

Genesis, Commentary to Chapter 5

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With the birth of Adam's and Eve's son Seth, the text begins a flow of generations, narrowing to a particular family, that continues unbroken through the book of Genesis and ultimately through the rest of the Hebrew Bible. Ironically, the element that establishes this flow, that produces the continuity of Genesis, and that sets the history of the family into the context of the universal history, is the "begat" lists. It is ironic because these lists are tedious to most readers. They therefore skip, skim, plow through, or joke about them. The result is that many (perhaps most) readers never get the feeling of Genesis as a book. It is a continuous, sensible work, filled with connections, ironies, puns, and character development—which are diminished or even lost when one reads it only as a collection of separate stories.

5:1. Records. This word has usually been understood to mean "generations," but that is inadequate. The word is used both to introduce records of births (as in this verse) and to introduce stories of events within a family (as in Gen 37:2).

5:1-5. human. In these verses, the Hebrew *'adam* sometimes refers to the species, as in v. 2, where it applies to both male and female; and it sometimes refers specifically to the first male human, so that it also functions as his personal name: Adam.

5:3. he fathered in his likeness—like his image. The first man's similarity to his son is described with the same two nouns that are used to describe the first two humans' similarity to God (1:26-27). It certainly sounds as if it means something physical here. We surely would have taken it that way if we had read this verse without having read Genesis 1. Still, we must be cautious on such a classic biblical question. In any case, the significance of this verse is to establish that whatever it is that the first humans acquire from God, it is something that passes by heredity. It is not only the first two humans, but the entire species that bears God's image.

5:4. he fathered sons and daughters. This is the presumed answer to the question of where Cain's wife came from.

5:5. nine hundred years and thirty years. The long life spans in the early portions of the Torah are an old question. Some assume that the ancients must have counted years differently. But that is not correct. (If we divide Adam's 930 years by ten to get it within normal range, then how shall we divide Moses' 120?) It is clear that this author thought of a year as a normal solar year because that is how long the flood lasts. The point to note is: life spans are pictured as growing shorter. The ten generations from Adam to Noah approach ages of 1,000. But the last one to live more than 900 years is Noah. The next ten generations start with Shem, who lives 600 years, and life spans decline after him. The last person to live more than 200 years is Terah. Abraham (175), Isaac (180), and Jacob (147) live long lives, but not as long as their ancestors. And Moses lives to be 120, which is understood to have become, at some point, the maximum for human life. (See the comment on Gen 6:3.)

5:24. Enoch walked with God. This expression is used in ancient Near Eastern texts to express continuous fidelity. So here it would mean that Enoch was faithful to God.

5:24. and he was not, because God took him. I do not know what this means. It was traditionally understood to mean that Enoch does not die. Alternatively, it could be the report of his death. It comes at the point at which all the other entries in this list say "And he died." The same word is used later by Joseph's brothers to express the fact that he is gone (Gen 42:13). At that point, the brothers do not know whether he is alive or not. It may possibly mean something like that in the case of Enoch, as well: his fate was unknown. At minimum, it means (as with the

case of Elijah later) that there is something distinctive and unusual about the man, his relationship to God, and his departure from life among humans.

5:29. Noah. The name is connected here to the Hebrew root נח, meaning “console,” though we would naturally connect it to a different root, נח, meaning “rest,” which matches the name Noah and does not have the extra *n* (Hebrew נ) at the end. Biblical names, like contemporary naming of Jewish children, are not necessarily based on precise etymologies, but rather may be based on similarity of sounds, involving only some of the root letters. See, similarly, the comment on the name Cain (Gen 4:1).

THE BOOK OF GENEALOGIES (5:1-6:8)

Having disposed of the line of Cain, the narrative now takes up the idea of a fresh start for humanity, as implied in the preceding verses. Commencing with Adam, it presents a vertical genealogy that covers ten generations spanning the period between the creation of the world of man and the advent of Noah, who witnessed its destruction.

Parallel to the traditions in the present chapter is the list of Sumerian kings who reigned before the flood, as recorded by Berossus, a Babylonian priest of the third century B.C.E. who wrote a history of Babylonia in Greek. He too details ten antediluvians, the last also being the hero of a flood. There is reason to believe that the ten-generation pattern for genealogies was favored by Western Semites in general and that the convention left its mark on the historiography of Israel. We meet this phenomenon again in the genealogy of David from Perez, as set forth in Ruth 4:18-22 and 1 Chronicles 2:5, 9-15.

