

Bible Genealogies

Commentary for April 16, 2016 — What Is Their Purpose?

I have published several articles that include lists of people and their genealogies. So why should we care about genealogies and lists? They are tedious to read and have no apparent connection with our concerns today. Yet such lists and genealogies in ancient times (knowing the parentage of a child) were important, particularly in times of transition, such as the kingly line of Judah, promised by God to be descended from King David (2 Samuel 7:12). For ancient audiences (the readers and listeners) genealogical material was written to provide:

- [1] placement of people within a timeframe, a sequence of events and of life;
- [2] relation of people mentioned as they relate to significant places;
- [3] relationships to people before and after the genealogy, people known to the audience.

There is an interesting passage in Nehemiah chapter 7:

“And my God put into my heart to gather together the nobles, and the rulers, and the people, that they might be reckoned by genealogy. And I found a register of the genealogy of them which came up at the first, and found written therein,

these are the children of the [Persian] province [of Judea], that went up out of the captivity, of those that had been carried away, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away, and came again to Jerusalem and to Judah, every one unto his city; Who came with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, ...”

• ***Nehemiah 7:5–7***

These registry lists were Babylonian records preserved by Persian conquerors of Babylon. Young men of Judah: Daniel, Meshach, Shadrach, and Abednego, were selected by the Babylonians from the exiles because of qualities the Babylonians noticed in these boys (along with other captives from other conquered peoples). Nebuchadnezzar thought they would benefit the Babylonian empire (Daniel chapters 1–2). These four young Israelites may have been the ones who wrote the lists used by the author of First and Second Chronicles (Ezra the Priest) as sources for the genealogies and the “register” that Nehemiah found. In his commentary on Daniel, Steven Miller describes the variety of records kept at Babylon¹:

“Babylon was the learning center of the day and had acquired the remarkable library left by the Assyrian ruler Ashurbanipal (669–626 B.C.). According to [Prof. D.J.] Wiseman, Babylonian texts indicate that the schools of the day copied sign lists, word lists, paradigms, legal materials, all kinds of religious documents, fables, omen texts including those about ‘devils and evil spirits,’ astrological and mathematical texts, economic data, as well as historical material.”

¹ Stephen R. Miller, *Daniel*, vol. 18, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 62.

“All kinds of religious documents” would include the various holy books (such as the five Books of Moses) of peoples conquered by Babylon. Such works gave rulers (Assyrian, Babylonian, and later Persian rulers of Israel and Judah) insight into the religious, cultural, and social understanding of subject populations. “[E]conomic data, as well as historical material,” would include court records, which were histories of ancient times,² and genealogies of Babylon and subject peoples, such as all the 12 tribes of Israel. Such lists of people and genealogies were useful for taxation, military recruitment, and for public works projects. Ancient kingdoms were extremely bureaucratic, as our societies are today.³

According to Nehemiah, a high official in the Persian administration, these Assyrian and Babylonian records were preserved by Persian authorities who conquered Babylon at the time of the Jewish prophet Daniel in the reign of Belshazzar, King of Babylon. Nehemiah **“found a register of the genealogy ...”** Alternatively, perhaps Nehemiah found a register written by the Jews themselves, preserved so his people could know who survived the exile, who was taken to Babylon, and who returned to Judah. Whatever the case, the records were useful for Nehemiah when some returned to Judea from Babylon and surrounding areas. Only a minority of Jews in exile ever returned to Israel. To the returnees, genealogies were vital:

“3. Importance of Genealogies: Genealogical accuracy, always of interest both to primitive and more highly civilized peoples, was made especially important by the facts

- that the land was promised to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob,
- that the priesthood was exclusively hereditary,
- that the royal succession of Judah lay in the Davidic house,
- that the division and occupation of the land was according to tribes, families and fathers' houses; and
- for the Davididae, at least, that the Messiah was to be of the house of David.

The exile and return, which fixed indelibly in the Jewish mind the ideas of monotheism, and of the selection and sacred mission of Israel, also fixed and deepened the genealogical idea, prominently so in the various assignments by families, and in the rejection in various ways of those who could not prove their genealogies.”

- **“Genealogy,” *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia***

Genealogies and lists may not be interesting to read, but they help us understand the past, and proper understanding of people and their place in history may even give us insight into prophetic events.

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² Esther 6: 1:

“On that night could not the king sleep, and he commanded to bring the book of records of the chronicles; and they were read before the king.”

A *Net Bible* footnote comments on this verse: **“Heb: ‘the book of the remembrances of 3’.”** Note that the records were read to the king; he did not read to himself.

³ Many innovations of controlling subject peoples were developed by the Assyrians which were later used by Babylonian, Persian, and Greek rulers in Asia, up to the emergence of the Roman Empire.