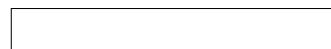


THE ACCOUNT OF GENERATIONS —“TOLEDOTH” IN GENESIS

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In the beginning, the Bible gives the reader introduction to the work of God. It does so by giving the reader narratives of how God has worked since long ago. A word which is often used to start these stories is the Hebrew word “toledoth”. This word will be examined in this essay in its relation to the Hebrew text to discuss its meaning and implications.

The New International Version translates this word in Genesis 2:4 : “This is the *account* of the heavens and the earth when they were created,” while the English Standard Version has “These are the *generations* of the heavens and the earth....” The World English Bible uses “This is the *history of the generations* of the heavens and the earth....” Each of these translations is starting a new narrative for the reader, but each has a different feeling. An “account” seems more historical, while the word “generations” is more active, while still delineating a specific time and place for the story.

The Hebrew original word being translated is **תולדות**. Strong’s concordance number is 8435 and references the root as **לד** meaning “to bear young” or as a causal “to beget”. Strong’s

goes on to mention medical uses as “to act as a midwife” or to declare lineage. **תולדות** thus has

meaning of “descent, family” and “history” or “generations”. The word is only a plural word.

Brown Driver Briggs defines “**תולדות**” as a feminine plural noun, while the verse in Genesis 2:4 according to Accordance software is a common feminine plural construct, referring to the heavens and the earth.

Brown Driver Briggs notes that this word occurs especially in “genealogies as an account of man and his descendants.” In addition to Genesis 2:4, “toledoth” is also found in Genesis 5:1, 6:9, 10:1, 11:10, 11:27, 25:12, 25:19, 36:1, 36:9 and 37:2. It gives structure to the book of

Genesis, as it introduces the major or featured protagonists and their family lines: creation in Genesis 2:4, next Adam, then Noah and the flood, next Noah's sons, Shem in particular in Genesis 11:10, going on to Terah, father of Abram, next Abraham's son Ishmael in Genesis 25:12, Isaac in chapter 25:19, Esau in 36:1 as well as in 36:9, and of Jacob beginning in chapter 37:1. After Genesis, the word "toledoth" is also found in Exodus 6:16, 6:19, 28:10, Numbers 1:20, Ruth 4:18. Beyond this, the word is found in First Chronicles 5:7, Chapter 7:2, 7:4, 7:9 and others for a total of eight times, referring to lineage and heads of clans. Notably, its usage in First Chronicles is in the setting of genealogies.

Throughout its usage, it designates the importance of community and focuses on descendants and future generations. It is used in history genres introducing the details of the people of the clan. Some of its uses may also be considered as part of wisdom literature as found in passages portraying creation, Adam and Noah. By contrast, the book of Job, wisdom literature about a possible contemporary of Abraham, begins without using this word, since the story of Job does not claim to be directly connected with the family of Abram.

The importance of the word **תולדות** is seen, according to Derek Kidner, author of the Tyndale Old Testament Commentary *Genesis*, in that the first book of the bible derives its name from it, due to the Septuagint's translation of the word as "origin". Kidner also argues that the word is also "looking forward" as opposed to summarizing (page 59).

What conclusions can be drawn about this word? There are several important ones in different categories: first, the orderliness of the accounts which are found in Genesis; second, the importance of human beings in the

story, meaning the specificity and attention given to them in their relationships to family; thirdly and finally, the importance of narrative and cultural activity, including procreation, in the telling of the Biblical story.

Firstly, one sees in the uses of the word “toledoth” an organizational pattern for the whole story of the book of Genesis. It’s use divides the book into sections focused on a certain protagonist or his family, or in the case of Genesis 2:4 the creation and fall story. Just as Luke in his gospel begins by desiring to write “an orderly account”, the account of Genesis is orderly and follows patterns. This itself is evidence of logic and reason in the presentation of the “accounts.”

Secondly, the importance of the accounts focuses on people and often how they relate to God. Creation is followed by details of the story of the fall. Adam’s line lists Enoch who walked with God. Cain’s line is mentioned with its magnification of selfishness. People and their relationship with God are a central focus, even as God extends saving grace to creation in the flood narrative. The toledoth of Jacob is both the story of Joseph saving his generation, but also of the change within Judah over his lifespan--from visiting prostitutes to offering himself as slave for the release of Benjamin—and subsequently receiving the great blessing of his father Jacob.

The third point of discussion regarding the use of the word “toledoth” can be seen as pointing to a fulfillment of God’s command to fill the earth and care for it. God commands in Genesis 1:28 for mankind to be caretakers

and fillers of the earth. Some call this verse the “cultural mandate” given to humankind to develop and create community and culture. This command is in a sense the forerunner of the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20) where Jesus sends his followers to make disciples and teach them everything commanded by God, with the help of God’s presence. By telling the narrative in terms of families and “generations,” there is an emphasis on the extended family structure, which modern culture does not always affirm, but which is even today generally recognized as formative and foundational.

Applying all the above study of the word “toledoth” to the verse of Genesis 2:4, this word is important because it serves as an introduction or explanation of the chapters and verses that follow. The author sets off the account of the creation of the heavens and the earth from what has come previously, implying that now further specifics are being offered to what has previously been told in Genesis 1. Derek Kidner believes that the word “toledoth” points forward (page 59). The word emphasizes the reproductive nature of creation by its root word meaning “to beget”. By placing the emphasis on the community aspect of “generations”, the word is not limited to reproductivity, but also connotes the shared history and distinctives in the stories which show God’s patience and provision with his creation. The toledoth of Noah thus includes the salvation of creation in the ark, much as the story and creation and fall shows the promise of “crushing the serpent’s

head” and the mercy God bestowed on Cain to prevent him being murdered in vengeance.

The original Hebrew meaning of “account of generations” is inclusive. The account of Genesis is more than that of “losing paradise,” but also how God is at work to restore and bring community and a narrative of salvation. Modern cultures struggle with the issues of homosexuality, choice in reproductive rights, addictions and earth-keeping. There are no “easy” solutions to the brokenness in modern lives, but Genesis does deal with human brokenness in the stories of Dinah, Judah, Rueben, and others. All these are presented in the beginning book of the Bible so that readers take into account a real picture of what the world is and how it can relate to God. The word “toledoth” suggests that an honest account of humankind’s situation is being presented, in a fact-filled narrative. The purpose of the account that begins with Genesis 2:4 is to show creation and fall, but also hopes of redemption. It is in the generations that follow that God continues to reveal himself, eventually as Christ, for continuing the story of redemption, which still goes on today.

WORKS CITED

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