

CAN ANYTHING GOOD COME FROM READING GENEALOGIES?

Read and compare Genesis 5 and 11:10-26

Jim ran his hand through his tousled dark brown hair. “It’s an awful habit,” his wife often complained, “because it makes your hair stick up like porcupine needles.” He couldn’t help it this time; he was frustrated! He had thought that teaching his congregation about Jesus’ genealogy found in Luke 4 would be a great kick-off for the Christmas season. This genealogy demonstrated that Jesus was the Son of God who had come as a babe to Bethlehem in order to save the world from sin. As usual, he was attempting to link this section from the New Testament to its counterpart in the Old Testament. This, however, was where his troubles had begun: Undoubtedly, Jim’s least favorite section of the Old Testament was the genealogies; and that is where he had landed. *Can anything good for my people come from studying the genealogies*, he brooded.

Jim read through Genesis 5 with increasing boredom. He already knew that this genealogy began with Adam and ended with Noah. He turned a couple of pages to chapter 11 in order to continue with the genealogy from Shem, Noah’s son, to Abraham. Although these genealogies would ultimately lead to the birth of Jesus, they still seemed monotonous in Jim’s mind. Since Jim liked to do justice to any text he was studying, there was rarely a time when he would read it less than five or six times. *This may be one of those times*, he muttered. Yet on the fourth time reading through chapters 5 and 11, Jim’s interest was sparked! Although both texts appeared at first to be identical—except for the names and the life-spans—he found one major difference between the two chapters. Carefully he folded the thin pages so that the two sets of genealogies were side by side. *Later I’ll type out the two genealogies in columns to see the difference more clearly*, he promised himself.

In both chapters, Jim noted, the names of each man was followed by the number of years he had lived before he became a father. After the name of his son was given, the father’s remaining years of life and any other sons he had fathered were listed. So far, the two chapters remained identical for each person named. It was only by reading the two chapters frequently and carefully that he had detected the additional wording in the fifth chapter. Now his curiosity was aroused: each name in the genealogy of Genesis 5 closed with the extra statement, “And he died.” Jim asked himself, *Why? Why are these words added, as well as repeated in chapter five?*

The answer to Jim’s question can be found earlier in Genesis when God approached Adam in the garden and offered him a delectable feast: “From any tree of the garden you may eat freely.” There was only one exception: “from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat” (Gen. 2:16). Then God gives information that answers Jim’s question: *why are these words repeated in chapter five?*

God says, “for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die” (2:17). In the repetitive lists of those who died, the author is simply reminding the reader (over and over again) that God keeps His promises. The promise was death for eating the forbidden fruit and, therefore, the consequence was death for each descendent of Adam as noted in Genesis 5. Perhaps the reason for including “and he died” with each name in chapter 5 but not in chapter 11 is because of the close proximity of the genealogy in chapter 5 to

this promise of death in Genesis 2:17. *My congregation can learn something from genealogies*, Jim concluded.

Additionally, amidst the persistent repetition of the declaration “and he died, and he died, and he died,” in chapter 5 there is an utterance of hope. We read that Enoch “walked with God” (5:22 and 24). It was because Enoch walked with God that the declaration “and he died” is omitted. It is replaced by “and he was not, for God took him” (v. 24).

By attending to the “boring” genealogy of chapter 5 the reader discovers that we really can learn something from reading genealogies. The genealogy reveals that, in the midst of a dying world, there is life for those who “walk with God.” Of the one who has walked with God, therefore, the obituary should not read, “and she died.” It should read, “and she was not, for God took her.”