

Genealogies in Genesis 1-11 (continued)

We've been discussing the role of the genealogies of Genesis 1-11 in ordering the primeval narratives into a primeval history by providing a sort of chronological backbone to these chapters. In our last session together we examined the claim of Robert Wilson that these genealogies don't really have any intention to be historical records. We saw reasons to dispute that. The fact that these genealogies merge seamlessly into persons who are indisputably thought to be historical (like Abraham and his successors) suggests that there's no differentiation in principle between Abraham and his successors and the predecessors of Abraham.

Still, I think Wilson's work does serve to remind us that ancient genealogies were not the work of disinterested historians but can serve other ends. Consider, for example, the segmented genealogy that appears in Genesis chapter 10 – the so-called Table of Nations. These peoples are listed as though they were the sons of Noah and their descendants. So, for example, in Genesis 10:1 it states that, “These are the generations of the sons of Noah, Shem, Ham, and Japheth; sons were born to them after the flood.” So in verse 2 the sons of Japheth are then listed, and then in verse 6 the sons of Ham are listed, and then down in verse 22 the sons of Shem are listed. Although the Table presents these various persons and nations as descended from Noah's sons (Shem, Ham, and Japheth), nevertheless the people groups that are listed on the Table are not necessarily connected by blood. Rather, they represent eclectic groupings of peoples based upon geographical, linguistic, racial,

and cultural similarities. The Jewish commentator Nahum Sarna in his commentary on Genesis 1-11 comments as follows. Sarna says,

On the surface, the use of verbs expressing birth and of terms like ‘son,’ ‘father,’ ‘first-born’ suggests straightforward genealogies of the kind already encountered in previous chapters. In actual fact . . . many of the personal names listed here are otherwise known to be those of places or peoples. Ten names have plural endings, nine others take the . . . suffix *-i* . . . [several others include] the definite article, which is inadmissible with personal names in Hebrew.¹

He concludes,

The terminology is not meant to be taken literally.²

Some of the peoples that we would classify as Semitic (that is to say, the sons of Shem) are listed in the Table as sons of Ham instead. Because the descendants of Ham are under God's curse, Israel's greatest enemies are listed as Ham's descendants. Moreover, this realization about the character of the Table is not a modern discovery. The ancient author himself would have been aware of how eclectic his groupings are. For example, he collects Mesopotamian, Ethiopian, and Arabian ethnicities together under Cush. He could not have failed to notice that Sheba and Havilah are listed as descendants of Ham in v. 7 and as descendants of Shem in vs. 28-29. So Sheba and Havilah are counted as descendants of both Ham and Shem. All of this suggests that he did not understand the genealogy to be a straightforward historical account. So despite the notices “sons of” and “begot,” this

¹ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), pp. 68.

² Ibid.

genealogy does not list blood descendants, but rather it lists peoples based on political, linguistic, geographical, and other similar factors. And the author of Genesis knew it. It is a showcase example of Wilson's claim that segmented genealogies serve mainly domestic, politico-jural, and religious purposes.

With respect to the linear genealogies, telescoping (that is to say, collapsing generations) and fluidity are common features in ancient genealogies. Gaps in Sumerian, Assyrian, and Babylonian king lists are common. When you put together or conjoin the genealogy of Adam in chapter 5 of Genesis with the genealogy of Shem in chapter 11, you find created an artificial symmetry of ten antediluvian ancestors from Adam through Noah followed by ten postdiluvian ancestors from Shem through Abraham. A similar ten name genealogy appears in Ruth 4:18-22 for King David, as well as in various Sumerian, Assyrian, and Babylonian king lists. Sarna concludes,

The conclusion is unmistakable: we have here a deliberate, symmetrical schematization of history, featuring neatly balanced, significant segments of time as a way of expressing the fundamental biblical teaching that history is meaningful.³

Moreover, in the Sumerian king list, the antediluvian kings have fantastically long reigns – as long as 43,200 years for an individual reign – with the lengths of the reign then diminishing after the Flood. The eight antediluvian kings are said to have ruled for a combined total of 241,000 years. Eight kings ruled for 241,000 years! Following the flood, 39 additional kings reign for less than 27,000 years. So a tremendous decline in the lengths of the reigns

³ Ibid., p. 40.

following the Flood. Similarly, in Genesis the Flood interrupts the genealogies, and fantastically long lifespans (hundreds of years in length) are ascribed to the antediluvians and then diminished lifespans following the Flood. These abnormally long lifespans lead to difficulties if taken literally. For example, if you add up the years, it turns out that Noah is still alive when Abraham is born! And his son Shem actually out lives Abraham by 35 years, which seems crazy. The author of Genesis would himself have been aware of how fantastic these ancestral lifespans are, which gives reason to think that the genealogies are not intended to be straightforward history. The Old Testament commentator Kenneth Matthews suggests, plausibly I think, that the genealogies serve the theological purpose of showing the interconnectedness of all mankind and the hope of universal blessing.

Nevertheless, the fact remains, as John Walton reminds us, there's no evidence that ancient genealogies included individuals who were not believed to have actually lived. Indeed, with respect to many of the kings in the Mesopotamian king lists, we are confident that they actually did exist. Walton concludes,

Consequently there would be no precedent for thinking of the biblical genealogies differently from others in the ancient world. By putting Adam in the ancestor lists, the authors of Scripture are treating him as a historical person.