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# The *Tôlĕdôt* Structure of Genesis

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## Abstract

**For the past couple of centuries, critical scholars have argued that the differences between Genesis 1 and 2 indicate that they are from two different sources which are contradictory. Those who understand that the biblical accounts actually describe God's creation of the cosmos see them as complementary, but still have encountered issues with regard to how they fit together. This study argues that a critical factor is the transition verse of Gen 2:4 hinging on the key Hebrew word *tôlĕdôt*, a term which has been difficult to translate. Drawing on the increasingly accepted understanding that the term is part of a technical phrase which should be understood as "this is what became of" as well as the generally accepted observation that this phrase serves as a structural indicator for the entire book, the study proposes that the initial creation account is a preface to the overall book. It then demonstrates that by showing how the phrase ties together the various sections of the book demonstrate sequentially what became of the creation which God proclaimed as very good (Gen 1:21). As such it provided a critical foundation for the embryo nation of Israel at Mt. Sinai where Moses shared God's revelation that the people had been called for a purpose, which would ultimately lead to redemption of the entire world. Seeing the book as a carefully crafted unit built on the *tôlĕdôt* phrase highlights the importance of the creation account preface not only to explain origins to us as well as the nation of Israel, but the nature of the world in which we live.**


In the past few decades, OT scholars have increasingly agreed with John Skinner's observation that Genesis seems to be organized around the Hebrew phrase *'ēlle tôlĕdôt*. This combination is used eleven times at key transition points through the entire book (Skinner, 1930, lxvi). While this structure is gaining wide acceptance, what the phrase means and its significance is debated (DeRouchie, 2013; Mathews, 1996; Ross, 1988). The phrase consists of the noun *tôlĕdôt* combined with the particle *'ēlle* which means "these are." The crux of the discussion is the meaning of *tôlĕdôt*.

## The Meaning of *Tôlĕdôt*

The noun *tôlĕdôt* is understood to be derived from the Hebrew verb *yālad* which means "to give birth, to beget, to bear, to bring forth, or to beget" (*BDB*, 1977; Clines, 2011; Hoogendyk, 2017; Koehler and Baumgartner, 1958; Schreiner, 2006). Unsurprisingly then the traditional English translation has been "generations," which in the phrase *'ēlle tôlĕdôt* might be translated literally as "these are the generations," the transla-

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tion the KJV consistently uses. In some cases this phrase precedes a genealogy so that translation makes excellent sense. For example, Gen 5:1 in the KJV begins: "This *is* the book of the generations of Adam" (italics in original). Although this is not the usual Hebrew term for "generation" (Mathews, 1996) it does begin a genealogy of Adam tracing his lineage down to Noah. Similarly, in the KJV, Gen 11:10 begins "These *are* the generations of Shem" (italics in original). The genealogy which follows traces Shem's descendants to Terah and his three sons, Abram, Nahor, and Haran.

However, in most cases where Genesis uses *'ēlle tôlĕdôt*, this translation is awkward at best. For example, in the KJV, RSV, and ESV, Gen 6:9 reads "These are the generations of Noah," while the NRSV provides "These are the descendants of Noah." The next sentence declares that Noah was righteous, blameless, and walked with God, and then simply declares that "Noah had three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth." But rather than continue with subsequent generations, the text switches to note how corrupt the earth had become. The remainder of this *tôlĕdôt* section (chapters 6–9) describes how God brought judgment on the corrupt (a word repeated three times in Gen 6:11–12) earth through an extensive flood judgment. Noah's genealogy is not listed until the next section (Gen 10:1–11:9) where it is not part of his *tôlĕdôt*, but is described as the *tôlĕdôt* of his three sons of Shem, Ham, and Japheth. For this reason, the NASB translates 6:9 as "These are *the records* of the generations of Noah" (italics in original) and the NIV gives "This is the account of Noah."

Drawing from the conclusion that the term seems to indicate transitions in structure, along with the observation that the premise that context determines meaning, in recent years a number of scholars have proposed a different translation of the word *tôlĕdôt* when used in the phrase *'ēlle tôlĕdôt*. Ross explains that: "The *tôlĕdôt* heading announces the historical development from the ancestor (or beginning point)…" (Ross, 1988, 72). As a noun, a good translation of the word *tôlĕdôt* might then be "outcome." The question is, how would the phrase *'ēlle tôlĕdôt* ("literally these are the outcomes") fit in the context of entire book of Genesis where it would appear to be used in a consistent manner?

## The Use *Tôlĕdôt* in Genesis

For most English readers the presence of the phrase *'ēlle tôlĕdôt* is not always clear, and even when understood, its role tends to be obscured. First, in several cases chapter divisions mask the apparent structural role of the phrase both in English translations and the original Hebrew. For example, Genesis 1 breaks the opening creation account at the end of day six of the seven day structure. The seventh day of the creation week is placed in verses 1–3 of Genesis 2. Then the first use of *'ēlle tôlĕdôt* in appears in 2:4. Most scholars observe that the use of this term in 2:4 introduces "a new stage of the book." But because the chapter division separates the seventh "day" of God's rest from the rest of the introductory creation account, it is easy to gloss over the significance of that transition.

