

§ 9. Excursus on Creation of Life and Biological Diversity

Lecture 16

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, even if they were not written primarily for historiographic reasons, Wilson claims that they 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 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

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

² Ibid.

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 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 both Ham and Shem in verses 7 and 28-29. So Sheba and Havilah are counted as both descendants of 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 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 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 outlives Abraham by 35 years, which seems crazy. The author of Genesis would himself

³ Ibid., p. 40.

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, 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.

START DISCUSSION

Student: Concerning your point about the fantastic ages, while I agree with that, I am having difficulty seeing how that's not anything more than an argument from personal incredulity. Because I know of plenty of Young Earth Creationists who would bite the bullet on that.

Dr. Craig: Some things are incredible, I think. It is unbelievable that I think the ancient author would have thought that people like Methuselah lived for 900 years. Moreover, remember the point that I make that taking them literally causes these really odd consequences like Shem outliving Abraham for 35 years. The fact that ancient Jews felt uncomfortable about this is evident in the fact that in the Samaritan and Septuagint texts of the Pentateuch these numbers are changed so as to make them less awkward – the ages are reduced. Scholars agree that the Masoretic text (the one that we have our translation based on) is probably the right text – it's original. But nevertheless, these other texts (the Samaritan and the Septuagint) show how uncomfortable ancient Jews felt about the length of these lifespans. So it's not just incredulity; it's that they also produce these sort of chronological anomalies that just don't seem right.

Student: I actually did a presentation on that very thing not all that long ago – on the Septuagint numbers versus the Masoretic text. I actually think the Septuagint numbers have the better historical support. That's because the difference is all off by a hundred except for one of them which is off by fifty. It looks like the one that's off by fifty could have easily been added a hundred years to it but you couldn't have subtracted a hundred years from it. There's a whole host of reasons for that. If there are gaps in the genealogies though that alleviates the problem of Abraham existing while Noah and Shem. Plus if you add the Septuagint numbers to it that also alleviates that problem. However, I do agree that there are gaps in the genealogies. As for the ages, I think there could be some scientific reasons. Moses lives 120. Abraham lives 175. We don't seem to have as much

of a problem with that. 900? Well? I know. But it's one of those things that we don't know genetically.

Dr. Craig: It's a cumulative argument here that I'm presenting, and I think this would be one factor. But thank you. Good response.

Student: Antediluvian and postdiluvian? What does that mean?

Dr. Craig: Antediluvian – those who lived before the Flood; before the deluge. Antediluvians are those who lived before the Flood; postdiluvians are those who lived after the Flood. As I say, in these Mesopotamian king lists, they have these fantastically long reigns prior to the Flood and then afterwards diminished reigns. You have the similar pattern in Genesis with the ages of the antediluvian patriarchs who lived for centuries and then afterwards the ages are diminishing.

Student: I just read a book *Rebooting the Bible*, which agrees with what someone earlier said – that at 100 AD there was a conspiracy to get rid of thirteen hundred years to confront Jesus being the Messiah. That's what got inducted into the Masoretic Text. The Septuagint is most accurate. Plus if you use the date of Josephus for the Exodus, it agrees with the Septuagint dates which agrees with all archaeology of the destruction of Jericho and their surrounding cities.

Dr. Craig: Thank you for that. I would just say that when you read Old Testament commentaries on Genesis, I think that I've never seen anyone yet disagree with the priority of the Masoretic text. Everyone seems to think (that I've read, and I've read quite a few) that the Septuagint text (that's the Greek text of the Old Testament; that's not the original language – that's a Greek translation) and then the Samaritan text of the Pentateuch – everybody seems to think that those numbers have been changed because of these difficulties. But, as you indicate, everything is open for discussion.

Student: Given the differences in how the world is supposed to work before the Flood (such as not having rain, things like that), it suggests different realities that may not preclude a longer lifespan due to a variety of factors. We won't want to get into it but I think that given the differences that are described it's premature to make a judgment about the reality of those types of lifespans.

