



Stephany Boisen arrived safely in Indonesia on this past Thursday. Had she made this trip a hundred and fifty years ago, it would have taken her the better part of her five months just to travel to Indonesia and chances are, most of us would never see her again. Being a missionary used to mean saying goodbye to your family for possibly the last time. Thankfully, we can do things like short term missions and Stephany can go and return in five months time and have a wonderful, faith-stretching experience. We know that missions did not begin with people like Amy Carmichael and Hudson Taylor, but do you know when missions did begin? Did it begin with William Carey in India? Most people would say that Carey is the father of the modern missions movement, but missions did not begin with him.

We could go back to the early church and the spread of the gospel throughout the known world. We could go back to the Great Commission given by Jesus.

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age. (Matt 28.18-19)

If you asked most evangelical Christians when missions first began, I am guessing that the vast majority would say it started with the Great Commission and if they did, they would only be off by a mere two thousand years. Wednesday night the KWAM club was studying this very topic, so let me stop and ask them. When did missions begin in the Bible? Missions began in Genesis chapter twelve with the call of Abraham. Now we do see hints of the gospel before this. As we said last week, part of the reason for the confusion and scattering at the tower of Babel was so that men would reach out and find the Lord. Before this we saw Noah, who was a righteous man because of his faith—that is the gospel. When God cursed Adam and Eve in chapter three we see the promise of “offspring” of the woman who would crush the head of Satan. That was the promise of Christ the Redeemer. So we do see hints of the gospel prior to Genesis twelve, but when God called Abraham to go the Promised Land, we see the first example of full blown missions.

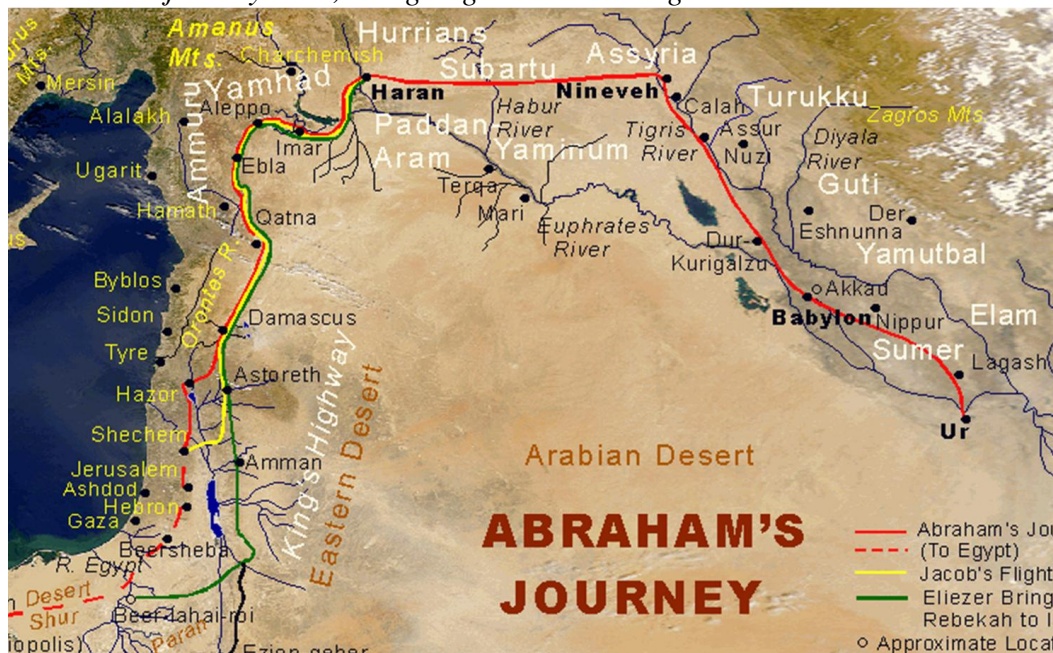
Let's read it for ourselves.

²⁷ Now these are the generations of Terah. Terah fathered Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran fathered Lot. ²⁸ Haran died in the presence of his father Terah in the land of his kindred, in Ur of the Chaldeans. ²⁹ And Abram and Nahor took wives. The name of Abram's wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor's wife, Milcah, the daughter of Haran the father of Milcah and Iscah. ³⁰ Now Sarai was barren; she had no child.

³¹ Terah ^ktook Abram his son and Lot the son of Haran, his grandson, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Abram's wife, and they went forth together ^lfrom Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan, but when they came to Haran, they settled there. ³² The days of Terah were 205 years, and Terah died in Haran.