Second, English translations tend to obscure how consistently this phrase is used. Because "generations" does not fit every context well, modern translators generally use various words in different places. Fields of meaning for analogous words vary from language to language so it is not unusual for individual words to require different translations within different contexts. For example, the Hebrew word *ben* literally means son, but its field of meaning expands to cover not only "son," but "grandson," "children generally," "descendants" or "people or items belonging in a category or group" (Martens, 1999, 254). However, embedding a given word into a specific phrase tends to restrict the field of meaning, especially when the phrase is used as a significant literary indicator (DeRouchie, 2013, 235). In this case, the use of the phrase *'ēlle tôlĕdôt* marks it as a structural indicator and thus suggests a specialized and consistent meaning. As such, following Ross, we would suggest this phrase demands a uniform translation proposing specifically: "this is what became of… ." This study will evaluate the merit of that proposal with respect to the book of Genesis.

Given the Documentary Hypothesis which proposed different sources for Pentateuch rather than Mosaic authorship, critical scholars following Skinner quickly suggested the phrase *'ēlle tôlĕdôt* was used by a redactor to piece Genesis together. Skinner himself understood it to be an introductory formula in P (to which he attributed Gen 2:4a) inserted by a later redactor (Skinner, 1930, 40–41). Von Rad also maintains that the term served as "a kind of chapter division in the Priestly document," added by a later redactor at this location for organizational purposes (von Rad, 1977, 63). This perception largely derived from presumed Mesopotamian background to the initial portions of Genesis. Seeing superficial similarities with the Mesopotamian flood and creation myths, they proposed them as sources (Heidel, 1951, 82–140; Kramer, 1972).

Drawing on the proposed Mesopotamian background, P.J. Wiseman proposed that the *'ēlle tôlĕdôt* statements served to identify documents that the redactor of Genesis used as sources. Wiseman supposes a common understanding of the word *tôlĕdôt* as "history, especially family history" (Wiseman, 1985, 62). He then argues that each section is a specific history of an individual or family and the name reflects either the subject or the owner of the history account. Given Abraham's Mesopotamian background, Wiseman then contends that these histories would have originally been written on clay tablets in cuneiform following

cuneiform protocols that included a colophon or a brief description of the tablet written on an edge which allowed a scribe to readily find a tablet lying on a shelf. He concludes that each *tôlĕdôt* phrase in Genesis was originally a colophon which had been transcribed when the tablets were copied other media such as papyrus. Retained when the copies were combined into one document, they become in essence citations of the source of the information (Wiseman, 1985, 67–73).

Wiseman's overall view has not been widely accepted. However, the idea that the *'ēlle tôlĕdôt* sentences were colophons added to the end of an individual Hebrew account as a subscription to identify the material preceding it has been accepted by a number, generally among critical scholars. For example, Westermann divides Gen 2:4 and attaches the first half of the verse to the first creation account as a subscription. As such he sees Gen 1:1–2:4a as the first *tôlĕdôt* section (Westermann, 1984, 81–177). Speiser also views Gen 2:4a as a subscription, and translates it as "Such is the story of heaven and earth as they were created" (Speiser, 1962, 5). While Gunkel sees the term as a subscription he argues that in this case it was really a superscription moved to the present location by a later redactor (Gunkel, 1997, 103). The subscription view has its problems, however, and Friedman bluntly asserts that viewing this verse as the conclusion of the previous section "is wrong" and states that the purpose of the *'ēlle tôlĕdôt* phrase is "to construct the book as continuous narrative through history rather than as a loose collection of stories" (Friedman, 2001, 16), although he does not explain how it works in that regard.

In contrast, conservative scholars generally include the entire verse of Genesis 2:4 as part of the "second creation account" making the phrase a superscription (Ross, 1988, 71). Kidner maintains that it introduces "a new stage of the book" (Kidner, 1967, 59). Keil and Delitzsch state that Gen 2:4a "form[s] the heading to what follows" (Keil and Delitzsch, 1970, I:70). Cassuto notes "there are definite indications that it [Gen 2:4] is a unity, and also that the first half belongs to the story of the garden of Eden" (Cassuto, 1961, 97). Mathews argues that it is a heading which "introduces what was the aftermath of that creation" (Mathews, 1996, 189).

Mathews simply states that the colophon (and thus subscription) argument is not compelling (Mathews, 1996, 32). Ross explores the issue somewhat more and says that the "evidence from cuneiform is unconvincing and the outworking of the arrangement in Scripture is impossible" noting that nowhere in the Bible does the word *tôlĕdôt* "refer *clearly* to what has preceded" (Ross, 1988, 71–72, italics in original). It other words, it cannot be a summary of what occurred before, but must transition into subsequent developments.

