

Genesis 5:1-6:4
January 3, 2021

1) The Value of Genesis 5

- a) Commentaries interpret this chapter in a variety of ways. Von Rad ignores this chapter in his otherwise exhaustive commentary. Sibley Towner begins his treatment of chapter 5 by saying that this is one chapter of the Bible that both Sunday school teachers and preachers love to skip. He goes on to comment that “as factual history the figures of Genesis 5... have no value.” However, he insists that the theological ideas concerning God’s purposes continue to have importance and merit. Walter Brueggemann in his commentary admits that the genealogies of Genesis are “notoriously difficult to interpret” and he also emphasizes how the writers of this passage depended a great deal on Mesopotamian traditional sagas. James Barr in his book *Biblical Chronology: Legend or Science?* argues that it is impossible to reconstruct a historically accurate biblical chronology from these early Old Testament genealogies.
- b) On the other hand, there are some important figures in church history like Martin Luther who place a great deal of importance on the genealogy of Genesis 5. The 17th century Irish Archbishop, James Ussher depended heavily on the names and ages provided in chapter 5 as well as a later genealogy in Genesis 11 to conclude that the creation of the world took place on Sunday, October 23, 4004 BC. Such a view is now ridiculed in most scholarly circles, and I would agree that the importance of this chapter is not to be found in its historical accuracy but in its theological presuppositions.

2) The Purposes of Genesis 5

- a) The structure of the genealogy traces the 10 generations connecting Adam with Noah. The line runs through Adam’s 3rd son, Seth while Cain and his descendants have been merged in this listing and may account for the name Kenan in verse 9. As noted by Sibley Towner, “This demonstrates the fluidity of genealogy in biblical tradition. There is a willingness to reuse materials in a different order, placing descendants in different generations as

children of different parents.” This scrambling of names allows the writer to proceed without the stain of the murderous Cain. Notice the dramatically different role played by Lamech. In Genesis 4:23-24 he boasted of his murderous vengeance but in 5:28-31 he is the father of Noah and he prophesies that his son will ease the curse that had been placed upon Cain because of the primal murder.

- b) The listing of 10 generations between Adam and the flood is matched in Genesis 11:10-26 where 10 generations are listed between the flood and Abraham. This listing of multiple generations according to Brueggemann “is primarily for purposes of continuity, to show the linkage of humankind from its wholesome beginning to a shameful arrival at the flood.” The repetition of 10 generations is the way in which the authors signify completion, that this eon of human history has run its full course. Like Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus, the regularity of these Old Testament genealogies also attests the trustworthy presence of God in the events of history. And this is one of the key purposes of this list of names: to affirm that God’s hand is at work in the turning points of history and that things unfold on a timetable set by God.

3) Why the Extensive Old Ages? How Can Methuselah Be 969 Years Old?

- a) The 10 generations of humankind prior to the flood are reported to have lived an extremely long life. If this listing is to be believed, Adam was still alive when his great-great-great-great grandson, Lamech, was born. How can this be? We know from both Babylonian and Sumerian genealogies that their ancient worthies were reputed to have lived even longer. A Babylonian list of 10 generations before their flood story claims 10 primal kings who ruled for 432,000 years. The Sumerians had their first king ruling for 28,800 years and a second ruling for 36,000 years. Like the Hebrews, the Sumerian list continued for 10 generations until their flood story intervened. Given the tradition of these Near Eastern sagas, perhaps the surprise is not the age of Methuselah but how young he is in comparison to the histories of their tribal competitors. This expanded lifespan continues for many Old Testament heroes until the death of Joshua at the age of 110. Only then did notable biblical characters assume a more normal “three score and 10.”

- b) There was a great interest in historical chronology displayed by the priestly writers of Genesis. For them, these precise numbers were to be taken literally; they were not metaphorical figures. We have lost the key to unlock the meaning of these exact numbers, but for the ancient authors it was significant that the flood occurred 2242 years following the world's creation or as recounted in the Septuagint and in the Book of Jubilees it was 1307 years between creation and the flood and 2500 years between creation and Israel's entering the promised land. So, the numbers had importance in themselves, they followed a pattern of other Near Eastern cultures, and veneration for tribal ancestors surely gave added impetus to exaggeration.
- c) What are we as 21st-century Christians to make of the genealogies of Genesis? We have geological evidence that our world is billions of years old, we have the scientific theories of archaeology and paleontology that humankind emerged from Africa about 300,000 years ago. What do we do with this list of Adam's descendants? Rather than ignoring or discarding Genesis 5 let me suggest some important theological truths to be learned from this text. First, we are created by God and placed in the family of humankind. As God's creatures we find meaning in our relationship to God and other persons. Second, as members of the family of faith we stand as heirs to a long tradition of believers. As followers of God, we are thankful to our forefathers and foremothers who blazed the trail of devotion, even in primitive times. Third, we recognize God's continued presence since the moment of creation drawing all persons to a divine way of life that is displayed through justice, mercy, and love.