Now ^mthe LORD said ^lto Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. ² ⁿAnd I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³ ^oI will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and ^pin you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."²

⁴ So Abram went, as the LORD had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from ^qHaran. ⁵ And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people that they had acquired in Haran, and they set out to go to the land of Canaan. When they came to the land of Canaan, ⁶ Abram ^rpassed through the land to the place at Shechem, to ^sthe oak³ of ^tMoreh. At that time ^uthe Canaanites were in the land. ⁷ Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, ^v"To your offspring I will give this land." So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him. ⁸ From there he moved to the hill country on the east of ^wBethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. And there he built an altar to the LORD and called upon the name of the LORD. ⁹ And Abram journeyed on, still going toward the Negeb.



There is a lot to mention here and we'll fill in the details as we go, but I want to start with the second half of verse three—in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. That is Old Testament foundation of missions. Through Abraham, the man of faith, all of the families of the whole earth will be blessed. I read from the ESV because I think it is the best translation here. The ESV states *I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.* Israel was never intended to be merely a vessel of God's mercy but rather a conduit of God's mercy *so that* they would bless all other nations with the gospel. This is not your run of the mill blessing. This is the blessing of sharing in the glory of God. This

is the blessing of being reconciled to the Creator, against whom all of creation had rebelled. This is the blessing of salvation in Jesus Christ.

But how do we know that this is the foundation of all missions? How can we be sure that this is the gospel? As always, don't take my word for it. None other than the apostle Paul tells us this is so.

And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying "In you shall all the nations be blessed." ⁹ So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. (Galatians 3:8)

In Genesis chapter twelve we have a wonderful example of God preaching the gospel. God preached the gospel to Abraham before the coming of Christ. And through Abraham, all of the families of the earth would be blessed. So we see that at the very birth of the Jewish nation, before Abraham stepped foot in the Promised Land, the gospel would be given to all families, to all nations of the earth. But where did these families of the earth come from? That takes us right back to what happened at Babel, does it not? I want you to see the birth of missions and the preaching of the gospel in Genesis, but I also want you to see the link between the events in chapter eleven and the events in chapter twelve. These two chapters link together in perfect harmony.

But many Christians, including most scholars, don't see the link between these two chapters. Instead, they build a wall between chapter eleven and chapter twelve. Many people claim that chapter eleven was part of primeval history, which means that we don't know when all of those things happened, like the tower of Babel, but chapter twelve begins the patriarchal history. Abraham was the first OT patriarch, therefore, history, it is assumed, begins with Abraham. Now these people are right about one thing—we are able to date Abraham with a high degree of certainty. Most scholars believe that Abraham was born about 2000 BC. Now how do you think they figured out this date? Simple, right? They just counted backwards from dates that we are very certain about. The OT is very detailed about names and dates and virtually every OT scholar can pinpoint the dates of Abraham's life with a high degree of certainty. (Interestingly, if you count backward, Abraham was born about 2000 BC and if you count forward from creation, Abraham was born 1950 years after creation. Therefore, Abraham lived in nearly the exact middle of the Old Testament period.) But here is a big problem. If scholars can count backwards and pinpoint the time of Abraham, why can't they just keep counting and pinpoint the dates of primeval history? The genealogy at the end of chapter eleven gives us this perfect link. They can do this but they choose not to do it.

This is a big problem for two reasons. First, as I have mentioned before, it undermines the authority and sufficiency of Scripture. Why would they use the Bible to count backwards to Abraham but not use the Bible to count backwards to Noah? Because they have been unduly influenced by evolutionary teaching about millions of years. This creates enormous problems because it forces you to conclude that the Bible is reliable on the dates back to Abraham but it is not reliable on the dates of Noah. Is this any different from saying that the Bible is reliable when it teaches us to love one another but the Bible is not reliable when it claims that you must believe in Christ alone to be saved? If we can pick and choose what is accurate in these foundational chapters of Genesis, then why can't we pick and choose what we like everywhere else.

The other problem with building a wall between chapters eleven and twelve is that you miss the continuity of the gospel proclamation. The nations who were spread out in chapter eleven are the same nations who will be blessed with the gospel in chapter twelve. God scattered the nations at Babel but in the very next chapter, he set forth a plan for reaching all nations—through the one nation of Israel. He blessed the nation of Israel *so that* through them he would bless all nations with the gospel. Israel was never meant to be a vessel for God’s blessing, but a conduit through which he would bless all nations.

