

Genealogies in Genesis 1-11

In our last session I argued that Genesis 1-11 is brimming with etiological motifs concerning the origin of the world, the origin of humanity, the origin of certain natural phenomena, of various cultural practices, and of the prevailing religious practice in Israel. So even if attempts to show direct borrowing of Genesis 1-11 from Ancient Near Eastern myths are fraught with uncertainty and conjecture, I do not think that it can be plausibly denied that these chapters in Genesis treat many of the same grand themes as Ancient Near Eastern myths, and they also seek to ground present realities for the Pentateuchal author in the primordial past. Therefore, they deserve to be classified as a Hebrew monotheistic myth according to the standard definition of myth among folklorists.

But that is not the whole story! For there is an additional feature of these narratives that must now be taken into account, and that is their apparent interest in history. This interest comes to expression most clearly in the genealogies that order the *primaeval* narratives. A genealogy may be defined as a written or oral expression of the descent of a person from an ancestor or ancestors. There are two types of genealogies that have been identified. First, a linear genealogy traces a single line of descent from some ancestor to one of his descendants. By contrast, a segmented genealogy traces the lineage of multiple persons from ancestors in the past. In Genesis 1-11 we find both linear and segmented genealogies. The narratives of Genesis 1-11 are shaped by genealogies that express the descent of the principal characters who are featured in the narratives. These are introduced by a standard formula: “These are

the generations of.” The word in the Hebrew is *toledoth*, which means literally “begettings” – these are the begettings, or the generations of, some particular ancestor. There are ten of these *toledoth* formulas in Genesis that punctuate the narratives. By ordering the principal characters of the narratives into lines of descent these *toledoth* genealogies turn the primeval narratives into a primeval history. You don't have in Genesis 1-11 simply a pool or collection of unordered prehistoric stories, but rather a chronological account beginning at the moment of creation and carrying through to the call of Abraham in Chapter 12.

The prominent Old Testament commentator Gordon Wenham refers to the genealogies as the “backbone” of Genesis 1-11. I think this is a very apt metaphor. Having a backbone does not determine what sort of bodily structure a vertebrate has, whether it has, for example, legs or arms or flippers or wings or no limbs at all. The *toledoth* formulae help to order the stories of Genesis 1-11 chronologically from beginning to end, but they do not determine the literary structure of the history.

In contrast to Mesopotamian king lists which list successive kings in ascending order (that is to say, going from the present back into the past), the genealogies of Genesis list the people in a descending chronological order and thus drive the narratives forward in time.

Mere chronology, however, is not sufficient to indicate a historical interest. After all, even a myth like the *Enuma Elish*, which we looked at in a previous lesson, contains chronologically ordered stories. For example, the god Marduk conquers Tiamat before he ascends to supremacy over the gods. So mere chronological ordering of the stories is not sufficient for history. What makes

Genesis 1-11 different is that the genealogies move seamlessly into the historical period of the patriarchs, where the historical interest is obvious and is not in dispute. Just as Abraham is presented as a historical person, so his ancestors are presented as historical persons. The lack of differentiation between Abraham and his successors and his predecessors supports the view that Genesis 1-11 is intended to be a primeval history.

That being said, however, the relation between Genesis' genealogies and historical interest is not so straightforward as might at first appear. Robert Wilson's groundbreaking book *Genealogy and History in the Biblical World* (1977) on the function of genealogies has been pivotal in the understanding of the role of genealogies in general and in the biblical text in particular. In this book, Wilson seeks to address the fundamental question: Are the genealogies a historiographic genre of literature? Were they constructed for the purpose of making a historical record? In an effort to answer this fundamental question Wilson examines both the data collected by contemporary anthropologists on how genealogies function in tribal societies and also from the comparative literary evidence of the Ancient Near East. With respect to the first (the anthropological data on how genealogies function in tribal societies), Wilson collects data showing that oral genealogies often involve different domestic or political functions, sometimes resulting in conflicting genealogies each of which is considered valid by the society in its own sphere. Wilson summarizes the anthropological findings with these words,

the data we have collected so far casts considerable doubt on the proposition that oral genealogies function primarily as

historical records. Nowhere in our study of genealogical function did we see genealogies created or preserved only for historiographic purposes. Rather, we saw that oral genealogies usually have some sociological function in the life of the society that uses them. Even when genealogies are recited as part of a lineage history, they are likely to reflect domestic, political, or religious relationships existing in the present rather than in the past. The purpose of the recital is not to provide the sort of accurate historical account that is the goal of the modern historian but to legitimize contemporary lineage configurations.

