

3 וַיִּאמְרוּ אֵינֶנּוּ
 לְבָנִים וְנִשְׂרֹן
 הַלְבֵנָה לְאֶבֶן
 4 וַיִּאמְרוּ הַבּוֹ
 וְרָאוּ בְשָׁמַי
 עַל־פְּנֵי כָל־הָ
 אֶת־הָעֵיר וְשֵׁם
 הָאָדָם: 6 וַיֵּ
 וְשָׁפָה אַחַת
 וַעֲתָה לְאִי־בַּ

are the descendants of Shem according to their clans and languages, by their lands, according to their nations.

³²These are the groupings of Noah's descendants, according to their origins, by their nations; and from these the nations branched out over the earth after the Flood.

11 Everyone on earth had the same language and the same words. ²And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there. ³They said

בְּאֶבֶן סִפְרָה הָרַקְדָּם: 31 אֵלֶּה בְנֵי־
 שֵׁם לְמִשְׁפְּחֹתָם לְלִשְׁנָתָם בְּאַרְצֹתָם
 לְגוּיָהֶם:
 32 אֵלֶּה מִשְׁפְּחֹת בְּנֵי־נֹחַ לְתוֹלְדֹתָם
 בְּגוּיָהֶם וּמֵאֵלֶּה נִפְרְדוּ הַגּוֹיִם בְּאֶרֶץ
 אַחַר הַמַּבּוּל: פ

יא שביעי וַיְהִי כָל־הָאָרֶץ שְׂפָה אַחַת
 וְדַבָּרִים אַחָדִים: 2 וַיְהִי בְּנִסְעָם מִקֶּדֶם
 וַיִּמְצְאוּ בְקֶעֶה בְּאֶרֶץ שִׁנְעַר וַיֵּשְׁבוּ שָׁם:

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 aven. Generally,
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 as in Isa. 56:5.
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The ziggurat, a
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ES (vv. 5-9)

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THE TOWER OF BABEL (11:1-9)

The generation after the Flood proves to be out of harmony with God, who must then embark on a new effort to fulfill divine purposes on earth.

THE MAKING OF BABEL (vv. 1-4)

1. Everyone on earth This and the following verses emphasize repeatedly the involvement of all humankind in the offense. This point is vital to the proper understanding of this narrative, which closes the second universal epoch in human history. It indicates that humankind is still rebellious against God, having learned nothing from the past.

the same language Belief in an original universal human language seems to have been current in ancient Sumer as well. The Bible here portrays the disruption of communication be-

tween human beings as having been the consequence of humankind's deliberate disharmony with God.

2. migrated Humankind is seen as having been nomadic after the Flood.

from the east That is, from the vantage point of Canaan.

a valley The flat alluvial plain in southern Mesopotamia between the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers.

Shinar See Comment to Gen. 10:10. A similar tradition is preserved by the ancient historian Berosus, whose story of the Mesopotamian flood also has the survivors first going to Babylon.

there The Hebrew word "sham," repeated five times, directs our attention to the crucial importance of the site.

CHAPTER 11

Commanded to disperse and settle the earth, Noah's descendants insist on clustering in one area. Commanded to submit to the will of God, they set out to make a name for themselves. The story of the Tower of Babel seems inspired by the Babylonian temple towers (ziggurats). Can we sense here the Torah's ambivalence about large cities, with the anonymity, crime, and lack of neighborliness they represent? Or its suspicion that technology, the celebration of human ingenuity, will often lead to idolatry, people worshipping the work of their own hands?

One writer distinguishes between "mountain cultures," which see the heart of the world in wilderness, revering nature and adapting to it, and "tower cultures," for whom the essence of the world is the city and the human-made environment, stripping the sense of awe from nature and attaching it to the social and technological order. Egypt, land of pyramids and treasure cities, will be a tower culture. Israel, from Mount Sinai to the Temple Mount, will be largely a mountain culture. The people of the Tower of Babel are a pre-eminent example of a tower culture. Although human beings have done many wonderful things to reshape their environment, there is always the danger

to one another, "Come, let us make bricks and burn them hard."—Brick served them as stone, and bitumen served them as mortar.—⁴And they said, "Come, let us build us a city, and a tower with its top in the sky, to make a name for ourselves; else we shall be scattered all over the world."⁵The LORD came down to look at the city and tower that man had built,⁶and the LORD said, "If, as one people with one language for all, this is how they have begun to act, then nothing that they may propose to do will