Admittedly, each view has its problems. If the phrase is a subscription or summary, the final section (Gen 37:2–50:26) does not have one. Wiseman explains this by arguing that the writer of that section would have been Moses who would not have used a tablet for that material (he would have used papyrus), and thus would not have needed a colophon (Wiseman, 1985, 100). Moreover, there are several places where the idea of a summary would not make sense, such as Gen 25:19 which would have the *'ēlle tôlĕdôt* statement of Isaac summarizing the offspring of Ishamael, his half-brother. However, if the phrase is a superscription, the initial section does not have one. Castellino addresses this tension when he observes that Genesis 1 is a "real creation narrative," while Genesis 2 is "strictly an organizational text." (Castellino, 1994, 94). As a real creation narrative, there would be nothing before, which would explain why there is not one at the beginning.

Similarly, several more recent scholars have suggested that the initial section serves as a preface or introduction to further explain the superscription issue. DeRouchie has done excellent work in terms of the overall structure of the book showing how the *tôlĕdôt* sections provide a tight outline of the entire book and serve to narrow the focus from mankind in general to the line of Abraham. He sees the focal point as "the blessing-commission of Gen 1:28" (DeRouchie, 2013, 226). Hart ties the seven day structure of the initial section which describes God working and then resting with the declaration that man is created in God's image as a prologue to man's working in the rest of the book (Hart, 1995, 315–336). Ross sees the introduction focusing on creation setting the stage for "the destiny of the covenant people" (Ross, 1988, 88). However, there has been little work done in terms of the value of the proposed meaning of this structural indicator the *'ēlle tôlĕdôt* phrase.

## *'Ēlle Tôlĕdôt* in Genesis 2:4

Probably the most significant anomaly both in terms of the subject matter and the way various translations and commentators handle the phrase *'ēlle tôlĕdôt* is its first use in the book. In the KJV, Gen 2:4 reads: "These *are* the generations of the heavens and of the earth when they were created…" (italics in original). Here "generations" seems at best a very figurative expression since the context is the creation of the cosmos, rather than any genealogical sequence (Waltke, 2001, 83). In other words, the material prior to the phrase describes the creation of the heavens and the earth in broad terms. The subsequent material appears to explain specific outsomes of that creation account. However, one must exercise caution here. While Tsumura observes that the two accounts "reflect essentially the same cosmology" (Tsumura, 1994, 28), as has

**Table 1. Uses of *'ēlle tôlĕdôt* in Genesis.**

| | Text Covered | Subject | Topic |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2:4-4:26 | Heavens and Earth | "Second creation account" and the fall of man |
| 2 | 5:1-6:8 | Adam | Genealogy of Adam to Noah (plus introduction of Noah) |
| 3 | 6:9-9:29 | Noah | Flood account |
| 4 | 10:1-11:9 | Shem/Ham/Japheth | Table of nations |
| 5 | 11:10-11:26 | Shem | Genealogy of Shem to Terah |
| 6 | 11:27-25:11 | Terah | Account of Abraham |
| 7 | 25:12-25:18 | Ishmael | Sons of Ishmael |
| 8 | 25:19-35:29 | Isaac | Account of Jacob and Esau |
| 9/10 | 36:1-37:1 | Esau | Double genealogy of Esau (1 in Canaan, 2 in Seir) |
| 11 | 37:2-50:26 | Jacob | Joseph and his brothers |

been well noted, the two accounts differ significantly. Consequently, translators struggle here using various terms such as "account" which are rather vague and do not satisfy. A key reason is that this *'ēlle tôlĕdôt* section does not stop with the creation material of chapter 2 which describes the creation of the Adam, Eve, and various animals that Adam named in the garden God planted, but continues on to include the fall of Adam and Eve, their expulsion from the garden, the murder of Abel, the exile of Cain and his genealogy. As such, the phrase is much more than a summary sentence of what occurred before, hence Ross's proposed translation.

If the proposed translation of the *'ēlle tôlĕdôt* phrase as "this is what became of" is valid, then it would seem that the initial portion of the book, the "first creation account" (Gen 1:1–2:3) really serves as a preface or introduction to the book which serves to define the situation (see Table 1). Specifically, it asserts that God is the Creator of the entire cosmos which is demonstrated by a very brief and extremely vague overview of the entire creation process where God *spoke* the universe into existence. Clearly it does not provide enough details to really satisfy us today, but then its purpose is simply to show that God is the Creator, and that the entire cosmos is His handiwork. Further, near the end of this account, we read in Gen 1:31 that when the creation was completed, God pronounced it "very good." Then in Gen 2:2–3 we are told how at this point the creation was complete. Today we look at this completed creation and puzzle because in many respects the world in which we live does not seem all that good. Moreover, although this account maintains that mankind was given responsibility to manage that creation, it seems that every time we turn around mankind is messing it up, making it worse and worse. How do we put this together?

This is where understanding both the *'ēlle tôlĕdôt* structure and its meaning helps. If Gen 1:1–2:3 is intended as a preface, then the weight of the entire book is really on what happened afterwards. In other words, while the author begins with a premise that the good creator God produced a cosmos that was not only good, but very good, his main concern is what happened to it. As such, the intent of the first section introduced by *'ēlle tôlĕdôt* (Gen 2:4–4:26) is not to recapitulate the creation of the cosmos, nor even the creation of mankind in God's image, but rather to explain what happened to them, ultimately providing a coherent background for the existence and purpose of the nation of Israel as given by Moses at Sinai (Harbin, 2005, 44–46). To demonstrate this, we will briefly look at how each section introduced by the phrase *'ēlle tôlĕdôt* (termed a *tôlĕdôt* section) serves to advance the author's purpose and to prepare the reader for the rest of the OT.