In the Bible this pattern is utilized for theological purposes. It so happens that, following the Flood, ten more generations separate Noah from Abraham, whose birth is projected as being another climactic turning point in human history. The genealogical chain that registers this development in 11:10-26 follows almost the identical literary pattern as that of the present chapter. 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. It is not a series of haphazard incidents but the unfolding of a divinely ordained, meaningful design, the corollary being that human activity lies under the perpetual scrutiny of God.

The present chapter also serves other functions in ways that are more specific to its immediate context. The biblical Narrator does not seek to present a comprehensive history. Rather, his is a highly selective and episodic presentation in conformity with larger theological purposes. Hence, the genealogy enables him to bring together otherwise disconnected occurrences and smooths the transition from Adam to Noah. At the same time, it demonstrates how the divine blessing of 1:28, "Be fertile and increase," is being fulfilled. Finally, it again emphasizes the great teaching of the first two chapters that the entire human race is traceable to common ancestry and thus constitutes a unity.

The present genealogy appears to share several items in common with the Cainite list of chapter 4. The names Enoch and Lamech occur in both; Cain and Kenan are almost identical in Hebrew; and Irad sounds like Jered, as does Methusael like Methuselah. Also, the last entry in each list is segmented so that three sons are mentioned in each case. These similarities have led some scholars to regard the two lists as doublets, either one being a reworking of the other or both deriving from a common source. Supporting this claim is said to be the additional fact that the Mesopotamian lists of early kings exist in several recensions that vary in number from seven to eight to ten generations. Yet it should be pointed out that in all the latter, the flood is the epochal dividing line, whereas the Cainite genealogy of chapter 4 is not so oriented. Moreover, only two names are really identical, while the similarity in other names is more superficial than real. It is also difficult to understand why an editor should arbitrarily have rearranged the order of the generations. [See below for Gunther Plaut's discussion of this.]

There is a stereotyped pattern in the genealogy. For each personality, the age at which he first became the father of a son is noted, then the number of his remaining years, then the fact that he fathered sons and daughters, and, finally, the age when he died. The formula is varied in

the case of the first and the last on the list, Adam and Noah, so that these constitute a literary framework for the entire list. The seventh, Enoch, is also singled out for special attention, meriting four verses instead of the three uniformly assigned to each of the other personalities.

The remarkably long lives enjoyed by the patriarchs before the Flood accord with the widespread folkloristic notion that associates ancient heroes with extraordinary longevity. Compared, however, with Mesopotamian ideas, the biblical figures give the appearance of moderation. The combined total of the years reigned by the ten antediluvian kings in the list of Berossus comes to 432,000; that of the Sumerian King List adds up to 241,200. By way of contrast, in Genesis the years from Adam to the Flood number 1,656. What the specific figures represent individually and collectively, whether they are invested with symbolic meaning or are the constituents of some comprehensive schematization, is presently unknown. If any such exists, it has not yet yielded its secret. The matter is further complicated by the variations in the numbers found in the Samaritan recension and in the Septuagint version of the Torah.

1-2. These verses are introductory and recapitulate 1:26-28.

This is the record of Adam's line This is most likely the title of an ancient genealogical work that served as the source for the data provided in the present chapter, in 11:10-27, and possibly in other genealogical lists, as well. Hebrew *sefer*, here rendered "record," specifically denotes a written document, not an oral composition.

Adam The Sifra to Leviticus, Kedoshim 4:12, reports on a discussion between Rabbi Akiba and Ben Azzai (mid 2nd cent. C.E.). Akiba declared Leviticus 19:18's "Love your neighbor as yourself" to be a cardinal principle of the Torah. Ben Azzai proclaimed the present opening phrase, "This is the record of the line of man ('adam)," to express a superior rule. By tracing all humanity back to a common parentage, this phrase conveys the idea that the "Golden Rule" is logically indefensible without the presupposition of the absolute unity and equality of the human race as created by God.

in the likeness of God This phrase refers to 1:26. The use of *demut* alone, without *tselem*, "image," is probably conditioned by consideration of assonance: 'adam, 'adam, demut. Compare Comment to 9:6.