The emphasis here, I think, is on the words “primarily” and “only.” It's hardly surprising that tribal societies do not have a disinterested pursuit of history for its own sake. But that doesn't imply an absence of historical interest on their part. It's just that that interest is subordinated to contemporary needs. So Wilson says,

Even though oral genealogies are not created or preserved for strictly historiographic purposes, the genealogies that are accepted by a society are nevertheless considered to be accurate statements of past domestic, political, and religious relationships. A society may knowingly manipulate a genealogy, and rival groups within the society may advance conflicting tendentious genealogies, but once the society agrees that a particular version of the genealogy is correct, that version is cited as historical evidence to support contemporary social configurations.

As we've seen, this is much the same concern as what drives myth-making, that is to say, the desire to ground present realities in the primordial past.

However interesting this data from contemporary anthropology may be, its application to ancient Israel must be fraught with uncertainty in light of the inaccessibility of data concerning Hebrew oral traditions. We just don't have access to them. More relevant, I think, will be the comparative literary evidence from Ancient Near Eastern genealogies. In considering ancient Mesopotamian genealogies, Wilson turns to an examination of Sumerian, Assyrian, and Babylonian king lists of successive rulers. He finds that the lists were primarily concerned with the succession of cities or dynasties through which kingship passed, or with the antiquity of kingship in a city. In some lists the formula, “____, son of ____” is simply imposed on the names in the list by the scribe whether it applied literally or not. Thus, in the Mesopotamian king lists, the genealogies

have no role in the overall function of the lists. The genealogies were simply part of the additional information that the compilers of the lists added to them.

Wilson concludes,

As a rule, Ancient Near Eastern genealogies seem not to have been created specifically for the purpose of writing history. They seldom have strictly historiographical functions, but they usually function sociologically in much the same way as the oral genealogies we have examined.

Nonetheless, he says,

they are still valuable historical sources provided their nature and functions are taken into account.

If Wilson is right about the role of the genealogical notices in the Mesopotamian king lists, then these lists are hardly comparable to the biblical genealogies, for the biblical genealogies are not just lists of names which are incidentally genealogical. The names in a linear genealogy wouldn't even exist if the genealogical connections were removed. That makes them completely different, I think, from the Mesopotamian king lists. For example, King Esarhaddon might not have been the literal offspring of his royal predecessor, but Seth is considered to be the third son of Adam.

In dealing with the genealogies of Genesis 1-11 Wilson considers only the genealogies of Cain in chapter 4 and of Seth in chapter 5. Unfortunately Wilson's analysis is predicated upon assumptions about the tradition history behind these genealogies that lead him to treat these passages as contradictory versions of the same genealogy. He thinks they're really the same genealogy, even though they now contradict each other. Wholly apart from the narrowness of his sampling (just two genealogies out of all of them), the uncertainty attending these assumptions and inferences makes Wilson's conclusions about the function of biblical genealogies less compelling. For example, his claims about the fluidity of the names in the middle of the genealogy can be equally taken as evidence that they're not the same genealogy. Wilson concludes,

Our work on biblical as well as extra-biblical genealogies indicates that genealogies are not normally created for the purpose of conveying historical information. They are not

intended to be historical records. Rather, in the Bible, as well as in the Ancient Near Eastern literature and in the anthropological material, genealogies seemed to have been created and preserved for domestic, politico-jural, and religious purposes, and historical information is preserved in the genealogies only incidentally.

Unfortunately, this conclusion has not been established by the evidence cited by Wilson, but it depends upon a narrow sampling of the biblical material and uncertain assumptions and inferences about that sample. Wilson has not established that in Genesis 1-11 genealogies seem to have been created and preserved for domestic, politico-jural, and religious purposes. Why? Well, according to Wilson's terminology, Near Eastern genealogies function in the domestic sphere when they are part of personal names like “____, son of ____.” They function in the politico-jural sphere when they're used to legitimate royal and professional office holders like the king lists. And they function in the religious or cultic sphere when they are part of an ancestor cult. It's striking that none of these functions applies to the genealogies of Genesis 1-11. According to these definitions they function neither domestically, politico-jurally, or religiously. Although Wilson thinks that the linear genealogies in Genesis 4 and 5 function in the religious sphere, you have to admit there's no trace in Genesis of an ancestor cult, which is the way in which he defines religious function.