

# ***BE-DOROTAV: NOAH'S "GENERATIONS"*** **IN LIGHT OF** **ANTEDILUVIAN LONGEVITY**

**JEFFREY M. COHEN**

The talmudic dispute between Rabbi Johanan and Resh Lakish as to the relative merit of Noah is very well known. It hinges on the statement that Noah was *a righteous man, perfect in his generation* [be-dorotav] (Gen. 6:9). R. Johanan states that the phrase *in his generation* is intended to convey the sense that only by the standard of "his (wicked) generation" was Noah perceived as a righteous man; but had he lived in an age of other righteous people, he would not have been regarded as extraordinary. Resh Lakish inferred the very opposite emphasis from that phrase. The fact that Noah succeeded in maintaining his righteousness even "in his (wicked) generation" is an indicator that had he enjoyed the benefit of living in a righteous generation, he would have been all the more righteous (TB *Sanhedrin* 108a).<sup>1</sup> Both views share the identical exegetical assumption: that the phrase "in his generation" is essentially superfluous, since he could hardly have been living in any other generation! It could only have been included, they believed, in order to add an extra perspective on the relative piety of Noah.

The present writer is but one among countless others down the ages who have been drawn to analyze those two opposing assessments of Noah, as well as to attempt to explain the anomaly of a sage of such acknowledged piety as R. Johanan presuming to disparage a biblical figure praised by the Torah as both "righteous" and "perfect".<sup>2</sup>

The difference of opinion between these two sages, inspired by the word *be-dorotav*, is obviously justifiable from a midrashic perspective. However, even then, a difficulty arises since it is based on an assumed singular formulation of the word, "in his generation [he was righteous, but . . .]," which presupposes a *be-doro* reading, whereas the text actually states *be-dorotav*, in the plural, which means "in his generations"! The plain sense of this word is

*Jeffrey M. Cohen is rabbi emeritus of the Stanmore Synagogue in London, and a regular contributor to Jewish Bible Quarterly. He has written some 20 books, the most recent being Genesis in Poetry, as well as The Siddur in Poetry and The Machzor in Poetry, both published in 2012 (see [www.rabbijeffrey.co.uk](http://www.rabbijeffrey.co.uk)).*

that Noah lived, unusually, through several generations – beyond the lifetimes of his predecessors.

Significantly, the plural form, *dorotav*, "his generations," is used only here, whereas the synonymous term *toledot* is consistently used in relation to all the other names in the genealogical lists of Genesis.<sup>3</sup> This allows us to assume that the employment of *be-dorotav* was intended to point to some unique aspect of Noah's "generations," which, we suggest, was the number of generations that he was privileged to see. At first glance this may seem strange, given that most of his predecessors, referred to in the genealogical lists of Genesis,<sup>4</sup> lived for almost as long as Noah's 950 years, with Jared and Methuselah even exceeding it (Gen. 5:20, 27). Would they not also have lived, therefore, through as many "generations" as Noah? In fact, however, Noah lived through more generations than any of his predecessors.

If we examine the Torah's data regarding the onset of the male generative capacity in the antediluvian period, we will discover the mystifying, albeit consistent fact that not a single man fathered children before he was at least 65 years of age. Genesis chapter 5 provides a genealogical list of the notable antediluvian families from Adam until Noah which indicates that most of those listed did not have their first child until they were much older than that, with half of them not starting their families until they were at least 130 years of age! Seth did not beget a child until he was 105 years old; Enosh, 90 years; Kenan, 70 years; Mahalalel, 65 years; Jared, 162 years; Enoch, 65 years; Methuselah, 187 years; Lemech, 182 years; Noah, 500 years. Compare this list with that of the postdiluvian generations in Genesis chapter 11:10ff, where the age at which each of Shem's offspring first had a child is provided: Shem at 100 years; Arpachshad at 35; Shelah at 30; Eber at 34; Peleg at 30; Reu at 32; Serug at 30; Nahor at 29; and Terah at 70. This postdiluvian situation, where most of those listed had children around the age of 30, is thus totally consistent with a new biological time clock having been activated to accommodate the contracted human life span.