He blessed them A knowledge of 1:27-28 is presumed. Since the theme of the chapter is the replication of the human race, one is reminded that sexuality is a divine blessing and procreation a God-given duty.

and called them Man As explained in the Comment to 2:19, the act of naming, in the biblical concept, is the exercise of authority and mastery. That God Himself gave the human race its name is not mentioned in chapter 1, but it is implied there in verse 26. It is made explicit here because inherent in the genealogical concept is human replication of divine creativity. Each act of procreation is an imitation of God's original creation of man. Hence, there is need to assert man's creatureliness, that is, his absolute subordination to God.

ADAM (vv. 3-5)

a son in his likeness after his image What constituted "the image of God" in the first two human beings was transmitted through procreation to all future generations.

he named him This formula appears again in the present unit only in verse 29, in respect of Noah, to form a literary framework. In 4:25 it was the woman who named Seth. The masculine is used here because only the fathers are featured in the genealogy.

Seth Cain and Abel are ignored, not because this list represents another tradition that had Seth as the first-born, but because the sole concern of the document is to trace a linear genealogical chain from Adam to Noah. For an analogy, see the line of Aaron as given in 1

Chronicles 6:35ff., which ignores the two older sons Nadab and Abihu, whose deaths are reported in Leviticus 10:1-2. 2

After the birth of Seth The continuity of the line is in jeopardy until the birth of the first son, who becomes, for that reason, a child of destiny. Hence, this event marks a meaningful point of demarcation in the measurement of a human lifetime.

ENOCH (vv. 21-24)

The seventh on the list, Enoch, is singled out for special mention. The allusive brevity of this biographical note suggests the one-time existence of some well-known story connected with his life and death. In postbiblical Jewish literature, he became the focus of legends connecting him with a knowledge of the secrets of heaven, with the invention of mathematics and astronomy, and especially with the devising of a solar-based calendar. Curiously, in the Sumerian King List, the seventh, Enme(n)duranna, enjoyed an intimate relationship with the sun god, according to Mesopotamian legend, and was initiated into the arts of divination, astrology and mathematics.

walked with God The regular formula, “he lived,” is replaced by a description of how he lived. The idiom is used again only of Noah in 6:9 and, in a slightly varied form, of the ideal priest in Malachi 2:6. It is expressive of a life spent in full accord with God’s will and in closest intimacy with Him.

23. 365 years Whether this figure is actually inspired by the solar year and reflects the legend about Enoch’s calendar, or whether it became the source of that legend, cannot be determined. If there is a connection with the Mesopotamian tradition in which the sun god is featured, then the number 365 would be significant. What is important is that our biblical text is wholly devoid of pagan elements. It is not caprice that determines Enoch’s relationship to God but the quality of his chosen lifestyle.

24. Enoch walked with God This is repeated, as Bekhor Shor noted, so that the brevity of Enoch’s life not be misinterpreted as a punishment for sin.

then he was no more The regular formula, “then he died,” is replaced by a description of how he died. The term is most frequently used of sudden, unexpected, and unexplained disappearance.

for God took him A euphemism for death, as is clear from such passages as Ezekiel 24:16, 18 and Jonah 4:3. It is most likely used here, as Rashi noted, with the sense of premature death. It was the narrative about Elijah’s transference to heaven without dying, as told in 2 Kings 2, that gave rise to the popular legend that Enoch too underwent this experience of apotheosis.

METHUSELAH (vv. 25-27)

The one who lived the longest life span is fathered by the individual who had the shortest. His death coincides with the onset of the Flood, according to the present chronological scheme. His name has variously been interpreted to mean “the man of the weapon” or “the man of the infernal river.”

LAMECH (vv. 28-31)

On the name, see Comment to 4:18.

28. he begot a son The arrival of the tenth generation marks a critical turning point in human history and so brings the list to completion. The formulaic style is therefore varied. The text is expanded to focus upon the one who is to become the illustrious hero of the age.

