

Chapter 5 raises an obvious question: Why are genealogies included in Genesis? And there is a straightforward answer: The genealogy here connects the story of Adam, Eve, Cain and Abel in the first four chapters with the story of Noah that starts in chapter 6. Those two stories are high points of God's first dealings with men (and with their sin), but without a connection between them, the narrative is episodic.

Genealogies were well-known in the ancient world, common enough that scholars have been able to learn some of their characteristics. The first and most general thing is that they were written with a purpose beyond simply listing names in a lineage. In most instances, that purpose could be achieved with a selective genealogy – and indeed, genealogies were typically selective. That is true of this particular genealogy. We see this clearly from the beginning: Only Seth is listed as a son of Adam, although there were two older sons, Cain and Abel. Except for 5:32, where the three sons of Noah are named, every generation has only a single son listed. The existence of other sons and daughters, unnamed, is explicitly stated, so we can see that the selectivity was deliberate.

Scholars have also determined that it was common, and indeed expected, that generations would be skipped in a genealogy. Chapter 5 has no explicit evidence of embodying this characteristic. However, the NIV footnote to 5:6, which says that *father* may mean *ancestor*, is an indirect indication of possible omissions.

What, then, is the purpose of the chapter 5 genealogy? It makes clear that God has chosen to use one family line to receive his particular blessing. We will see later that this blessing is intended to be passed on to all mankind. Moreover, this line will be used to deal with the sin that has already arisen and started to flourish.

Because of the possibility of skipped generations, with no explicit indication expected, it is not possible to calculate time span of any genealogy by adding together the ages at the birth of a son. Determining time spans is doubly problematic in the case of chapter 5, because there are three sets of numbers of years in the three textual traditions of the Pentateuch:

- those numbers given by the Hebrew Old Testament as preserved in the Masoretic<sup>1</sup> text;
- those numbers in the Samaritan Pentateuch;<sup>2</sup> and
- those numbers in the Septuagint.<sup>3</sup>

This divergence in these witnesses to the text is a well-studied problem. Briefly stated, scholars have no idea why the numbers are different, and there is no satisfactory way to reconcile them.

Likewise, we have no good explanation for the very long lives recorded in chapter 5.<sup>4</sup> In the hope of learning something about the original intent of the writer, we can consider a roughly contemporary document, the Sumerian King List.<sup>5</sup> To be clear, we are not suggesting any literary dependence either way. Rather, we make the much weaker statement that they have similar contents and may have been understood in similar ways. The similarities in content are in fact striking. The King List reports eight (or ten in a much later version) kings in a single line of descent, a flood covering the earth, and then thirty-nine more kings. The kings before the flood have lives that span tens of thousands of years; those after the flood have much shorter lives. We can conclude that a reference to extravagantly long lives was not seen as an impediment to the purpose of the document.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Masoretes were scholars, typically families of scholars, who took upon themselves responsibility for the accurate transmission of the Hebrew text of the Old Testament during the sixth through tenth centuries AD. The text as they preserved it is called the Masoretic text.

<sup>2</sup> The text of the Samaritan Pentateuch (and no other part of the Old Testament) was kept independently in the northern kingdom of Israel (or Samaria). It too is in Hebrew, but written in the pre-exilic alphabet.

<sup>3</sup> The Septuagint is a Greek translation of the Old Testament from the time of the diaspora, when Greek was becoming the international language of the Near East. It served as the Bible in New Testament times, since at that time Aramaic, rather than Hebrew, was the common language of the people in Israel.

<sup>4</sup> It is of course entirely possible that the ages are correct – nothing is too hard for God. Still, the text makes no comment about the great ages or their possible significance, nor any about the decrease in lifespan after the flood. Indeed, there is no indication whether the long lives were restricted to this one line, or were more widespread.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1–17, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*, 1990, p 251 ff. He suggests a date of composition for the king list of around 2000 BC.

<sup>6</sup> The purpose of the king list may have been to emphasize a connection to the past, at the time when the city ruling Sumer changed from Akkad to Ur. *Ibid.*

We do note a fundamental difference. The genealogies in Genesis are not concerned with kings,<sup>7</sup> but with the people through whom God was working to bring his blessing, first to his chosen line, and ultimately to all mankind.

Chapter 5 begins with *this is the written account of Adam's family line* (5:1). A more literal translation is "this is the book of the generations of Adam," which is also how the KJV reads. When the word translated "generations" is used, it precedes a genealogy.<sup>8</sup>

After this introduction is a recapitulation of the creation of mankind:

*When God created mankind, he made them in the likeness of God. <sup>2</sup> He created them male and female and blessed them. And he named them "Mankind" when they were created.*

This strikingly similar to 1:27:

*So God created mankind in his own image,  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them.*

The verbal similarities, particularly the three-fold repetition of "created," make the reference backward hard to miss. This similarity is certainly intentional. The topic of blessing is added here.

The rest of the chapter is devoted to listing sequential pairs of fathers and sons, of whom very much the same things are said, using all but identical phrasing:

- After living  $x$  years, the son was born to the father.
- The father lived  $y$  additional years, during which he had other children.
- The father lived  $x + y$  years altogether, and then died.

There are a few departures from this model (beyond slight changes in wording), and these departures are the most interesting parts of the genealogy:

- Seth is said to be in the image of Adam (5:3). The connection with men being made in God's image is clearly intended.
- Enoch is said to have *walked faithfully with God* (5:22), a description shared only with Noah (6:9). This seems to be distinguished from "walking before God," which is said of the patriarchs and Hezekiah; it perhaps indicates a greater degree of intimacy. The death of Enoch is not recorded; instead it is said that *he was no more, because God took him away*. This is very widely taken to mean that he was brought into God's presence without undergoing death.<sup>9</sup> His lifespan is notably less than the others in the chapter – possibly an indication that long life was not *per se* an indication of closeness with God.<sup>10</sup>
- Noah's name is explained (5:29). As the NIV footnote explains, the explanation is not connected to the meaning of the name; instead, *Noah* sounds like the Hebrew for *comfort*. This sort of connection between a name and a similar sounding word is relatively common in Genesis. It can be thought of as a rhetorical device, a way of connecting the name of a person with the significance of his life, so that the latter will be memorable to someone hearing the narrative.
- Three sons are listed for Noah (5:30) rather than the expected one; all three will be very important in the subsequent chapters.

Verses 5:25-27 are notable, not for any departure from the pattern, but because the lifespan of Methuselah is the longest one in this genealogy, and indeed in the whole of the Bible. We note that the Bible makes no comment on this fact, here or elsewhere. This chapter gives no support to a supposition that a long life is *per se* a sign of any particular favor in God's sight.

Some commentators make much of the fact that some the names in the genealogy of Cain (4:17-22) are the same as, or similar to, those found here. Indeed, some use the correspondence to draw conclusions about how Genesis was written. My own view is that such conclusions are overreaching. Simple coincidence could explain the correspondence. This would be more probable if the names involved were common at the time, and more probable still when everyone in the two lists was related.

<sup>7</sup> The early kings in the Sumerian King List seem to be, to at least some extent, divine or semi-divine.

<sup>8</sup> 2:4 is an exception.

<sup>9</sup> There is a minority opinion that *he was no more* is here a euphemism for "died," as it is elsewhere in the Old Testament. However, there seems no good reason why a euphemism would be used here amid so many direct statements of death.

<sup>10</sup> It is certainly plausible that Enoch's life would have been equally long, had it not been interrupted by his being transported.