## The First *Tôlĕdôt* Section: What Happened to the Heavens and the Earth (Gen. 2:4–4:26)

As noted, the six days of creation end with the statement that the creation was "very good" (Gen 1:31). Further

the entire creation process is set apart from the rest of the book by the seventh day, when God is described as having "rested," a word which Ross notes "describes the enjoyment of accomplishment, the celebration of completion" (Ross, 1988, 114). Cassuto observes this lays the foundation for the Sabbath day directive given subsequently at Mount Sinai and would seem to indicate a tie-in between this material and the covenant that the nation entered with God there (Cassuto, 1961, 63–70). Sarna expands this correlation noting how the concept of a seven-day week, a seven-day pattern of creation, and the institution of the biblical Sabbath are unique to Israel (Sarna, 1989, 14–15).

Translating the phrase *'ēlle tôlĕdôt* as "this is what became of," clarifies the entire sequence of Genesis 1–4 showing how the so-called "second creation account" doesn't end with the creation of humans (2:25), nor even with the expulsion of the fallen first couple from the garden (3:24), but the new start of a people of God with the beginning of Seth's line (4:26). As Ross puts it, "This first *tôlĕdôt* traces what became of the universe God had so marvelously created: it was cursed through disobedience, so that deterioration and decay spread rapidly throughout the human race" (Ross, 1988, 117). From both practical and scientific perspectives, there are significant differences between the creation which God pronounced as very good in the preface, and the consequences of the fall event announced in Gen 3:15ff. Just because God created the cosmos does not mean that everything we experience in it today is itself good, although Paul does note that God works everything together for God for those who love Him, but this is in the long term, i.e., preparation for eternity (Rom 8:28).

The entire first section presents two contrastive strains. The positive strain reflects God's grace and promise of redemption. This is seen first when God allows Adam and Eve to continue to live physically, providing them a covering in the form of animal skins (a foreshadowing of blood sacrifices). It is also seen in their exile from the Garden so that they might not eat from the Tree of Life in their fallen state (Gen 3:22). Another positive factor is God's judgment on the serpent after the first couple has eaten from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. The declaration known as the *protevangelium* contains the promise that the seed of the woman would eventually destroy the serpent. Christian tradition has understood this to be the first anticipation of a redeemer (Mathews, 1996, 245–248). The term "the seed of woman," while it uniquely addresses Eve's offspring as opposed to Adam's, it embeds the promise of redemption in the initial command to have children and multiply (Gen 1:28), placing the hope in the next generation. It appears that Eve anticipated its fulfillment in the birth of Cain, but that idea was crushed with the murder of Abel. Following that debacle, new hope follows the line of Seth and Enosh when "he began to call on the name of the Lord" (literal translation).

But there is also the negative strain of disobedience and sin. Cain's inappropriate worship culminates in his murdering his brother. Then Cain's expulsion from the community of Edenic exiles is followed by his genealogy which is *not* marked off by the term *tôlĕdôt*. Rather it merely lists a series of births concluding with Lamech who seems to pride himself in how evil he is (Mathews, 1996, 282), indicating that what happened to the heavens and the earth was the beginning of a downward spiral.

## The Second *Tôlĕdôt* Section: What Happened to Adam (Gen. 5:1–6:8)

The tension between the anticipation of a redeemer and the downward spiral of humankind continues. The world is now fallen—that is what happened to that good creation. The natural question then is, what is God going to do about it? Contrary to the reader's expectations, the answer is not short-term. Following Eve's disappointment in Cain and the lineage of their firstborn, the second *'ēlle tôlĕdôt* section (Gen 5:1ff) shows the long term nature of the situation by rapidly tracing the next ten generations through Adam's genealogy tracing the line of Seth.

Wilson shows how the genealogy ties into the overall structure of the book when he states "a linear genealogy can have only one function: it can be used only to link the person or group using the genealogy with an earlier ancestor or group" (Wilson, 1975, 180). Here it links Noah (and his three sons) back to Adam, designating one selected individual in each generation as the heir apparent. Clines suggests the genealogy serves a theological function of distinguishing the line that remained true while the rest of the mankind drifted further from God (Clines, 1994, 293–294). This is demonstrated by the contrast within the section between the material on Enoch (the one exception to "and he died") and the very enigmatic appendix to the genealogy regarding the marriages between the sons of God and the daughters of men (Harbin, 1994, 16–17). The key to the latter is the observation that "every intent of the thoughts of [mankind's] heart was only evil continually" (Gen 6:5 NASB). This is followed by the decision on God's part to destroy all life—with the exception of Noah and what he would preserve.