Dr. Craig: I don't think that there's anything in the text that indicates that the laws of nature changed before and after the Flood that would allow people to live longer. And here I might appeal to Jonathan Sarfati, who is himself a Young Earth Creationist who has written a commentary on Genesis 1-11. Sarfati himself argues against Young Earthers who say that somehow the antediluvian conditions were different that enabled people to live for centuries and then after the Flood somehow they changed. There just doesn't seem to be anything in the text to support that, much less in science.

Student: Just a quick methodological question. We talked about the symmetry of tens. At what point do you think such symmetries should be seen as artificially added by the author versus those being signs of God's sovereign ordination over creation, like he planned it that way?

Dr. Craig: It's going to be a cumulative argument, as I said earlier. It's not just here that you seem to have this created symmetry of ten and ten, but you find that for example in the genealogy for King David in Ruth 4. You find these groups of tens in the king lists in ancient Mesopotamia. So it looks like an artificial construction rather than saying that there actually were literally ten generations before and after the Flood.

Student: With the pre-Flood ages and then post-Flood ages, they seem to kind of decrease as the ages go after the Flood, I was curious what function that might serve, as well as tying that in with the Flood? Did the author of Genesis, and then the original people hearing this, would they have taken the Flood then to be strictly literally or did they see it as something different?

Dr. Craig: That's sort of the million-dollar question at this point, and we'll have to talk about that more later on. What I'm suggesting is that there are indications such as I've mentioned already that even though the genealogies order these narratives chronologically they shouldn't be read with strict historical precision. Therefore it would be a mistake to read them in a kind of literal way. They could represent other things. Now, what they represent – that's a difficult question. What is the theological significance of long ages prior to the Flood and shortened ones afterwards? I'm not in a position to answer that question. But that certainly is germane.

Student: The questions you've raised here – is it an example of a general tendency that we have when assessing ancient writings to impose modern standards of accuracy on those writings? For example, we expect when you read a history everything will be chronological, and in the Gospels that doesn't seem to always be the case. Also, direct quotation. Ancient people had no means of recording speeches, and yet we insert quotation marks as if these are verbatim quotes. Do you have any comment on that?

Dr. Craig: You are absolutely correct. The difference between the Gospels and Genesis 1-11 that I believe I mentioned before is that the genre of literature to which the Gospels belong is ancient biography. While you're correct that in ancient biography events could be told in different order, nevertheless these do show a historical interest. They are about a historical person and telling anecdotes to illustrate the character of the principal figure in the biography. By contrast, I've argued at some length now that the genre of Genesis 1-11 is myth. It is an attempt to ground realities in the Pentateuchal author's time that were important to Israeli society in the primordial past. Therefore you cannot just assume that these are to be read historically in the way that you can with the Gospels which are a

genre of ancient biography. The most historical element in Genesis 1-11 that I think does show (and I've defended this against Wilson) historical interest is the genealogies, but as I've just argued, even the genealogies mustn't be interpreted in a kind of wooden literalistic way. I think the Table of Nations alone in Genesis 10 precludes that. As for quotation, you're also correct about that. In fact, in Genesis 2 when we have the story of the creation of Eve and God brings Eve to Adam and presents her to him, Adam says, "She shall be called woman [*Ishah* in the Hebrew] for she was taken out of man [*Ish* in Hebrew]." What's interesting about that is according to Hebraists that I've spoken to, that kind of vocabulary didn't exist in Hebrew until about the monarchy around 1000 BC. Therefore, Adam (or even an earlier author) couldn't have used this kind of vocabulary – this pun on *Ish* and *Ishah*. This is an anachronism. It is a retelling of the story using the language and the vocabulary of more modern Hebrew that existed around the time of the monarchy. That's just again one more indication here that we mustn't press these narratives with a kind of wooden literality.

Student: A couple things about the ages. It seems to me that the decline of purity of the gene pool coupled with the introduction of meat into the human diet may have had something to do with the reduction of ages. But I also want to ask you. Genesis 6:3 – what do you think about that verse where it says "God says my spirit will not abide and man forever for he is flesh but his days shall be a hundred and twenty years."

Dr. Craig: That is presented as the reason for the diminished lifespans of the postdiluvians. God has said, *I'm not going to put up with these people in the same way and now their lifespans are going to be diminished to no more than 120 years*. That would be the rationale. Maybe that would help to answer an earlier question about what's the theological point that's being made here by the diminished lifespans. Maybe it underlines the sinfulness of mankind and how their lives need to be shortened lest they utterly destroy the world and civilization.

