Abram believed the Lord, and He credited it to him as righteousness." Paul quoted this to prove a point in Romans 4:3 and Galatians 3:6, and James's quote is in 2:23, where he went on to describe the resulting relationship between God and Abram - "he was called God's friend." In verses 18,19 of Genesis 15 God outlined in detail the land He had already promised to Abram: this was fulfilled exactly in the reign of King Solomon.

Look up Romans 4:1-3 to see Paul's comment on Abram's righteousness. Did that apply only to that time or that patriarch? For answer, look up verses 16, 17. We do not have to turn only to the New Testament to see the workings of God's grace: it is demonstrated over and over again throughout the Old Testament, as here to Abram. God's grace is forever!

We come to Chapter 16, and another blot on the copybook - a blot spreading its ugly mark across the world even today. With Abram and his wife still childless, Sarai had the brilliant idea - not uncommon then and not considered immoral - of giving her Egyptian maid Hagar to Abram so that she might be a surrogate mother for their child. Abram meekly agreed, but when Hagar very quickly conceived she naturally despised her barren mistress and Sarai in bitterness had the hide to blame Abram with the self-righteous words, "May the Lord judge between you and me." Abram again meekly gave the unfortunate Hagar into Sarai's hands to do with her as she liked and the pregnant Hagar was banished, ending the hope of Abram having a son in his household.

Hagar fled from Sarai's mistreatment but an angel of the Lord appeared to her with a message to return to her mistress and a promise that her descendants would be too numerous to count. He had a strange prophecy for the unborn son - "You shall name him Ishmael, for the Lord has heard your misery. He will be a wild donkey of a man; his hand will be against everyone and everyone's hand against him, and he will live in hostility toward all his brothers." So Hagar obediently returned to the household and bore Abram a son, significantly named as the angel had instructed, Ishmael.

Did Sarai acquire Hagar during that ill-fated trip to Egypt? The prophecy regarding her son began its fulfilment in Genesis 25:12-18, where the 12 sons of Ishmael developed into tribes and moved away in the direction of Egypt, (under any matriarchal influence?) settling in the northwestern part of the Arabian Peninsula. Verse 18 comments that they lived in hostility toward all their brothers - hostility which even today is having terrible repercussions in the Middle East. While Arab nations, with the tradition that Ishmael is their ancestor can never consolidate, they are one in their hatred of their common enemy, the people of Israel. It is frightening to consider how far-reaching can be one wrong action. So we give this study a cliff-hanger ending: was that the nation God had promised to Abram?