Noah's three sons procreated and gave rise to the founding nations of humankind during the period of 350 years that he lived through after the Flood (Gen. 10:1-5). Those children would have been the offspring of the period that witnessed a gradual reduction in the human life span until it reached the decreed maximum of 120 years. This gradually reduced life span is clearly

recorded in the genealogical list of the postdiluvian generations of Noah's offspring referred to above (Gen. 11:10) – generations which, in addition to the effects of the Flood, also witnessed the vagaries of the Tower of Babel and mankind's subsequent dispersal (*ha-pelagah*). The life spans achieved by successive generations are as follows: Shem's son, Arpachshad, 438 years; Shelah, 433 years; Eber, 464 years; Peleg, 239 years; Reu, 239 years; Serug, 230 years; and Nahor, 148 years. As expected, the graph would also have some peaks and troughs before a consistent 120 years became the norm. Thus, Nahor's son, Terah, reached an age of 205 years (Gen. 11:32); his son Abraham, 175 years (Gen. 25:7); Abraham's sons, Isaac, 180 years (Gen. 35:28) and Ishmael, 137 years (Gen. 25:17); Jacob, 147 years (Gen. 47: 25) and Joseph, 110 years (Gen. 50:22).

We referred above to the Torah's genealogical list of the postdiluvian generations, in which most of those listed began to have families at around the age of 30, as opposed to the antediluvian generation in which none produced children before they were in their sixties. The average age for procreation, spread over the ten generations from Adam to Noah, was 155 years 6 months.<sup>5</sup> On the basis of these data, we realize the appropriateness of using the plural term *dorotav*, "his generations," in relation to the offspring that Noah was destined to see. For by using 155.5 years as the mean for each of those antediluvian "generations," we arrive at a situation where the oldest man, Methuselah, who reached the age of 969 years, would have lived through just six generations while Lemech, the last of the antediluvians, who lived 777 years, would have witnessed just five generations. By contrast, although Noah lived for 950 years and his children only had offspring during the 350 years after the Flood (Gen. 10:1), he would have witnessed some ten generations due to the shorter life spans and earlier birth time of subsequent generations. This, we suggest, is the force of the term *be-dorotav*. Noah was the only man blessed to see so many generations of his progeny.

On that basis we may assume that some of those later "generations" – specifically in the postdiluvian period – might not have been so iniquitous and could well have boasted some good people. This is certainly the position taken by the

the midrashic Sages with their concept of a *beit midrash* led by Noah's son, Shem, together with the latter's great-grandson, Eber (*Genesis Rabbah* 63:6, *Cant. Rabbah* 6:6). *Beit midrash* presupposes students learning how to lead righteous lives, and the generation gap between the two heads of this academy, *midrasho shel Shem ve-Ever*, reinforces the notion of several generations doing so at that period.

Such an understanding of *be-dorotav* would support the view of Resh Lakish, for it could now be argued that, on the evidence of the text, Noah did indeed live through some righteous generations, yet still merited the Torah's designation of "righteous" and "perfect." This, in turn, would give added emphasis to the divine injunction for Noah to enter the ark: *Come, you and all your household, into the ark; for I have seen you as righteous in this generation* [ba-dor ha-zeh] (Gen. 7:1). In other words, it was only in that specific antediluvian period that Noah was the only righteous man; but during the many generations through which he later lived, Noah was joined by a number of kindred spirits – and yet he remained *primus inter pares*.

#### NOTES

1. See also Rashi on Genesis 6:9.
2. See Jeffrey M Cohen, "Had Noah lived in Abraham's generation," *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, 22 (2):1994, pp.120-122; idem, "Had Noah lived in Adam's generation," *L'Eyla* no. 46 (September 1998) pp. 11-14.
3. See Genesis 5:1; 10:1; 11:10.
4. See previous note.
5. This is based on the total of 1556 years for the ten generations listed in Genesis chapter 5.