

FROM NOAH TO ABRAHAM: THE ONOMASTICS OF THE PERIOD

FRED BLUMENTHAL

The Bible often presents genealogical lists containing many personal names, with no indication as to the origin, meaning or significance of these names (onomastics). While Rachel and Leah spell out the reasons for the names given to each of their children, we are usually left to wonder about the significance of other proper names. Talmudic and midrashic literature sometimes provides a meaning, for example TB *Sotah* 36b, which illuminates the reason for the name given to each of Benjamin's ten sons. A particularly interesting case is that of Peleg, whose name is explained in the Bible as due to the fact that *in his days the earth was divided* (Gen. 10:25). Now Peleg was born hundreds of years before the division of humanity into nations, as a result of the Tower of Babel, so how could he have been named for a future event? We must understand that the Biblical narrator wished to explain that Peleg was an appropriate name, since it foreshadowed events that would take place during his lifetime. On that basis, names can be understood to have a significance derived from events at the time of a person's birth or much later.¹

Since the Bible, particularly the Pentateuch, is focused not so much on recounting historical facts as on imparting religious dogmas and instruction, we might wonder why it is considered important to name everyone in the line of descent from Noah to Abraham, instead of simply stating, as the Mishnah does (*Avot* 5:3), that they constituted ten generations. The list of names in the early chapters of Genesis should therefore be seen to have a particular significance.²

Scholars have noted that many of these names appear to refer to geographic locations, much like the children of Noah's three sons. For example, the name of

Nahor (Abraham's grandfather) is supposedly connected with Tel-Nahir, a location known from Assyrian documents.³ Such historically based commentaries overlook the underlying themes of the Pentateuch, and I propose instead to treat these names in the way that the Bible explains that of Peleg, *Fred Blumenthal z"l was a retired businessman from Jerusalem and Cedarhurst, New York. He was educated at the Samson Raphael Hirsch School and the Yeshiva of Frankfurt am Main, Germany, and had pursued biblical studies throughout his adult life.*

as a name bearing a meaningful and appropriate message. This approach can already be found in Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch's comments to Genesis 11, where he states that these names hint at the spiritual development of mankind through ten generations.

The period from Noah to Abraham can be divided into two major eras, separated by the Tower of Babel. This is demonstrated by the names of the personalities enumerated in chapter 11 of Genesis. The first era describes mourning and fear for the future.⁴ The few survivors of the deluge had all lost friends and relatives. The wives of Noah's sons, for example, had to mourn parents and siblings. These feelings are illustrated by the names given to people of that time, as we shall show. The era after Babel reveals the consequences of mankind's division into separate nations and linguistic groups. Following this division, men started to invent different religions and lost the unifying monotheistic belief of Noah's time. The names of this period hint at the existence of these new religions and the role of Abraham as an iconoclast who rediscovered the belief in one God.

MIDRASHIC DERIVATIONS OF THE NAMES FROM THE TIME AFTER NOAH

SHEM

This word usually means "name" but also has the connotation of perpetuity – as, for example, in Genesis 11:4; Deuteronomy 25:7 and Isaiah 56:5. It thereby reflects the conviction of Noah, who was aware of the impending Flood, that mankind would survive. This meaning accords with the lifespan of Shem, which was longer than any other biblical figure of his time.

ARPACHSHAD

The derivation of this name is still considered a mystery, although it is sometimes understood to mean "healer," because the letters *r-p* are an allusion to the root *rafa* (or *rippe*, "to heal").⁵ The last two letters of this name are an abbreviation of *Shaddai* ("the Almighty"), so that it comes to mean "the Lord heals." Since Arpachshad was the first in the Noah-Abraham genealogy born after the Flood, his name may refer to the emotional pain that the catastrophic event must have caused, while healing this pain was uppermost in the mind of his parents.

SHELAH

This name (Shelah in Hebrew) conveys the idea of stretching out and releasing (from the root *sh-l-h*), but it is also associated with the *waters of Shiloah that flow softly* (Isa. 8:6). The name may also be based on the root *sh-l-h*, meaning "to be calm, tranquil." As such, it could mean the exact opposite of the stormy Flood waters that drowned so many people, indicating that water can also be calm and beneficial.