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל־רֵעֵהוּ הִבֵּה נִלְבְּנָה לְבָנִים וְנִשְׂרָפָה לְשָׂרֶפֶת וְתָהִי לָהֶם הַלְבְּנָה לְאַבֵּן וְהַחֲמֵר הִיָּה לָהֶם לְחֵמֶר: וַיֹּאמְרוּ הִבֵּה! נִבְנֶה־לָּנוּ עִיר וּמִגְדָּל וְרֵאשׁוּ בַשָּׁמַיִם וְנַעֲשֶׂה־לָּנוּ שֵׁם פֶּן־נִפְּוֶץ עַל־פְּנֵי כָל־הָאָרֶץ: וַיֵּרֶד יְהוָה לִרְאֹת אֶת־הָעִיר וְאֶת־הַמִּגְדָּל אֲשֶׁר בָּנוּ בְּנֵי הָאָדָם: וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה הֵן עִם אֶחָד וְשָׂפָה אֶחָת לְכָל־ם וְנָה הַחֲלָם לַעֲשׂוֹת וְעַתָּה לֹא־יִבְצָר מֵהֶם כָּל אֲשֶׁר יִזְמוּ

3. Come, let us make bricks The narrator, writing from the perspective of a foreign observer, nevertheless displays an accurate and detailed knowledge of Mesopotamian construction methods.

Brick . . . mortar This editorial aside expresses wonderment at construction techniques so different from those familiar to the narrator in Israel where stone was used for construction purposes. (The phrase "with bitumen and burnt-brick" is a standard formula in Babylonian building inscriptions.)

4. a tower The ziggurat—a lofty, massive, solid-brick, multistaged temple tower that symbolized a sacred mountain, a meeting point of heaven and earth. The outstanding feature of most Mesopotamian cities, it was regarded as the center of the universe, the arena of divine activity, where humankind and the gods might enter into direct contact with one another.

with its top in the sky This phrase is the name of the chief ziggurat of Babylon, the locus of the story and the very tower in question, Ešagilah, "the house that lifts its head to heaven." This expression is also often found in other Mesopotamian building inscriptions, leading to the

widespread interpretation that the aim of the tower builders was to storm heaven. Generally, the Bible considers tall towers to be symbols of human arrogance (see Isa. 2:12–15 and 30:25; Ezek. 26:4,9).

to make a name for ourselves "Name" here probably means "monument," as in Isa. 56:5. Important kings were associated with great building projects. Bricks inscribed with royal names were placed in the ziggurat's foundations to ensure the monarch's eternal fame.

else we shall be scattered The ziggurat, a source of civic pride, was expected to foster a spirit of unity. But the Torah interprets construction as a mark of human arrogance and a direct affront to God.

GOD'S COUNTERMEASURES (vv. 5–9)

5. The LORD came down To investigate humankind's doings.

man The biblical narrator stresses the strictly human nature of the entire enterprise. In Mesopotamian tradition, the gods erected the temple at Babylon.

had built Thus far; Gen. 11:8 tells us that the project was never completed.

of becoming so enamored of technology that human values are lost.

A rabbinic legend relates that people paid no mind if a worker on the tower fell to his death. If a brick fell, however, they lamented the delay in their building project (PRE 24). "The purpose of these awe-inspiring monuments erected by the technical skill of men was to enable people to forget their insignificance and transient nature" (N. Leibowitz).

4. God learns from experiences like these, "When I am gracious to decent people, they respond with gratitude and humility. When I am gracious to wicked people (like Nimrod and the builders of the Tower), they respond with arrogance" (BT Hul. 89a).

5. The LORD came down A *midrash* states that this passage is intended to teach us not to pass judgment on anyone without personally examining the situation (Tanḥ.).