29. Noah The name as such is unparalleled in biblical and extrabiblical sources. It would appear to derive from the stem n-w-h (נוח), “to rest,” and there are records of Akkadian and Amorite personal names compounded of this element. The explanation given in the narrative rests on similarity of sound, not on etymology, since Noah cannot derive from n-h-m (נחם), “to comfort, give relief.” The incongruity is noted in Genesis Rabba 25:2. In the Hurrian version of the Gilgamesh Epic, one hero of the flood is Nahmasulel, and a dim recollection of this may have influenced the word play in our text. At any rate, the two stems, n-w-h and n-h-m, are subtly integrated into the language of the narrative. The first stem appears in 6:8 and 8:4, 9, 21; the second provides an ironic touch, for this same stem is used in 6:6, 7. As Rashbam observes, since Noah was the first to be born after the death of Adam, his arrival signified some easing of the curse laid on the soil through Adam’s sin. The father looked to “relief” (*yenachamenu*) from “toil” (*itsavon*), but instead came God’s decision to wipe out civilization. God “regretted” (*va-yinnachem - nichamti*) and was “saddened” (*va-yit’atsev*).

relief The reference is probably to a tradition about Noah as a culture hero. According to Tanhuma Genesis 11, he invented the plow; that is to say, he was the initiator of true agriculture as opposed to hoe agriculture or horticulture. The invention of the plow inaugurated a revolution in the production of food and effected an enormous saving of time and energy. Such a tradition may underlie 9:20, which describes Noah as “a tiller of the soil.” Another possibility is the report in that same text that Noah initiated viticulture. He was the first to discover the soothing, consoling and enlivening effects of wine.

NOAH (v. 32)

The extraordinarily advanced age at which he begets a child, as compared with his forebears, is required by the fact that, according to 7:11, he is 600 at the time of the Flood, and there are no grandchildren in the ark. Noah is also the only personage in the list who has no daughters. This must be connected with 6:1-2, which tells how fallen angels consort with the daughters of men. The idea is that his immediate family remained uncorrupted. See Comment to 9:24 in regard to the order of the three names.

Shem Its meaning is “name, fame, renown,” and it is probably abbreviated from *shemuel* or the like.

Ham Its origin is obscure, despite attempts to connect it with Hebrew *cham*, “a wife’s father,” *cham*, “hot, dark-skinned,” and Egyptian *chm*, “servant.” Ham is synonymous with Egypt in Psalms 78:51; 105:23, 27; and 106:32.

Japheth The name may be the same as that of Iapetus, which appears in Greek mythology but has no Greek etymology. Its meaning is unknown.

Torat Shelemah to Genesis 5

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This is the book. Heb. Sefer does not always mean a volume; it may be used of any written document. Rabbinic tradition states the Torah is not one continuous work, written at one definite moment. "The Torah was given to Moses in separate scrolls."

the book of the generations of Adam. "This is the book of the generation of Man"—not black, not white, not great, not small, but Man. In these Scriptural words we have a concept quite unknown in the ancient world—Humanity. And only the belief in One God could lead to such a clear affirmation of the unity of mankind.

and blessed them. With the power of begetting children like themselves, who in turn would have the same power for all time.

called their name Adam (man). ...Although all are born in the likeness of their begetters, it is here particularly pointed out that since Adam was created in God's image and it might be thought that such a privilege could only belong to one directly created by Him, his children were begotten in the same Divine image.

ANTHOLOGY

THIS IS THE BOOK OF THE GENERATIONS OF ADAM.

Rabbi Nehemiah said: How do we know that a single man is equal to the entire Creation? Because our text reads, This is the book of the generations of Adam. In the day that God created man, in the likeness of God made He him. Now, another verse says: These are the generations of the heaven and of the earth when they were created, in the day that the Lord God made earth and heaven (2:4). Just as creating and making are stated in the case of the latter (heaven and earth), so are they stated in connection with the former.

Aboth d'Rabbi Nathan Ch. 31. T.S. 5, 3.

Rabbi Simon said: Adam alienated himself from Eve for 130 years after Abel was killed, saying, "Why should I beget children who are accursed?" But when Seth was born Adam addressed his sons: "I did not give the genealogy of my first sons (Cain and Abel), because they were under a curse. But this one's genealogy I will give, because he ranks first of the generations that are to follow."

Tanhuma Yashan B'reshith Par. 26. T.S. 5, 12.

MALE AND FEMALE CREATED HE THEM.

For King Ptolemy, the seventy-two elders wrote, "Male and female He created *him*," not *them*, lest it be thought that they were separately created from the very beginning).

Megillah 9a. T.S. 5, 25.

Rabbi Eleazar said: A man without a wife is not a man; for it is said, Male and female created He them..., and called their name Man.

Yebamoth 63a. T.S. 5, 26.