Student: Matthew is indisputably historical, but it provides a genealogy where up to the deportation to Babylon there are fourteen generations, after that up to Jesus there are fourteen generations. So you see there's a similar type of symmetry there, but it's hard to say that there would literally be fourteen generations.

Dr. Craig: I didn't appeal to that example because it's New Testament. It's centuries after Genesis. But you're exactly right. You have these three groups, as I recall, of fourteen generations each, clearly, I think, constructed by Matthew to be symmetrical – nice and neat. It's an artificial symmetry. As I say in Ruth 4 you have a genealogy of David like this which is constructed of ten nice generations. This, I think, makes it plausible that that's also what's going on in the genealogies of the antediluvian/postdiluvian ancestors.

Student: I want to bring you to awareness of how people keep up with their genealogy tracking. My father actually passed down to my older brother (the first-born) a poem of twenty generations and said that is to pass on to the first-born. You pass on and track the twenty generations. That is how everything is intact. That way you not only have the last name but this poem gives you the given middle name so that later on you can kind of track across the geography someone shared that last name and middle name. You can ask about their ancestry and be able to track.

Dr. Craig: This is in Chinese society?

Student: Yes.

Dr. Craig: That's very interesting. Let me ask you one question. When an additional person is born, do they drop somebody off the beginning of the genealogy to keep it at 20 or do they add so it becomes 21, 22, 23?

Student: The firstborn after the 20 generation has to come up with a poem for another 20 generation. So it is passed down like that.

Dr. Craig: Very interesting. Thank you. As Wilson's book illustrated, this anthropological data (such as what you shared) is very often studied by Old Testament scholars today as an analogy to how genealogies function in tribal societies. Although this is of uncertain application to ancient Israel, nevertheless it's interesting and suggestive.

Student: I have seen headlines but not studied and read that there's no reason why we couldn't live forever. Junk DNA at the back and the copying errors and everything else. I keep hearing from that – our better understanding of how DNA is used for copying and that sort of thing. You mentioned that there's no indication in the Bible that there was a change that caused people to live longer earlier than later. There *is* an indication. It's called the ages of the patriarchs. That is the evidence that said something happened.

Dr. Craig: Well, no, I don't think that's fair. Because we're looking for an explanation of the ages of the patriarchs – some change. There isn't anything in the text that says that somehow because of a flood that the laws of nature changed enabling DNA to operate differently or people to live longer. I want to just be very clear here. The objection or concern that I'm raising is not scientific. I've not said anything about DNA or science. This is purely hermeneutical at this point. We're just studying the text and asking: Are these genealogies meant to be taken literally or do they serve other purposes as Wilson suggests? I want to say they do have a historical side to them. They show a historical interest by the author. But we mustn't press them too hard for literal truth.

Student: It does seem that there is a lot. The ages. The patterns of the ages. Enough that I wouldn't just say “ah.” I would go with a default and say it is true.

Dr. Craig: Fair enough.

Student: One of the things to consider in these groupings, like the 14s in the New Testament, as memory devices. This would be a way of arranging so you would remember the main people groups.

Dr. Craig: Yeah, absolutely. In an oral society or with oral tradition you probably don't want to have genealogies that are hundreds of names in length, for example, but you would have simple, symmetrical genealogies that could be easily transmitted like the groups of twenty that someone mentioned.

Student: The other consideration is the range of the kings – a number of these can be co-regencies rather than consecutive. That would shorten these spans somewhat.

Dr. Craig: Fair enough. Though when you get to reigns of twenty six thousand, thirty thousand years, something very peculiar is going on there.

Student: I didn't get that. Where do these come from?

Dr. Craig: This is the Sumerian king list – the lists of the kings of ancient Sumer which is the society prior to Assyria and Babylon in Mesopotamia. Then you also have king lists from Assyria and then from Babylon. So we have these ancient king lists that seem to resemble a little bit the biblical genealogies. The biblical genealogies are unique in ancient literature, but in these king lists you do have “____, son of ____, son of ____” and they list their successive reigns, so there's some analogy there to the biblical genealogies.

