

TEN GENERATIONS FROM ADAM TO NOAH VERSUS TEN GENERATIONS FROM NOAH TO ABRAHAM

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History differs from chronicles in that the latter is simply a description of past events, that is, what happened, while the former is a systematic search for patterns and causal connections between these events, that is, why they happened. The biblical account fits neither category, being more than chronicles and less than history. It is what is sometimes called historiography, history written from a particular point of view. In the case of the Bible it is history written from a theological perspective. One of the methods basic to both history and historiography is what is called "periodization." In order to study the seamless flow of events it is necessary to divide the subject matter into manageable units or periods. Then the historian, after due examination, might attribute certain defining characteristics to that period. Thus, we tend to speak of something called the medieval period as the "Dark Ages" because it had not been exposed to the light of scientific knowledge. But on what objective basis does one determine the boundaries of the medieval or any other period?

When the rabbinic composers of the Mishnah studied the first eleven chapters of Genesis, they observed certain structural similarities between Chapter 5 and 10 which suggested to them a basis for periodization. They expressed their teaching in the pithy style of *midrash aggadah*:

- a) There were ten generations from Adam to Noah
- b) to make known the patience of God
- c) since all those generations continued to anger Him
- d) until He brought upon them the waters of the flood (*Avot* 5:2).

- a) There were ten generations from Noah to Abraham
- b) to make known the patience of God
- c) since all those generations continued to anger Him

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d) until Abraham our Father came and received the reward due them all (*Avot* 5:3).

The opening portions (a) of both sections of these *mishnayot* simply note that the number of generations between Adam and Noah and between Noah and Abraham are the same, exactly 10, a number which is generally seen as constituting a unit. To the Mishnah this meant that our attention is being drawn to a similarity between the two periods which then surprisingly leads to two quite different personalities and two very different outcomes. Using identical language to emphasize the similarity, the Mishnah proceeds to tell us that (b) the purpose of the biblical account is to inform us of God's patience or forbearance in that (c) while all these people continued to anger God, ten full generations elapsed before God, as it were, decided to act. In the case of the Adam-Noah period (d) "He brought upon them the waters of the Flood" In the case of the Noah-Abraham period (d) "Abraham our Father came and received the reward due them all."

But if, as the Mishnah implies in (c), the behavior of the intervening generations in both periods was negative, how do we account for their vastly different endings? To understand this we must go to the biblical text. After the elapse of the first ten generations, we are told of God's judgment:

And the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great upon the earth and that every imagination of the thought of his heart was continually evil . . . And it repented the Lord that He had made man upon the earth . . . And the Lord said 'I will blot out man whom I have created . . . both man and beast, creeping things and fowl of the air . . .' (Gen. 6:5-7).

God found that the entire situation of "man on earth," including the climate, the proliferation of grotesque forms of life, as well as man's propensity to violence, could no longer be tolerated.¹

After ten generations, God's "patience" had come to an end. And so, after taking measures to preserve what was worth preserving, "He brought upon them the waters of the Flood." However, when we read of the more benign outcome of the Noah-Abraham period where the Mishnah alludes to Abraham "receiving the reward due them all," we are quite perplexed, since we

had been told that these generations, as well, had "continued to anger Him"? Once again let us return to the biblical text.

After enumerating the generations after Noah and the geographic distribution of the nations that descended from his three sons, we read in a summary paragraph (Gen. 11:1-9) which corresponds to Genesis 6:5-8 of the earlier period, the story of the Tower of Babel. While here too God disapproves of their behavior, contrary to His reaction at the end of the Adam-Noah period, He intervenes here only to bring about a mid-course correction in human development. God destroys their unity by confounding their language causing them to scatter to other parts of the earth (Gen. 11:9). The period does not end in a wholesale destruction but rather in the hopeful appearance of Abraham.

This then is the textual basis for the Mishnah's understanding that while the Noah-Abraham period "continued to anger God" in the sense that it was still not what God expected from man, there were already some positive civilizing elements taking place in his development. There seemed to be a certain sense of unity and a cooperative spirit amongst the people although much of it was the result of the rule of "tyrants" like Nimrod (Gen. 10:8). God's judgment seems to be that conditions were now conducive for the appearance of an Abraham and of a people called Israel to follow. While on the surface much was still the same, the Creator evidently felt that now people might respond to a living example of a human being who actualized the "image of God" within him.

If our analysis is correct, then the reference to God's "patience" in connection with the second period must be interpreted somewhat differently. In the case of the Adam-Noah generations God's "patience" indeed means his forbearance in withholding punishment for ten long generations in the hope that mankind would repent and improve. However, in the case of the later period, God "waits patiently" in another sense. For Him, the perfection of mankind is so important, so vital to the entire project called "creation" that He is willing to wait patiently, ten generations and much longer, until inch by inch mankind struggles to learn and to improve.

A closer look at the key passages of Genesis 6:1-8 and Genesis 11:1-9 suggests that the problem in the early period was with man, the individual, his psyche, his sense of self-identity, his lack of self-control. Hence God must

seek a radically new beginning. However, in the second period the problem seems to have been more social and political. What are the best conditions under which men may live together in peace? The Bible implies that man is sent forth to find out the answer for himself in the hazardous school of experience. We must learn to balance the relative benefits of uniformity and diversity and learn by trial and error the least objectionable form of government.

"Until Abraham came and received the reward due them all," whatever success Abraham had in furthering the Divine plan was in large part made possible by the unrecorded "small steps" made by the generations between Noah and Abraham, hence, "the reward due them all."²

NOTES

1. See the article by the author: "The Biblical Stories of Creation: Garden of Eden and the Flood: History or Metaphor?" *Tradition* 33:2 (Winter 1999).
2. Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik characterizes the culture of the generation of the Flood (the ten generations from Adam to Noah) as one of "egocentric hedonism," surrendering to beauty, carnal pleasure; comfort and convenience (see Gen. 6:2, 12). These are the *benei basar* of the *Aleinu* prayer. On the other hand, the ten generations leading up to Abraham exemplify a culture which worships power and seeks to subordinate the individual to a particular economic or political system (Gen. 11:4). These are the *rishei aretz* referred to in *Aleinu*. The appearance of Abraham says to the world that it is within the capacity of the individual to discover the moral God, rise above pagan culture and follow a way of life that recognizes the uses of pleasure and the limitations of power (Abraham's Journey, (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav, 2008) pp. 35-37).



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