## The Third *Tôlĕdôt* Section: What Happened To Noah (Gen. 6:9–9:29)

God's decision to destroy all life, coupled with the observation that Noah was found righteous, sets the stage for the next *'ēlle tôlĕdôt* section. This section does not contain a genealogy, but rather describes the flood event which

describes what became of the increasingly violent, very corrupt world. As a result, many scholars miss its significance. For example, Anderson identifies the passage of 6:1–9:27 as "a long block of narrative material dealing with Noah's lifetime which has been inserted into the heart of Noah's genealogy as presented in the toledoth document (5:1)" totally ignoring the *'ēlle tôlĕdôt* division at 6:9 (Anderson, 1975, 32–33). The section recounts how God called Noah to prepare a large ark and to gather representative animals from every "kind" to preserve them for replenishing the earth after God's judgment. Scholars agree that the literary purpose is to demonstrate both judgment and salvation on the part of God (Delitzsch, 1978, 235; von Rad, 1977, 127; Ross, 1988, 188–189). Kidner notes that the scope of this event is the background for New Testament allusions which present it as a warning for a yet future global judgment seen in passages such as Luke 17:26ff, and 2 Peter 3:6–7 (Kidner, 1967, 59).

While there are a number of parallels with the introductory chapter of Genesis (Anderson, 1975, 36; Ross, 1988, 189; and Westermann, 1984, 393), its correlation with the fall event is more significant. While the fall event marks the beginning of the decay that spread throughout the human race, the overall physical world apparently did not change significantly with just the Garden of Eden isolated. The flood event marks a massive change in the entire physical world changing the entire globe. Given the physical alterations in the world as a result of the extreme dynamics of a global flood, viewed properly the current geological record seems to provide a monument that demonstrates the reality of God's judgment documented in a number of recent works including (Whitcomb and Morris, 1969; Austin, 1994; Clarey, 2020). The bottom line is that this section which relates what happened to Noah presents this flood as an unparalleled world changing event. As Delitzsch observes "[f]or the accomplishment of these inconceivabilities, recourse must be had to miracles of omnipotence… unprecedented in Scripture history" (Delitzsch, 1978, 248). This seems to be the exact intention of the text.

## The Fourth *Tôlĕdôt* Section: What Happened to Shem, Ham, and Japheth (Gen. 10:1–11:9)

The previous *'ēlle tôlĕdôt* section concluded with the death of Noah leaving his three sons and their wives to repopulate the world. The post-flood world is now presented as a second new start for mankind to fulfill God's creation mandate. Thus, the fourth *'ēlle tôlĕdôt* section (beginning at Gen 10:1) shows how the mandate to be fruitful and multiply was fulfilled in the three sons of Noah, somewhat paralleling Genesis 5 with the genealogy of Adam. This is done in the form of what Wilson calls a "segmented genealogy," that is, a genealogy which "expresses more than one line of descent from a common ancestor" (Wilson, 1975, 179). Custance claims that the "Table of Nations" in Genesis 10 is an early, accurate but limited delineation of the tribal groupings of mankind which he would date to approximately 2000 BC or earlier (Custance, 1975, 59–79). For our purposes, the more significant point is that the Table of Nations in Genesis 10 contrasts the separation of Cain's lineage from Seth's and the rest of Adam's descendants in Genesis 5 by showing how all the descendants of Noah are viewed as members of one lineage although distinguished by the three family groupings headed by the three sons of Noah (Waltke, 2001, 174–75; Custance 1975, 12–13). The climax of this *'ēlle tôlĕdôt* section occurs at the beginning of Genesis 11 where we see how the directed dispersion of mankind required that God once more over-ride the efforts of mankind to disobey God's directions. The key statement in the passage is in 11:4 where the descendants of the flood survivors make their plan for the tower because "otherwise we will be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth." The result presented here is the diversity of languages making communication even more difficult.

## The Fifth *Tôlĕdôt* Section: What Happened to Shem (Gen. 11:10–11:26)

The fifth *'ēlle tôlĕdôt* section is short, but it changes the focus of the book. Thus far, each *'ēlle tôlĕdôt* section has demonstrated another failure on the part of the expanding human race, and the reader is still looking for the redeemer promised back in Gen 3:15. Up to this point the book's focus has been on mankind as a whole even it traced a specific family line. Now, after the segmented genealogy in the fourth *'ēlle tôlĕdôt* section, the text returns to give a linear genealogy of just one of Noah's three sons, specifically Shem. Commentators pick up on the linear aspect of the genealogy which links a person to an earlier ancestor and quickly focus on Abraham whose story fills most of the next thirteen chapters, and who seems to be presented as the most important person in the book in terms of theology. As Westermann asserts, "[t]he branch that is continued is to be understood only in the light of its goal, Abraham" (Westermann, 1984, 560). The problem is that this section stops with Terah and the notation that he had three sons (Gen 11:26)—not with Abraham, per se. Abraham actually is part of the *'ēlle tôlĕdôt* section of Terah.

## The Sixth *Tôlĕdôt* Section: What Happened to Terah (Gen. 11:27–25:11)

The sixth *'ēlle tôlĕdôt* section catches the reader unprepared. It is a very long narrative section—far longer than any previous section and is actually the longest in the book. It is defined as the

*'ēlle tôlĕdôt* of Terah, but covers him in just the initial six verses, after which he is not mentioned again. After abruptly noting that Terah died in Haran, the next 13 chapters focus on his son Abraham (properly speaking, when introduced, his name was Abram, but for clarity we will just use his more familiar name). Given the amount of space devoted to Abraham, one must conclude that he is a very significant character—arguably the most significant person in the book. If that is the case, then why is there no *'ēlle tôlĕdôt* section for Abraham?