הולידו את־עֵבֶר
מאות שנה ויולדו
16 ויחִי־עֵבֶר אַרְבַּע
את־פְּלֶג: 17 ויחִי־ל
פֶּלֶג שְׁלֹשִׁים שָׁנָה
ויולד בָּנִים וּבָנוּ
שְׁלֹשִׁים שָׁנָה ויולדו
אחרי הולידו
ומאתים שנה וי
20 ויחִי רְעוּ שְׁתַּיִם
את־שְׂרוּג: 21 וי
את־שְׂרוּג שֶׁבַע
ויולד בָּנִים וּבָנוּ
שְׁלֹשִׁים שָׁנָה וי
שְׂרוּג אַחֲרָי הוּא
שָׁנָה ויולד בָּנִים
תִּשַׁע וְעֶשְׂרִים
25 ויחִי נָחוֹר אֶ
תִּשַׁע־עֶשְׂרִים שָׁ
בָּנִים וּבָנוֹת:
שָׁנָה ויולד אַחֲ
הָרִן: 27 וְאֵלֶּה הַ

be out of their reach. ⁷Let us, then, go down and confound their speech there, so that they shall not understand one another's speech."
⁸Thus the LORD scattered them from there over the face of the whole earth; and they stopped building the city. ⁹That is why it was called Babel, because there the LORD confounded the speech of the whole earth; and from there the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

¹⁰This is the line of Shem. Shem was 100 years old when he begot Arpachshad, two years after the Flood. ¹¹After the birth of Arpachshad, Shem lived 500 years and begot sons and daughters.

¹²When Arpachshad had lived 35 years, he begot Shelah. ¹³After the birth of Shelah, Arpachshad lived 403 years and begot sons and daughters.

¹⁴When Shelah had lived 30 years, he be-

7. Let us, then Unless preventive measures are taken, there will be no limit to humankind's schemes. For the plural use of the verb, see Comment to 1:26.

confound The Hebrew word "navlah" is a form of the stem for "to confuse" (בלל).

8. they stopped building This narrative may have been inspired by the spectacle of Babylon and its ziggurat lying in ruins, which was the situation after the Hittite raid on the city ca. 1600 B.C.E.

the city That is, the ziggurat.

9. it was called Literally, "one called its name," an ironic echo of verse 4. They aspired

לַעֲשׂוֹת: 7 הָבָה נִרְדָּה וְנִבְלָה שָׁם שְׁפָתֵם
אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ אִישׁ שֵׁפֶת רֵעֵהוּ:
8 וַיִּפֹּץ יְהוָה אֹתָם מִשָּׁם עַל־פְּנֵי כָל־
הָאָרֶץ וַיַּחֲדִלוּ לִבְנֹת הָעִיר: 9 עַל־כֵּן קָרָא
שְׁמָהּ בָּבֶל כִּי־שָׁם בָּלַל יְהוָה שְׁפֹת כָּל־
הָאָרֶץ וּמִשָּׁם הִפְיָצָם יְהוָה עַל־פְּנֵי כָל־
הָאָרֶץ: פ

10 אֵלֶּה הַיְלֹדֹת שֵׁם שָׁם בֶּן־מֵאֵת שָׁנָה
וַיֹּלֶד אֶת־אַרְפַּכְשָׁד שְׁנַיִם אַחֲרָי
הַמַּבּוּל: 11 וַיַּחֲיֵ־שָׁם אַחֲרֵי הַיְלֹדוֹ אֶת־
אַרְפַּכְשָׁד חֲמִשׁ מֵאוֹת שָׁנָה וַיֹּלֶד בָּנִים
וּבָנוֹת: ס 12 וְאַרְפַּכְשָׁד הָיָה חֲמִשׁ
וּשְׁלֹשִׁים שָׁנָה וַיֹּלֶד אֶת־שֶׁלַח: 13 וַיַּחֲיֵי
אַרְפַּכְשָׁד אַחֲרֵי הַיְלֹדוֹ אֶת־שֶׁלַח שְׁלֹשׁ
שָׁנִים וְאַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת שָׁנָה וַיֹּלֶד בָּנִים
וּבָנוֹת: ס 14 וְשֶׁלַח הָיָה שְׁלֹשִׁים שָׁנָה
וַיֹּלֶד אֶת־עֵבֶר: 15 וַיַּחֲיֵ־שֶׁלַח אַחֲרֵי

to "make a name" for themselves, but succeeded only in attaching the name "confusion" to their handiwork.