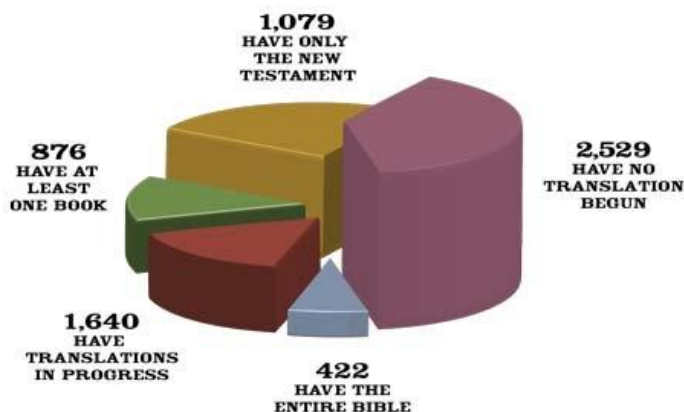
Notice how the apostle Peter applied these Jewish blessings to all believers.

⁹ *But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.* ¹⁰ *Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.* (1 Peter 2:9-10)

Each of the phrases is loaded with OT Jewish meaning. As believers, we are a “chosen people.” Only Jews were God’s chosen people, correct? No, all believers everywhere are God’s chosen people because we were blessed through Abraham. We are a “royal priesthood.” Again only Jews could be God’s priests and they had to be exclusively from the tribe of Levi. But Peter applied this royal priesthood to us, what is commonly called the “priesthood of all believers.” He also called us a “holy nation,” which was a title applied only to the Jews in the OT, but now belongs to all Christians. To an orthodox Jew, each of these titles is blasphemous and together they are blasphemy upon blasphemy. But each of them—and all of them—are ours through Christ, and through Abraham, the man of faith.

Let me clarify this with an explanation of modern missions. Missions starts with sharing the gospel with your family, friends and next door neighbors, but ultimately, missions is taking the gospel to every tribe, nation, people and language on the whole earth. This is the Biblical definition of missions. Revelation 5:9 says, *And they sang a new song: “You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.”* Missiologists, those who study missions, refer to every tribe, nation, people and language as “people groups.” The official definition of a people group is “the largest group within which the Gospel can spread as a church planting movement without encountering barriers of understanding or acceptance”.¹ According to the experts, there are around 7,000 languages in the world. But if the definition of a people group includes tribes, nations, people and languages, would you expect that there would be more people groups than there are languages or less people groups? Since language is one of the subgroups of a people group, then it follows that there would be more people groups than languages. This is not an exact science, but missiologists have estimated that there are approximately 14,000 people groups in the world. There are barriers to the gospel other than language differences, but you can see that language is the primary barrier.

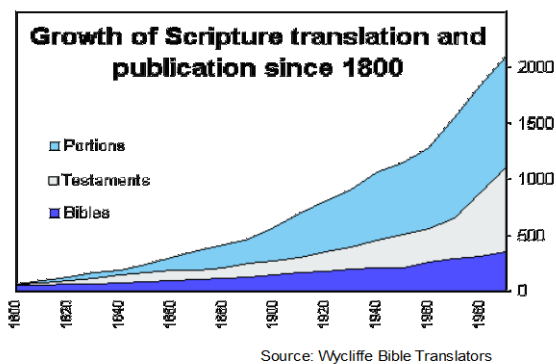
Total Languages in the World: 6912



Source: Wycliffe Bible Translators

the Lamb.” (Revelation 7:9) Therefore, when Jesus said that “all nations” must have the gospel preached to them, he must have been referring to “every nation, tribe, people and language.” To use our term, every people group will be represented in Heaven, therefore the gospel must be taken to every people group before Christ will return. According to this chart from Wycliffe Bible Translators, only 422 languages in the world have the entire Bible translated and almost half of all languages do not even have the start of any portion of the Bible being translated. Everyone understands that we have such a long way to go. The encouraging part of this equation is the fact that we have made significant progress in the past two hundred years.

In order to fulfill the Great Commission, we must take the gospel to every one of those 14,000 people groups with their 7,000 languages. Jesus told us that this must happen before he returns. *And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.* (Matt 24:14) We also know that this must happen based upon the description of heaven given to us by John. “After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from *every nation, tribe, people and language*, standing before the throne and in front of



Source: Wycliffe Bible Translators

But remember, we know from the Babel event that God was the one who confused the languages and scattered the people. What do we make of this? Did God create different languages in order to slow the progress of worldwide evangelism? As we have already seen, the judgment at the tower of Babel was also a means of grace. In the same sense, in ways that we may never understand in this life, having different languages and being spread out over the earth was done *so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him.* (Acts 17:26) We not only must not say that God has made a mistake, but we must also affirm that all of this was done according to his sovereign plan and ultimately for our salvation. Being scattered was better for us than being united. The people were scattered in chapter eleven and redeemed in chapter twelve.