Student: I'll just add a comment about the feasibility really quickly about the old ages. I was going to say something along the same thing that others said about the degeneration of mankind over time – the genetic mistakes for instance. Obviously when God created mankind, he created them perfect without any genetic mistakes. By the time you get to the law of Moses, a law has been established that you can't marry a sibling because you're going to have some mistakes because of similar genetic mistakes. So I think that gives some feasibility to the longer lifespans early on. Then under the Young Earth perspective, we are at least consistent between animals and humans because reptiles continue to grow as long as they live, and so reptiles that live a long time would be dinosaurs. So humans live hundreds of years, reptiles live hundreds of years, that's where we get dinosaurs from – reptiles that live a long time since they continue to grow until they die. Then I think you kind of look at Methuselah who has a prophet as a dad and Enoch names Methuselah which means in Hebrew “when he dies it will come.” If he actually did live 969 years then he dies the year of the Flood which would make that prophecy true. I guess I just wanted to add a couple of comments about the feasibility of these.

Dr. Craig: Fair enough. I welcome the push back. I know this is controversial.

Student: I'm just thinking and sort of comparing and contrasting the Mesopotamian king lists with the genealogies in Scripture. Obviously the Mesopotamian king lists are ridiculous. We know from anthropology that *Homo sapiens* has been around for much less of the time that those kings would have ruled, but to me I was just thinking that seems to add to an argument for the historicity of the Genesis list because even though they're large they're far more reasonable in a way that people at that time wouldn't have known that *Homo sapiens* had only been around for a hundred thousand years. But they still have dates that are considerably shortened. To me, I would think that does make an argument for their historicity. They are not a clear copy of those Mesopotamian lists.

Dr. Craig: This is a point that is made by the Jewish commentator Umberto Cassuto in his commentary on Genesis 1-11. He says compared to these king lists with these fantastic reigns thousands and thousands of years long, the ages of the antediluvians look modest by comparison. Now, that doesn't mean he takes them literally, but he does say that they are much more modest, less fantastic than the reigns of these Mesopotamian kings, and so that certainly is a fair point. Whether or not though these are to be taken literally, well, I've already said reasons for my doubts about that.

Student: The Mesopotamians and the Egyptians had a tendency to exaggerate, too.

Dr. Craig: Obviously!

Student: If they had real numbers then they were trying to outdo each other in some cases.

Dr. Craig: The question would be then: what about ancient Israelites? Did they have a tendency to exaggerate numbers for some reason? Is there some theological point that's being made here?

Student: If there's a theological point, I haven't been able to find it. I just think it brings up the inerrancy issue. If the numbers are not literal . . . and I think you can take the numbers in Genesis literal and have gaps in the genealogies so that you don't have a wooden strict timeline.

Dr. Craig: But in the genealogies what you've got is that it gives the age of the father at the time that he gave birth to the son: *when he was 375 years old he gave birth to a son and then he lived another 600 and some years after that.*

Student: In some cases like in Abraham it says that Terah was, I think he was 135 when Abraham was born, but when you do the math in some of the other places we see that he was really not that age when he was born. So the numbers . . . there are actual textual reasons to think that the numbers are not exact.

Dr. Craig: You don't think the text is corrupted?

Student: I don't think the text is corrupted. I just think that if there are gaps there (if it's telescoped like you said) the numbers could be literal but we still can't make an exact timeline out of it.

Dr. Craig: Alright. That is sort of the point I'm making, isn't it? We mustn't interpret these with a sort of wooden literalness. There's something else going on here.

Student: An excellent article if you want to write these names down – Jeremy Sexton and Henry Smith from the Associates of Biblical Research website has got an excellent article on those two.

Dr. Craig: The reading that I've done on this suggest that there is no sort of consensus view about how to explain these ages of these antediluvians. It is completely mysterious. They tried to find numerology in them, symbols, tried to think of multiple generations or lines of descent, and nothing seems to work. Old Testament scholars remain baffled basically at what these long ages could mean. I think it's at least an open question; maybe they're not meant to be taken literally.

END DISCUSSION

We are at the end of our time. Next week we will continue. I appreciate the good discussion today.⁴