Babel Neither the "gate of god," as the inhabitants of Babylon interpreted the name, nor the center of the earth, as they conceived their city to be—but a site of gibberish, radiating divisiveness and disastrous alienation from God.

The narrative of this chapter's opening is a parody belittling Babylon and its temple tower (ziggurat). Babylon ("the gate of the god," *bab-il*) becomes "babble." The ziggurat, the abode of the god, is unable to withstand the divine onslaught.

FROM SHEM TO ABRAHAM (11:10–32)

The narrative now focuses on one line of descent within the family tree of Shem. This line leads to Abraham, the 10th generation from Shem, just as Noah was the 10th generation from Adam. From the biblical point of view, the birth of Abraham constitutes a decisive turning point in the history of humankind.

10. This is the line The advent of Terah is a climactic event set off by the words translated here as "This is the line" (*eilleh tol'dot*). The He-

brew phrase appears another 10 times in Genesis. Here, the phrase establishes the transition from universal to patriarchal history.

100 This figure is approximate, because Shem would now have been 102, according to the data of 5:32 and 7:6.

Arpachshad Inexplicably, in 10:22 he is the third son of Shem, whereas here he seems to be the first-born.

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(vv. 27–32)

This *eilleh tol'dot*
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got Eber. ¹⁵After the birth of Eber, Shelah lived 403 years and begot sons and daughters.

¹⁶When Eber had lived 34 years, he begot Peleg. ¹⁷After the birth of Peleg, Eber lived 430 years and begot sons and daughters.

¹⁸When Peleg had lived 30 years, he begot Reu. ¹⁹After the birth of Reu, Peleg lived 209 years and begot sons and daughters.

²⁰When Reu had lived 32 years, he begot Serug. ²¹After the birth of Serug, Reu lived 207 years and begot sons and daughters.

²²When Serug had lived 30 years, he begot Nahor. ²³After the birth of Nahor, Serug lived 200 years and begot sons and daughters.

²⁴When Nahor had lived 29 years, he begot Terah. ²⁵After the birth of Terah, Nahor lived 119 years and begot sons and daughters.

²⁶When Terah had lived 70 years, he begot Abram, Nahor, and Haran. ²⁷Now this is the

הולידו את־עֵבֶר שְׁלֹשׁ שָׁנִים וְאַרְבַּע
מֵאוֹת שָׁנָה וַיּוֹלֵד בָּנִים וּבָנוֹת: ס
וַיַּחֲיֶיֶבֶר אַרְבַּע וּשְׁלֹשִׁים שָׁנָה וַיּוֹלֵד
אֶת־פֶּלֶג: ¹⁷וַיַּחֲיֶיֶבֶר אַחֲרֵי הוֹלִידוֹ אֶת־
פֶּלֶג שְׁלֹשִׁים שָׁנָה וְאַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת שָׁנָה
וַיּוֹלֵד בָּנִים וּבָנוֹת: ס ¹⁸וַיַּחֲיֶיֶפֶלֶג
שְׁלֹשִׁים שָׁנָה וַיּוֹלֵד אֶת־רְעוּ: ¹⁹וַיַּחֲיֶיֶפֶלֶג
אַחֲרֵי הוֹלִידוֹ אֶת־רְעוּ תִשַׁע שָׁנִים
וּמֵאֲתַיִם שָׁנָה וַיּוֹלֵד בָּנִים וּבָנוֹת: ס
²⁰וַיַּחֲיֶי רְעוּ שְׁתַּיִם וּשְׁלֹשִׁים שָׁנָה וַיּוֹלֵד
אֶת־סְרוּג: ²¹וַיַּחֲיֶי רְעוּ אַחֲרֵי הוֹלִידוֹ
אֶת־סְרוּג שֶׁבַע שָׁנִים וּמֵאֲתַיִם שָׁנָה
וַיּוֹלֵד בָּנִים וּבָנוֹת: ס ²²וַיַּחֲיֶי סְרוּג
שְׁלֹשִׁים שָׁנָה וַיּוֹלֵד אֶת־נְחֹר: ²³וַיַּחֲיֶי
סְרוּג אַחֲרֵי הוֹלִידוֹ אֶת־נְחֹר מֵאֲתַיִם
שָׁנָה וַיּוֹלֵד בָּנִים וּבָנוֹת: ס ²⁴וַיַּחֲיֶי נְחֹר
תִּשַׁע וְעֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה וַיּוֹלֵד אֶת־תְּרַח:
²⁵וַיַּחֲיֶי נְחֹר אַחֲרֵי הוֹלִידוֹ אֶת־תְּרַח
תִּשַׁע־עֶשְׂרֵה שָׁנָה וּמֵאֵת שָׁנָה וַיּוֹלֵד
בָּנִים וּבָנוֹת: ס ²⁶וַיַּחֲיֶי־תְּרַח שֶׁבַע־עֶשְׂרִים
שָׁנָה וַיּוֹלֵד אֶת־אַבְרָם אֶת־נְחֹר וְאֶת־
הָרָן: ²⁷וְאַלֶּה תּוֹלְדֵת תְּרַח תְּרַח הוֹלִיד