There are many principles that can be drawn from this subpoint. First of all, it tells us that language study for the purpose of evangelism is a God-inspired enterprise. We enjoyed a wonderful evening with Jacob and Abi Storbakken while they were here and we learned that Abi is way ahead of Jacob in learning Mandarin, the primary language in China. Jacob learned a fair amount by just living in China. Last year he had his first formal education in the language and when they return he will continue his studies. Like most people who learn a new language,

especially as adults, it is a difficult enterprise rife with blood, sweat and tears. People like Jacob should be encouraged with the fact that language study is not merely *preparation* for missionary work, it *is* missionary work. The Lord himself divided the languages and while there are no doubt many more languages now than there were back then, the whole enterprise was God's idea.

This is true for any adult or young person who is currently studying a foreign language. If you have eyes to see it, you can be confident that your language study can eventually be used to share the gospel with another person in that language. Language study is a missionary, gospel-driven enterprise. Karen and I experienced this when we helped to start an outreach to Latinos in Prairie du Sac. I took a basic ESL course and developed a friendship with a few Latinos, which led to a few conversions and the starting a worship service in the church building. Karen and I started to take Spanish lessons so that we could communicate and eventually share the gospel in Spanish. Whether you are studying Spanish, French or Mandarin, all of your efforts can be used for spreading the gospel.

A few weeks ago, someone asked me this question. "If it was God's will to scatter the nations at Babel, why is he allowing the nations to gather together again?" This is a good question. At Babel, gathering together led to rebellion and separation led to seeking God. Therefore, will globalization lead again to ultimate rebellion? The answer is yes, it will. We see this in Revelation 13:7.

[The beast] was given power to make war against the saints and to conquer them. And he was given authority over every tribe, people, language and nation.

Here we see again the same designation of nation, tribe, people and language, except that the words are in a different order. Think of the implications here. Representatives from every tribe, nation, people and language on the face of the whole earth will be saved and worship the Lord before his throne in Heaven. But it is also true that representatives from every tribe, nation, people and language will be deceived and led astray by the Antichrist. But we need not fear, because God sovereignly controls both events. John records that the beast was given "power" and "authority" to make war and deceive the nations. But who gave this power to the beast? God alone possesses this power and only he can give it to whomever he chooses.

So what difference does all of this make?

It assures us that the Bible is trustworthy from the first word until the last. We can trust it when it connects Noah to Abraham with the scattering of the nations in between. We can trust it in every last word that it declares.

Second, it demonstrates that the Gospel is found throughout the Scriptures. Missions did not originate with William Carey or even with the powerful call of the Great Commission. Missions began in Genesis. We usually begin the gospel with John 3:16. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him, will not perish, but will have eternal life." But we could alter that somewhat and get an earlier gospel. "For God so loved the world that he scattered the nations over the face of the earth so that they would reach out for him." Or "God so loved the world that he called Abraham to the Promised Land and preached the gospel to him, that Abraham would be blessed so that all nations on the earth would be blessed.

It reassures us that all of our missionary and evangelistic efforts will be successful. There will be people from every tribe, nation, people and language gathered around the throne to worship the Lamb. In just a few minutes, we will be discussing our budget for 2010, which includes \$11,000 for missions. Some would say that is too large and others that it is too small, but either way, we know that our money given to missions will be successful. We don't know that every missionary or every dollar we give will result in *x* number of conversions, but we do that God has declared that it will succeed. All that remains to be seen is, will we give, will we go, will we preach the gospel on the other side of the world and across the street.

It reminds us that nothing is beyond the sovereign control of Christ. Why was the nation of Haiti devastated this past week? Ultimately we would say that it happened because God willed it to happen. But in the very same breath we must proclaim what Scripture says, that God never takes pleasure in the death of the wicked (Ezek 33:11). There is not a single person who died in the earthquake or who may yet die from disease and malnutrition that does not break the very heart of God. God does not take pleasure in the death of a single one. God judges people from every nation and he redeems people from every nation, just as he judged and scattered the nations at Babel so that he could redeem them through the promised Messiah.

Rich Maurer
January 17, 2010

ⁱ ch. 17:15

^j ch. 22:20

^k ch. 12:1

^l ch. 15:7; Josh. 24:2; Neh. 9:7; Acts 7:2, 4

^m Acts 7:3; Heb. 11:8

ⁿ Or *had said*

^o ch. 17:6; 18:18; [Gal. 3:14]

^p ch. 27:29; Num. 24:9

^q ch. 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14; Jer. 4:2; Acts 3:25; Gal. 3:16; Cited Gal. 3:8

^r Or *by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves*

^s ch. 11:31

^t [Heb. 11:9]

^u ch. 13:18

^v Or *terebinth*

^w Deut. 11:30; Judg. 7:1

^x ch. 13:7

^y ch. 13:15; 17:8; Ex. 33:1; Ps. 105:9-12; [Num. 32:11]; Gal. 3:16

^z ch. 28:19

¹ The Lausanne Covenant, 1982.