Rabbi Jeremiah b. Eleazar said: The Holy One, blessed be He, originally created Adam as a hermaphrodite, for it is said, Male and female created He them and called their name Adam.

Gen. Rabbi 3. T.S. 5, 27.

AND CALLED THEIR NAME ADAM.

Adam has seven different meanings. (1) It is the name of the first man. (2) It is the name of his wife and (3) all his children. (4) The common people too are called Adam. (5) It signifies man as opposed to a woman, (6) and woman as opposed to man. (7) It is also the name of a city (Joshua 3:16). That it signifies the first man and his wife we know from the Scriptural verse, And God called their name Adam.

Midrash Sh'loshah V'Arbaah. T.S. 5, 32.

AND ADAM LIVED A HUNDRED AND THIRTY YEARS, AND BEGOT A SON IN HIS OWN LIKENESS.

Rabbi Jeremiah b. Eleazar stated: In all those years during which Adam was under the ban [for his disobedience], he begot wraiths and male and female demons, for it says; And Adam lived a hundred and thirty years, and begot a son in his own likeness, after his image, whence it follows that until then he did not beget after his own image. An objection was raised: Rabbi Meir used to say: Adam was extremely pious. When he saw that through him death was ordained, he spent a hundred and thirty years in fasting, shunned his wife, and wore clothes of fig-leaves on his body for 130 years. (How then could he have begotten anything at all?) His [Rabbi Jeremiah b. Eleazar's] statement referred to the semen emitted unintentionally.

Erubin 18b. T.S. 5, 33.

AND BEGOT A SON IN HIS OWN LIKENESS, AFTER HIS IMAGE.

This teaches that Seth too (like Adam) was born circumcised.

Aboth d'Rabbi Nathan Chap. 2. T.S. 5, 34.

From this you learn that Cain was not of Adam's seed, nor after his likeness, nor in his actions did he emulate Abel his brother. Thus Adam had no worthy progeny until Seth was born, who was indeed of his seed and in his own likeness, while at the same time emulating the noble deeds of his brother Abel.

Pirke d'Rabbi Eliczer Ch. 22. T.S. 5, 40.

AND ENOCH WALKED WITH GOD.

When Enoch, the son of Jered, saw the evil ways of mankind, he turned away from them, and built a house for himself where he worshipped the Lord with all his heart, and prayed to him, saying, "O Lord God, create in mankind a pure heart, to love good and hate evil, that men may serve You and do what is right in Your sight." And as Enoch was praying to God and pleading with Him for the people of his generation, an angel of the Lord called to him, "Enoch! Enoch!" and Enoch answered, "Here I am!" And the angel said to him, "God has sent me to say to you, 'Arise, come out of the place in which you have hidden yourself and go to the people of your generation and teach them how they should live.'" Then Enoch came out from his hiding-place and went to the people and taught them the ways of lovingkindness, righteousness and mercy.

At that time all the hundred and thirty kings of the earth gathered together and came to Enoch, and bowing before him, said, "We have seen that God is with you, and has given you of His wisdom, therefore come and reign over us." And he was persuaded by them and made them acquainted with the ways of God, and made peace among them, and there was peace throughout the whole earth all the days of Enoch, who reigned over all mankind two hundred and forty-three years and executed justice and righteousness over all the people and led them in the path of the Lord.

Book of Jubilee; Baraitha di Rabbi Ishmael, 23, 11. Levner, Legends of Israel, pp. 36-37.

God's way is unlike man's. When a land rebels against a mortal king, he penalizes it by destroying the good alike with the evil. Not so is it with God. When a generation provokes Him, He delivers the good and destroys the wicked. When the generation of Enoch sinned, God destroyed the sinners but saved Enoch, as Genesis narrates, And Enoch walked with God....

Num. Rabbi 5:4. T.S. 5, 54.

The companionship of the righteous with God is described in three ways. Of Noah we are told, Noah walked with God (6:9). Jacob said: "The God before Whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked" (48:15). And finally, Moses bade the children of Israel: After the Lord your God shall ye walk (Deut. 13:5). This may be illustrated by the case of a man who has three children: the oldest walks before his father; therefore the Patriarchs, who were indeed great in good deeds, are described as walking before God. The middle son walks behind him. Therefore the Israelites were bidden, After the Lord your God shall ye walk, which means, emulate Him in His humility, His enduring patience, and His love. But the youngest walks by the side of his father, so as not to go astray. Therefore of the earlier generations it is said, And Enoch walked *with* God; and Noah walked *with* God.