EBER

The word (Ever in Hebrew) generally means crossing a boundary or river and landing safely on the other side. We find it used to describe Abraham as *ha-Ivri* ("the Hebrew," Gen. 14:13). There, *Genesis Rabbah* 42:13 offers multiple interpretations: one expresses the idea that Abraham was geographically "from the other side" of the Euphrates river; another suggests that Abraham was a religious nonconformist – "all the world was on one side and he was on the other." In the case of Eber, it can also be seen as reflecting a metaphorical crossing, from dread to a belief that men need no longer live in fear of a catastrophe such as the deluge. Such a crossing into a new era paved the way for the abortive Tower of Babel project and the splitting of mankind into different linguistic and national groups.

PELEG

This name, as explained in the text (Gen. 10:25), points to the ordained separation of mankind into different nations.

REU

I suggest that this name derives from the word *ro'eh* ("shepherd"), one who guides and protects his flock. Repeatedly, in biblical texts, the relationship between God and His people is expressed in terms of a shepherd and his charges. At the end of his commentary to Genesis 10, Abrabanel includes a long discussion of the material in Josippon regarding the early generations of man.⁷ There he quotes the tradition that in the time of Reu, "kings began to make themselves gods." The name thus represents the beginning of idolatry, when kings were deified and seen as the true "shepherds" of men. Magical

powers or a supernatural origin were then believed to make kings and leaders the godlike rulers of the population.

SERUG

This name is generally understood to refer to a geographical location,⁶ but it can also be viewed as related to the word *sarig* ("branch"), as in Genesis 40:10. S. R. Hirsch, in his commentary to Genesis 11:10, explains that it hints at the idea that there was a continuous development of idolatry in Serug's time. Since the word implies growth from a tree or plant, it may represent the beginning of man-made wooden idols and the deification of trees, such as the *asherah*.

NAHOR

To interpret the name of Abraham's grandfather (Nah̄or in Hebrew), we must recognize that the letters *het* (ח) and *he* (ה) are sometimes interchanged in the Bible, especially in proper names.⁸ Nahor's name may therefore have its origin in the root *nahar*, as in Isaiah 60:5 and Psalm 34:6, where the word signifies "lighting up, being radiant." On the basis of that meaning, and the fact that the Midrash understood the idolaters of Abraham's time and place to be fire-worshippers (most famously in the Abraham/Nimrod confrontation in *Genesis Rabbah* 38:13), the invention and popularity of sun/fire worship are evidently reflected in this name.

TERAH

After the introduction of sun worship represented by Nah̄or, we may assume that the similarity of this name to *yare'ah* ("moon") points to idolatrous worship of the moon. The Midrash notes that Abraham, as a youth, first considered both the sun and the moon as possible deities before he realized that since they constantly rise and set, there must be a Creator who controls them.⁹

The genealogy from Noah to Abraham and the names detailed in the Bible can thus be read as a chronicle of socio-religious evolution during the post-Noachian era, moving from the trauma of the Flood to the division into nations and the deification of sun and moon, culminating in Abraham's reintroduction of the true monotheistic religion.

NOTES

1. See Moshe Garsiel, *Biblical Names: A Literary Study of Midrashic Derivations and Puns* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1991), esp. p. 17; and Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1996) p. 151 (Hebrew).
2. Compare the author's article "Biblical Onomastics: What's in a Name?", *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, vol. 37:2 (April-June 2009) pp. 124-128.
3. See Nahum Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary – Genesis* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989) p. 86.
4. The fact that God promised Noah that there would never be another Flood does not invalidate this statement. We know that all prophetic communications (except for Moses) left some doubts in the recipient (see Num. 12:6).
5. See E. A. Speiser, *The Anchor Bible – Genesis* (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1987) p. 70.
6. See Sarna, p. 84; Cassuto, p. 171.
7. Josippon is a chronicle of Jewish history probably compiled in the tenth century. It was very popular among medieval Jews and respected by them as a historical source.
8. See Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992) pp. 248-9 and 251-2.
9. A. Jellinek, *Beit Ha-Midrash*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem: 1938) p. 118.



Full text of articles from Volumes 1-40 is available for
download on our website:

<http://jbq.jewishbible.org/jbq-past-issues/>