18. Reu Probably a shortened form of Reuel, meaning "friend of God." (Cf. Reuel, a name of Moses' father-in-law, in Exod. 2:18.)

20. Serug The well-known city of Sarugi, not far north of Haran in the Balikh Valley.

22. Nahor An important site in the upper Balikh Valley.

24. Terah Ancient sources mention a place-name *Til (sa) Turahi* situated on the Balikh River not far from Haran and Nahor. The name may well be connected with *yarei-ah*, "moon." Several members of Terah's family, as well as some of the sites connected with him, bear names associated with moon worship. Josh. 24:2 explicitly describes Terah as an idolater. Note that both Haran and Ur were also associated with moon worship.

26. 70 years Terah begets children when he is about twice the age of all his predecessors in the line of Shem. This detail inserts into the nar-

ative the motif of protracted childlessness, a condition that will be a major factor in the lives of his descendants, the patriarchs of Israel.

Abram This form of the name is consistently used until it is expanded to Abraham in Gen. 17:5, after which it appears again only in Neh. 9:7 and 1 Chron. 1:26 as required by their respective contexts. The name Abram is west Semitic and attested in cuneiform sources. It could mean "exalted father," "the father is exalted," or "the (divine) father loves (him)."

Nahor Apparently named after his grandfather.

Haran A name derived from *har*, "a mountain," used in the sense of "mountain god" in ancient Semitic personal names.

THE FAMILY OF TERAH (vv. 27-32)

27. Now this is the line This *eilleh tol'dot* phrase introduces the biography of Abraham.

שָׁם: ³²וַיְהִי וּמֵאֲתָיִם שָׁנָה

Ferah lived on in er Abraham's de-

introducing the h tempers God's g the emergence emained fixed in o history to pro- r).

line of Terah: Terah begot Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran begot Lot. ²⁸Haran died in the lifetime of his father Terah, in his native land, Ur of the Chaldeans. ²⁹Abram and Nahor took to themselves wives, the name of Abram's wife being Sarai and that of Nahor's wife Milcah, the daughter of Haran, the father of Milcah and Iscah. ³⁰Now Sarai was barren, she had no child.

³¹Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot the son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and they set out together from Ur of the Chaldeans for the land of Canaan; but when they had come as far as

אֶת־אַבְרָם אֶת־נְחֹר וְאֶת־הָרָן וְהָרָן הוֹלִיד אֶת־לוֹט: ²⁸וַיָּמָת הָרָן עַל־פְּנֵי תְּרַח אָבִיו בְּאֶרֶץ מוֹלְדֹתוֹ בְּאֹר כְּשָׂדִים: ²⁹וַיִּקַּח אַבְרָם וְנְחֹר לָהֶם נָשִׁים שָׁם אֵשֶׁת־אַבְרָם שָׂרַי וְשֵׁם אֵשֶׁת־נְחֹר מִלְכָּה בְּתֵּהֶרָן אִבְי־מִלְכָּה וְאִבִּי יִסְכָּה: ³⁰וַתְּהִי שָׂרַי עֲקָרָה אֵין לָהּ וָלֶד: ³¹וַיִּקַּח תְּרַח אֶת־אַבְרָם בְּנוֹ וְאֶת־לוֹט בְּוֹהֶרָן בְּוֹבְנוֹ וְאֶת שָׂרַי כְּלֹתוֹ אֵשֶׁת אַבְרָם בְּנוֹ וַיֵּצְאוּ אֹתָם מֵאֹר כְּשָׂדִים לָלֶכֶת אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וַיָּבֹאוּ עַד־הָרָן וַיֵּשְׁבוּ