P'sikta Zuta B'reshith. T.S. 5, 57.

That means that he was absorbed in the service of God to the exclusion of all other interests.

Midrash Habibur. T.S. 5, 59.

AND HE WAS NOT; FOR GOD TOOK HIM.

Rabbi Ishmael related: When I scaled heaven to gaze at the vision of God's chariot, I passed through palaces. I met Metatron and asked him: "Why are you called by the seventy names which belong to your Creator? Moreover, you are the greatest of all the heavenly princes, higher than all the angels, the most beloved of all His ministers, the most honored of all the hosts, and greater than all the mighty in honor, majesty and glory. Why then do they call you a young lad in the highest heaven?" He answered: "Because I am Enoch, son of Jared. When the Generation of the Flood sinned and hurled defiance at God, 'Depart from us, for we desire not the knowledge of Thy ways' (Job 21:14), He delivered me before their very eyes (another version: He removed me from them and translated me to Heaven) that I might be a witness in the high heavens to every human being, that none might say that 'the Merciful One is cruel, for what grievous sin did those masses commit?' Therefore He translated me while they still lived, before their very eyes, so that I be a witness against them in the future world. Then God made me a ruler and a prince among the ministering angels."

The Book Hekaloth (Palaces), which is called the Book of Enoch. T.S. 5, 65.

Because Enoch was a righteous man, God removed him from the world of mortals and translated him into the Angel Metatron. Rabbi Akiba and his colleagues disagree on this subject. The latter maintained: Enoch was righteous only intermittently, vacillating between righteousness and sinfulness. Said the Holy One, blessed be He: "I will remove him from the earth (that is to say, I will let him die) while he is righteous." Rabbi Hama b. Rabbi Hoshaya said: *And he was not* means that he was not inscribed in the register of the righteous, but in that of the wicked. Rabbi Aibu said: Enoch was changeable, at times righteous, at others wicked. Said the Holy One, blessed be: "While he is righteous I will remove him from the world, so that he will be judged as a righteous man." Rabbi Aibu also said: He judged and condemned him on New Year, when He judges the whole world.

Midrash B'reshith; Gen. Rabbi 25. T.S. 5, S2. 62.

Thus it happened with Enoch. While he was yet righteous and his whole generation was wicked, God prematurely removed him from the world, lest he learn the wicked ways of his age and himself be corrupted and lose his good name.

Midrash Haneelam Zohar Hadash 20. T.S. 5, 66.

It was taught: Three men ascended to heaven and ministered there before God. They were Enoch, Moses and Elijah. The proof lies in the following texts: Enoch: And he was not, for God took him. Moses: And he ascended from the plains of Moab...And no man knoweth of his sepulcher unto this day (Deut. 34:1, 6.) [since he did not die, there was no sepulcher]. And Elijah ascended into heaven by a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:11).

Midrash Hagadol B'reshith. T.S. 5, 64.

Sectarians asked Rabbi Abbahu: "We do not find that Enoch died?" "How so?" inquired he. "Scripture speaks of God's taking him," they replied, "whilst the same is said in connection with Elijah, 'Knowest thou that the Lord will take away thy master from thy head today'" (2 Kings 2:3). "If you interpret the word 'taking,'" he answered, "then 'taking' is employed here, while in Ezekiel it says, Behold, I take away from thee the desire of thine eyes in a plague" (Ezek. 24:16—there it obviously means death). Rabbi Tanhuma observed: He answered them well. A matron asked the same question of Rabbi Jose, to which he replied: "If Scripture only said, And Enoch walked with God, and nothing more, your deduction would be correct. Since, however, it adds, And he was not, for God took him, it means that he was no more in this world (having died), for God took him."

Gen. Rabbi 25. T.S. 5, 60. 61.

Excurses

The Early Generations

The reader will look in vain for an explanation of how the world suddenly became filled with people, the men and women of whom Cain was apparently afraid and who would build cities. The ancients tried to solve this difficulty by suggesting that twin sisters were born to Cain, Abel, and later Seth, and that in this fashion the earth was populated.

There is, however, no need for the modern student of the Bible to follow this line of speculation. If the text is silent on the matter, it is probably because it is not the purpose of this chapter to present humanity's ongoing story as much as it is to present an explanation of our spiritual state. Thus, the Bible should here be understood as speaking of prototypes, not of actual people.