Ross seems to point in the right direction when he notes that the little information that is given about Terah really is that which is associated with Abraham "and his future sojourn in the Promised Land" (Ross, 1988, 257). Kidner takes us further when he states, "Terah, lacking the vision, lost the will to persist" (Kidner, 1967, 111–112). Given our understanding of the phrase *'ēlle tôlĕdôt* ("this is what became of") it seems that Terah was the patriarch when God called him and Abraham, as a family, to leave Ur to go to Canaan. While the section is difficult, it appears that on the basis of comparison of this passage and Stephen's testimony in Acts that Terah stopped in Haran and Abraham with him (Polhill, 2001, 189). Terah refused to go into the land and as a result died in Haran. That is what became of Terah, but there is more to the story. God then turned to Abraham, who appears to have been part of the original call in Ur. Abraham obeyed in faith and thus received the promise. Even so, the overall section demonstrates that Abraham also struggled with his faith. As discussed elsewhere, in essence this is a situation similar to what Mordecai expressed to Esther when he told her, "relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place and you and your father's house will perish" (Esth 4:16, NASB), except that unlike Esther, Terah failed. In contrast, Abraham demonstrated the requisite faith and thus through him came the promise—reflecting the very strong tension between God's sovereignty and the "free will" of individuals (Harbin, 2016, 19–34).

However, Terah's decision to stop may have had other consequences which are significant for the overall account. Genesis 12:6 states that when Abraham reached Shechem, "at that time the Canaanites were in the land" (so NRSV, and ESV; NIV has "[t]he Canaanites were *then* in the land," italics added). While often taken as an indication that the text had to have been written long after Moses (Spieser, 1962, 87), Cassuto points out that it has also been taken to suggest that the Canaanites were "*already* in the land" (Cassuto, 1964, 327–328; italics in original), which is a better understanding, suggesting that they had settled there in the time Terah hesitated in Haran. Subsequently at different points, additional tribes are noted as then being in the land indicating that in addition to the movement of Abraham and his family, other tribes were in the process of moving in. If so, then it seems that a consequence of Terah's settling in Haran was that other tribes got to Canaan first.

Regardless, as a result, Abraham is now the descendant of Adam who is going to father the line of the redeemer. While the rest of this *'ēlle tôlĕdôt* section sets the stage for a future possession of the land by the descendants of Abraham, the process is complicated by Abraham's up and down faith. Most of these issues lie outside the scope of this study, but one is important enough that the writer devotes an entire *'ēlle tôlĕdôt* section to reflect its outcome—that is the birth of Ishmael, which preceded the birth of Isaac the designated heir.

## The Seventh *Tôlĕdôt* Section: What Happened to Ishmael (Gen. 25:12–18)

Initially, this *'ēlle tôlĕdôt* section seems somewhat of a rabbit trail since Isaac has been designated the heir of the Abrahamic covenant, and the reader would expect the text to follow Isaac. The early readers may also have expected that as the firstborn, Ishmael would be the heir. However, one of the dynamics of the entire book of Genesis is that the first-born is not necessarily the heir. For example, later in the book, Joseph, the next to youngest of Jacob's twelve sons is given the double portion normally associated with the firstborn (Gen 48:18–22). In this case, Isaac was named as the heir before conception, but because of Abraham and Sarah's attempted manipulation to fulfill God's promise for Him, Ishmael was born first. Now the reader might wonder about the son who did not receive the promise. In essence this short section ties up what would otherwise be a loose end. Ishmael was Abraham's oldest son, even though he was born to a concubine rather than to Sarah. This segmented genealogy lists only the first generation whose members are deemed the rulers of twelve tribes. Thus, as Keil and Delitzsch indicate, this section shows that God's promises were fulfilled as the writer now turns back to the chosen line (Keil and Delitzsch, 1970, I:264).

## The Eighth *Tôlĕdôt* Section: What Happened to Isaac (Gen. 25:19–35:29)

By now the reader is getting used to the idea that each *'ēlle tôlĕdôt* section explains what happened to a figure introduced in the previous section. Consequently, it is no longer a surprise that while the eighth *'ēlle tôlĕdôt* section tells what happened to Isaac, it focuses on his twin sons. In fact, Isaac seems to be almost a bit player in his own *'ēlle tôlĕdôt* section. Actually, the main character here is the younger twin, Jacob, who manages to receive the birthright, but more importantly the blessing through which he would continue the Abrahamic covenantal line.

While the fact that Jacob manages to get the birthright expected for the firstborn is significant, the fact that Isaac gives him his blessing is more important not only for the story line, but the entire OT. Three points stand out. First, and most obvious, the section relates how Jacob got that position despite what the reader might consider serious character flaws. On one hand, he used cunning and deceit to get both, but on the other hand, the text relates that this result was prophesied before birth, in fact before Rebekah knew that she was bearing twins, demonstrating the tension between God's sovereignty and the choices of individuals (Ross, 1988, 433). In contrast to Abraham who through faith received the promise, however, in Jacob's case the stress seems to be on the disdain his brother had for the promises as opposed to Jacob's own gradually developing faith (Kidner, 1967, 152, Ross, 1988, 447–449).

