

Reading ‘places’ in Genesis 1–11

I found Alistair McKitterick’s paper, Reading ‘places’ in Genesis 1–11,¹ very interesting and informative, and generally agree with his explanation. However, another explanation came to my mind. Is it possible that the reason “why the author gave such attention to the places and features of the four headwaters if they are nowhere relevant to the geography of the rest of the text”, is that the author (or authors) of the *toledot* of the heavens and the earth (Genesis 2:4–4:26) and of the *toledot* of Adam (Genesis 5:1–6:8) actually wrote prior to Noah’s Flood? Is it not possible that the records of these histories were preserved by taking them onto the Ark and handed down through the subsequent generations by the patriarchs, so they would later serve as a source or sources for Moses in his compiling of the pre-Flood history in Genesis? All of this, of course, would have taken place under the providential care and control of the Holy Spirit of God.

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Reference

1. McKitterick, A., Reading ‘places’ in Genesis 1–11, *J. Creation* 31(1):99–103, 2017.

» Alistair McKitterick replies:

Thank you for your comments regarding my article, and I’m glad you found it helpful. I’m aware of the argument you mention stemming from P.J. Wiseman (1888–1948) of viewing the *toledot* in Genesis (and elsewhere) as discrete historical sources.¹ Wiseman argues that *toledot* should be understood as a kind of signature at the conclusion of physical tablets which



"The location of Eden" by Hieronymus Bosch (c. 1450–1516)

were then passed on in some way from patriarch to patriarch down to Moses. The dozen mentions of the word *toledot* in Genesis, he believed, should be understood as colophons that point backwards as concluding refrains to the history of the person mentioned (or creation in the case of Gen. 2:4).² This idea of Genesis consisting of discrete historical documents handed down to Moses has been seized upon as a rebuff to those who would argue that the Pentateuch was stitched together from folklore and priestly sources late on during the Babylon exile. However, it should be noted that neither Wiseman's nor Wellhausen's accounts of the origin of the Pentateuch have any historical evidence to support them (there are

no historical examples of 'Terah's *toledot*' in the same way that there are no historical examples of a so-called Jahwist source). Moreover, the belief in Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch is not helped by the claim that Moses compiled Genesis from patriarchal tablets. The way we understand the *toledot* must be decided by literary analysis of the biblical text as we have it in its final form.

The *toledot* structure of Genesis is much better understood as a literary device (that Moses intentionally used) that indicates how we should read Genesis, where the theological emphases lie, and how God's plan developed through time. Wiseman's argument that the *toledot* look backward or are conclusions to sections is wrong. The *toledot* are forward looking and act as headings. The phrase should be understood not as a 'history' but rather as in the concept of generation. In a helpful article,³ Marten Woudstra translates the term *toledot* this way: "In the word *toledot*, therefore, we find the meaning: this is what came of it. And in the genitive 'these are the *toledot* of ...' we have the thought: this is where it started from." The *toledot* introduce sections of Genesis showing how God was working in and through the patriarchs and their offspring (looking forwards) to achieve his purposes and fulfil his promises. They are not primarily biographical about the named patriarch (looking backwards). Their literary function can be seen in the suspense that is created by having a *toledot* of Terah but not one of Abraham, and by the brief space given to Ishmael's descendants compared to those of Isaac. Wright argues that "the plot of the book moves forward in a 'hopscotch' fashion, noting Ishmael and Esau, as it bypasses them into the stories of the families of Isaac and Jacob".⁴ There is much more that could be said about the literary *toledot* structure.⁵ The main point to be taken,

however, is that seeing the *toledot* in Genesis as remnants of cuneiform tablets taken on board the ark is neither scriptural nor helpful. We are much better advised to consider the complex literary structure and narrative unity of the *toledot* as evidence of the single genius who authored the Pentateuch.

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References

1. Wiseman, P.J., *New Discoveries in Babylonia about Genesis*, Marsh, Morgan and Scott, London, 1936.
2. I note that you do not follow Wiseman's colophon approach (because you refer to the *toledot* of Adam as being Genesis 5:1–6:8) but, generally speaking, the idea of the *toledot* being discrete historical sources derives from him because he believed he identified the use of colophons in ancient cuneiform texts that he'd found. Without that link, there is nothing historical at all to support the view that *toledot* are discrete historical documents.
3. Woudstra, M., The *toledot* of the book of Genesis and their redemptive-historical significance, *Calvin Theological J.* 5:184–89 1970.
4. Wright, J.W., Genealogies; in: Alexander, T.D. and Baker, D.W. (Eds.), *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, Leicester, IVP, p. 348, 2003.
5. For those interested in pursuing it, I suggest Thomas, M.A., *These are the Generations: identity, covenant and the 'toledot' formula* (The Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies), T&T Clark, New York, 2011.