The Torah preserves two genealogical traditions, one in 4:17-22 (from Adam's son Cain), and a more elaborate list in 5:1-32 (from Adam via his son Seth). A comparison between the names of Cain's and Seth's descendants reveals a startling similarity and some duplication:

Adam	1	Enosh
Cain	2	Kenan
Enoch	3	Mahalalel
Irada	4	Jared
Mehiyael	5	Enoch
Metushael	6	Methuselah
Lamech	7	Lamech
Naamah	8	Noah

Adam and Enosh both mean "human being." Other names in the two lists are like-sounding, and by exchanging the places of Enoch and Mehiyael we arrive at a single basic list, which in the biblical tradition is presented in two variants. Humanity has one ancestor (Adam or Enosh) and one line of descent.¹ Noah appears when the seven prehistoric human generations have run their course.

There are strong parallels between these biblical genealogies and the Babylonian lists of antediluvian kings and their counselors. In both cases, they name "culture-heroes" responsible for basic contributions to civilization, including the first cities. In both cases, they end with the protagonist of the Deluge story. The genealogical interest was characteristic of the Western Semites. "To dedicated guardians of sacred traditions, unbroken lineage meant a secure link with the remotest past and hence also a firm basis from which to face the future. These were vital statistics in more ways than one" [Speiser, *Genesis*].

While the parallels between the biblical and Babylonian traditions are clearly visible, there are also significant differences. The Babylonians attached these traditions only to their royal lists,

¹ The inclusion of Seth and the change from Cain to Kenan was probably due to the understandable disinclination to have all humans appear to be descended from a murderer. It may also be that for this reason the term *tol'dot* is denied the Cain line. Note the midrash that suggests Naamah was Noah's wife.

but the Bible treats the antediluvians as ancestors of one another and ultimately of all humanity. It eschews all mythological allusions in these lists; that is, it deals with human and not with semi-divine rulers. Even the longevity attributed to Seth's line must be compared with that of the Babylonians, who were reputed to live for many thousands of years. In the Bible, a thousand years is regarded as a day of God (Psalm 90:4), and no one of the ancients in the biblical account reaches the millennial age.

The longevity of the antediluvians should, therefore, be seen in the context of such ancient traditions. To say that Methuselah's 969 years were meant as shorter units, such as months, merely subjects the Torah to artificial interpretation. The Bible presents the list of the primevals and their long lives as an intermediate stage in human development. The first humans possessed potential immortality; their immediate descendants had, by our standards, very long life spans; Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Jacob, Joseph and Joshua, all lived past the century mark; thereafter, however, people have only the "normal" life span. In the biblical view, their longevity is limited severely at some stage between prehistory and history, and only in the messianic days will they again reach the high ages of old (Isaiah 65:20).

The Message Behind the Numbers

While the Near Eastern context provides the general background for the antediluvian lives that the Torah records, the numbers fit certain astronomical schemes and convey a specific religious message.

The ancients measured time in two ways: by the moon and by the sun. The lunar cycles were observable and easily countable, and the solar year determined the agricultural cycles. The relationship between the two revolutions was analyzed by the Athenian astronomer Meton (5th century BCE) and has become known as the "Metonic Cycle." It is based on the recurrence of 19 solar year spans, which equal 235 lunar months. Though it was Meton who gave the cycles his name, there is little doubt that the major astronomical facts were known long before him, and these underlie many, if not most, of the antediluvian figures. Thus, the oldest antediluvian, Methuselah, is said to have lived for 51 cycles of 19, or 969 years, dying the year the old era ended and the Flood extinguished all life. Thereafter, life spans decreased. Noah—who bridged the two worlds—lived 50 cycles or 950 years.

A number of other antediluvian data precisely reflect the Metonic Cycle, and some others do nearly so, which suggests that the oral traditions upon which the text was based were no longer sure of the underlying scheme. Still..., none of these old numbers were random creations, but reflected careful sequences and interrelationships....

At one time, no doubt, these relationships were clearly understood, as was the unifying message: God had arranged each person's days on earth, and special care was given to the early generations, as well as to the progenitors of the Chosen People. They were all under the watchful care of the Almighty, and their years of life and death were the clearest sign that Divine Power controlled their fate.