4) The Meaning of Genesis 6:1-4

- a) This passage is a prelude to the flood story telling of the perversity of human sin and the reasons for God's regret that creation ever occurred. What we read in these verses is the justification for God's wrath that resulted in universal destruction. Mark Twain was once asked what he would say to God if he ever got the chance. Twain cynically replied, "Things are pretty bad. You better try another flood." In these verses we began to see the biblical writers' attempt to explain the reason for the flood of Noah. If the list of generations in chapter 5 was problematic, then the first four verses of chapter 6 usher us into a mythic realm that is confusing, contradictory, and

questionable. It causes us to ask, why is this in my Bible? Walter Brueggemann concludes, “The text ill fits with the main flow of biblical faith.”

- b) Verse 1 describes a population explosion; perhaps the ancient writers interpreted this overpopulation as one of the reasons for God’s extreme disappointment. This may be the reason for the divine limitation on the human lifespan in verse 3 when God decrees a limit, “their days shall be 120 years.” But the unrestrained multiplication of humanity and their extreme longevity are certainly not the most odious issues challenging God’s righteousness.
- c) “Sons of God,” mentioned in verses 2 and 4, are not the literal sons of Yahweh but members of the angelic court surrounding God who are mentioned in several other places in the Old Testament (Genesis 28:12; I Kings 22:19-22; Job 1:6 and 38:7; as well as Psalm 29:1, 82:6, and 89:7). These are demigods, mythic creatures active in primeval times appearing at the very outset of creation and the beginnings of the human story. Like many commentators Sibley Towner concludes that these verses seem “to preserve a fragment of some wondrous Near Eastern tale about the ancient demigods.” As it is used in this text the shared cultural myth has been reshaped as a reason to explain God’s disgust for events occurring in a supposedly righteous and divine creation. The sons of God found the human women beautiful and raped them, as stated in verse 2, “they took wives for themselves of all that they chose.” This resulted in the birth of hybrid creatures who were unintended in God’s plan of creation.
- d) The offspring of the sons of God and the daughters of men pollute both the divine and human realms. From the Hebrew perspective, as stated by Sibley Towner, “God belongs up there and we belong down here and if the two get mingled, a disorderly cosmos results.” These beings were inappropriate and evil. In verse 4 a reference is made to “NEPHILIM,” traditionally understood as giants (see KJV), and described here as ancient heroes and renowned warriors. Akin to other Near Eastern cultures the ancient Hebrews also had stories of imagined ancestors who were larger and more powerful than people of their own day. The linguistic root of the Hebrew term NEPHILIM is “to fall” leading some scholars to identify these creatures as

fallen or evil angels. There are other references in the Old Testament (Numbers 13:33 and Deuteronomy 1:28) to such beings as terrifying giants. Once again we have an intrusion of cultural myths joined to these verses of Scripture. Walter Brueggemann concludes that this passage “participates as fully in the common mythological tradition of the ancient Near East as any Old Testament text.”

- e) Genesis 6:1-4 sets the stage for God’s judgment resulting in the great flood. God’s wrath is unleashed in watery destruction because of human sin, the desecration of the created order, and rebellion within the heavenly court itself. The story of the flood now follows.

Questions for Reflection

1. How do you make sense of these mythic stories of people living for over 900 years and giant sex-crazed demigods roaming the earth? Are these passages consistent with the biblical message, or are they best treated as ancient Near Eastern myths that mistakenly ended up in our Hebrew Bible?
2. What positive value do you find in the genealogy and stories of Genesis 5:1-6:4? Are there theological truths we can learn from these verses?
3. There are obvious parallels at several points in the early chapters of Genesis and the myths that circulated in other Near Eastern cultures. Does that bother you, or can you see divine truth emerging in the Hebrew version of those ancient stories?
4. At several points these early chapters of Genesis challenge modern scientific analysis. Is it possible to hold onto the truths of Genesis while also affirming the scientific truth of evolution, geology, paleontology, and archaeology? Is it possible to treat Genesis as scientifically and historically accurate?