The second point that should stand out to the reader is that this is the first time that a father blessing his son prior to his own death is noted. Because the concept of blessing permeates both testaments, most modern readers just accept the concept as a cultural given. However, the idea of an OT father blessing his son seems limited just to the three generations in Genesis associated with the Abrahamic covenant. In Gen 26:3–5 God clearly communicates to Isaac that he has received the blessing and covenant which had been given to Abraham, although the father blessing the son is not explicitly stated (Sarna, 1989, 183). Then, Isaac gives the blessing to Jacob (Gen 27:27–29; see also Gen 35:12). Finally, Jacob blesses his sons in Genesis 49. Because there is a significant difference in the blessing and this event seems to terminate the practice, we will look at it under the last *'ēlle tôlĕdôt* section.

The third point is one of confusion between the concept of birthright and blessing. Jacob "bought" the birthright from his brother for a bowl of stew in Genesis 25, and in Gen 27:36 at a later date Esau sees it as a done deal. What then is the issue with the blessing, and how is it separate from the birthright? The key is in the wording of Isaac's blessing on Jacob, where Isaac's words in 27:29 cite wording from the Abrahamic covenant in Gen 12:3. The distinction is that the birthright involves a double share of the physical inheritance while the blessing makes the recipient the next link in the Abrahamic covenant (Harbin, 2005, 105–106).

There are a number of challenging issues within this passage which we are not able to cover in this brief structural overview. Collectively, however, they illustrate the process by which Jacob's character is transformed "from trickster to humbled servant" (Mathews, 1996, 70; Sarna, 1989, 397–98). The main point of the *'ēlle tôlĕdôt* section of Isaac is that it shows how Jacob was renamed Israel and became the father of twelve sons. In other words, what became of Isaac, the heir of Abraham, is that he passed the promises on to his youngest son, and his family. We will address the implications of that in the last *'ēlle tôlĕdôt* section, that of Jacob. This section, however, ends with the death of Isaac, who has been mentioned only incidentally since Jacob left Canaan in Genesis 28. He is then buried by his two sons, Esau and Jacob, who are the subjects of the last three *'ēlle tôlĕdôt* sections.

## The Ninth and Tenth *Tôlĕdôt* Sections: What Happened to Esau (Gen. 36:1–37:1)

After the tension between Jacob and Esau which began before birth, the reader would necessarily wonder what became of the other brother. The ninth and tenth *'ēlle tôlĕdôt* sections together explain that, relating what happened to the older twin who sold his birthright and was cheated out of the blessing that he considered his.

This is really a double *tôlĕdôt* with the phrase *'ēlle tôlĕdôt* appearing twice—once in 36:1 and then again in 36:9. While unique, the two sections are related. The first genealogy lists Esau's wives and sons "who were born to him in the land of Canaan" (36:5), while the second genealogy relates what became of him "in the hill country of Seir" (36:9). In contrast, Gen 37:1, which is still part of this *'ēlle tôlĕdôt* section states that Jacob lived in the land of Canaan. Thus, in addition to tying up the loose end of what happened to Esau, very subtly we see how the families of Jacob and Esau in essence switch locations with Esau who had remained with his father when Jacob fled to Haran now outside of the Promised Land. This sets the stage for Israel's conquest and settlement when it comes.

## The Eleventh *Tôlĕdôt* Section: What Happened to Jacob (Gen. 32:2–50:26)

The final *'ēlle tôlĕdôt* section addresses what became of Jacob. As the section begins, he is back in the land which was promised. Further, while his name has been changed to Israel (although Jacob and Israel seem to be used interchangeably through this section), the section begins by referring to him by the older name of Jacob, reminding the reader that we are still addressing Isaac's younger son. However, the focus of the section is on the next generation, which is demonstrated at the very beginning as the text begins: "*'ēlle tôlĕdôt* [this is what became of] Jacob. Joseph… ." This primes the reader to expect that Joseph will play a significant role in the next step of the narrative, a practice that the reader is now familiar with.

This familiar text traces the conflict between Joseph and his brothers which heightens when the brothers sell Joseph into slavery and he is transported to Egypt. But the account does not stop there. Rather, the narrative climaxes

when the brothers are driven to Egypt by a famine and stand before Joseph who now controls all of the agricultural produce of Egypt and thus controls their fate (Westermann, 1986, 24). But, demonstrating God's grace, he brings them down to Egypt along with their father. In the process they fulfill the prophecy given to Abraham that his descendants would be "strangers in a land that was not theirs" (Gen 15:13).

It is here that the *'ēlle tôlĕdôt* structure proves especially helpful. Commentators note Joseph's dominance and tend to call this section the history of Joseph. They then struggle with two incidents that seem to interrupt the story: the Judah-Tamar incident in chapter 38, and Jacob's blessing of his sons and grandsons in chapters 48–49, (Skinner, 1930, 438; Sarna, 1989, 254; von Rad, 1977, 347–48). And yet both really serve critical roles in explaining what happened to Jacob.