Lot The origin of this name is unknown.

28. Haran died A fact essential for understanding 12:4–5.

Ur of the Chaldeans Most scholars regard this mention of the Chaldeans as an anachronism. They were a Semitic people related to, but distinct from, the Arameans. Nothing excavated from the great city of Ur in southern Mesopotamia indicates the presence of Chaldeans until the 7th to 6th centuries B.C.E., long after the period of the patriarchs. Thus the Ur of our text may be one of the sites in Upper Mesopotamia, founded by citizens of the famous city in the south and named after it. An Upper Mesopotamian Ur would have been much closer to Haran, a city crucial to patriarchal narratives.

29. Sarai The name (changed to Sarah in 17:15) means “princess” in Hebrew. If it is based on the Akkadian word *sharratu* (a term used for the female consort of the moon god Sin, the principal god of Ur), it means “queen.” The parentage of Nahor’s wife is given, that of Sarai is not—a startling omission that must have been intentional. Perhaps the narrator withholds that information so as not to diminish the suspense in chapter 20 when Abraham, to extricate himself from an embarrassing predicament, reveals that Sarai is his half-sister.

Milcah The name is a variant form of Malcah, “queen.” In Akkadian, *malkatu* is a title of the goddess Ishtar, known as Queen of Heaven, daughter of the moon god Sin.

Iscah The name may derive from the stem meaning “to see” (סכה) and may be a shortened form of a sentence name: “May God see [i.e., with favor] the child.” Nothing is known of her; she may have been the central figure of traditions now lost.

30. barren The Hebrew word *akarrah* simply means “childless,” but not necessarily infertile.

31. they set out . . . as far as Haran Haran is situated some 550 miles (885 km) northwest of Ur, about 10 miles (16 km) north of the present-day Syrian–Turkish border on the left bank of the Balikh River. The name means “route, journey, caravan,” no doubt derived from the city’s location as an important station on the main international trade routes from Mesopotamia to the Mediterranean Sea.

Nahor is not mentioned as included in the company, but he was closely associated with Haran. Indeed, the place is called “the city of Nahor” in Gen. 24:10. Perhaps he migrated at a later time.

31. They set out together from Ur We know from archeological sources that there was a great influx of population into Ur at about this time. But Abraham, the *Ivri*, from a word meaning

“the other side,” ever the contrarian, chose to leave Ur in pursuit of God.

they settled there So often in life, we set out with the best of intentions, only to give up half-way to our goal (*Arugat Ha-Bosem*).

Haran, they settled there. ³²The days of Terah came to 205 years; and Terah died in Haran.

שָׁם: ³²וַיְהִי יְמֵי תֵרַח הַמֶּשׁ שָׁנִים
וּמֵאֲתַיִם שָׁנָה וַיָּמָת תֵּרַח בְּחָרָן: ס

32. Terah died The Torah does not always tell its stories in strict time sequence. A calculation based on the data of 11:26 and 12:4 shows him to have been 145 years old when Abraham

left Haran for Canaan. Thus Terah lived on in Haran for another 60 years after Abraham's departure.

32. Terah died in Haran Actually, Terah did not die for another 60 years. Therefore the Torah must be describing him here as "spiritually dead," having given his soul over to idol worship (Gen. R. 39:7).

As the previous *parashah* lightened the note

of disappointment at its end by introducing the righteous Noah, this *parashah* tempers God's disappointment by anticipating the emergence of Abraham. "Whereas Noah remained fixed in Nature, Abraham sets out into history to proclaim God's dominion" (Buber).