In the case of the Judah-Tamar incident, there are a number of issues which lead commentators to puzzle over not only its location, but its inclusion (von Rad, 1977, 356; Ross, 1988, 611–613; Speiser, 1962, 299; Westermann, 1986, 49). While the chronological issues are problematic, the crux of the issue seems to be that God took the life of Er, Judah's firstborn, "because he was evil." While we are not told what he did, the use of this phrase in Judg 2:11–13 suggests that it would involve going after other gods. If that is the case, then one thing that happened to Jacob was that his grandsons started going into idolatry. If so, this incident serves explains why the family of Jacob needed to be quarantined from the land until the time of the fulfillment of the promises to Abraham in Genesis 15. This move served to isolate the embryonic nation from the corrupting influences of the Canaanites as they devolved into greater depravities.

While the book ends with the death and burial of Jacob/Israel at Machpelah followed by the death of Joseph both events really seem to be epilogues to the blessing Jacob/Israel gives his twelve sons in the last recorded patriarchal blessing.

Commentators tend to focus on the prophetic aspects of the blessing which are indeed significant (Ross, 1988, 698–709; Lange, 1960; I:648–659; and Skinner, 1930, 507–535). However, a comparison with the blessing in Genesis 27 contrasts Isaac who could only bless one son with Jacob who blesses all twelve sons. This suggests a major change in the scope of the Abrahamic covenant. Up to this point the sense of Abraham's "seed" (and given the scale of the promise, this would be in a plural sense) had been passed from the father to one son. It is now expanded to include all the sons, or in reality, recognizing the flexibility of the Hebrew term son, to all the descendants of Jacob/Israel. Thus, the book ends with the promise encompassing what would become the twelve tribes, as explicitly stated in Gen 49:28. In other words, both the blessing and the covenant now encompass all twelve tribes of what will become the nation of Israel.

## Conclusions

There are a number of implications that result from recognizing that the book of Genesis is organized in this manner. First, the *'ēlle tôlĕdôt* structure of Genesis would point to a unified work that is well crafted with a strong theological purpose (DeRouchie, 2013, 247). It traces a view that begins with an Almighty God who created a very good world and then demonstrates how this ideal cosmos became not only the world in which the reader lives but one in which God has started a redemption process. As a preface which contrasts the state of the world which God created and what became of it, the creation account then takes on greater significance. It requires us to recognize that while the world that God created was good, it is no longer good in the same sense, which is important for those who study God's creation. Further, this would place a stronger emphasis on the rationale for the seven day structure of the creation process suggesting that God utilized a seven day process to set up a model for his people to follow, not only in terms of work but in order to weekly recalibrate their relationship to him (Hart, 1995, 315–316).

Second, as suggested by Wiseman, Ross and others, while this structure might suggest that the writer of the book used source material, and have actually had written sources, it does not preclude Mosaic authorship (Wiseman, 1985, 57–58; 68–73. Ross, 1988, 62–63). Rather, the *'ēlle tôlĕdôt* structure indicates a carefully crafted unit. As such, this model is far different from that of the documentary hypothesis or JEDP theory which builds on apparent contradictions in the text. As Cassuto points out, that theory proposes not a unified work, but excerpts from separate compositions (on the same subject) "which a later editor arranged consecutively by pure chance" (Cassuto, 1961, 85). Moreover, accepting that the writer used sources in this manner does not rule out Moses, the traditional author, from being the writer, since other portions of the Pentateuch (traditionally understood to be by Moses) cite specific sources by name (such as the "Book of the Wars of the Lord" in Num 21:14).

Third, as the book culminates with the embryonic twelve tribes of Israel incubating in Egypt, the *'ēlle tôlĕdôt* structure of Genesis would suggest that the book was designed to serve as a prologue to the subsequent account of the Exodus event. Specifically, for the audience at Sinai, the Exodus event would still be part of "what became of Jacob." As such, this would be a profound explanation to the crowd at Sinai, the implied audience, regarding why they were there. Not only were they fulfilling God's promise to Abraham that his descendants would come out of the land of their captivity

but they were part of what happened to Jacob, who became Israel. But more powerfully, they were part of a program intended to reconcile the entire world to God, which, for those paying attention, would add tremendous importance to the system which was being developed at Sinai to guide their relationship with God and their fellow humans.

Consequently, it is deemed that the *'ēlle tôlĕdôt* structure of Genesis provides a framework for the book that prepares the reader to understand the subsequent narratives of the OT as a coherent whole, providing a much stronger foundation for comprehending the culmination of those narratives in the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus as the world redeemer. In the process, it better accommodates various internal anomalies pointing to careful composition of Genesis with a clear agenda. Perhaps most importantly, with this, the initial creation account becomes much more significant. It is not just the story of creation, but the series of "this is what became of's" show how what happened enhance our understanding of why we are here, and why the world is the way it is. With the open-ended conclusion of the book setting the stage for the ultimate redemption, it also shows why there is hope.

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