# Genealogy as a Measurement of Time: A Critical Analysis of Genesis 3 to 11

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In ancient Near Eastern societies, texts concerning the "beginnings" provided the reader with a means to understand and conceptualize the notion of time in an era that was often intertwined with that of the deities. U. Cassuto notes that both the ancient Near Eastern and Greek traditions sought to emphasize an "intermixing" between the human world and that of the gods or the divine when speaking of their primordial histories.[1] However, Cassuto argues that the tradition found in the book of Genesis for the most part discards this "mythical technique"[2] of recounting primordial history. In fact, he contends that the authors of Genesis do not allow the boundaries between the Godhead and mankind to be blurred at all. Rather, the authors "see[k] to emphasize that human civilisation was of human origin" and not intermixed with that of the gods or the divine.[3] This argument, however, is not maintained by all scholars. J. Blenkinsopp argues that, quite to the contrary, the "idiom of myth" is a literary device utilized by the authors of Genesis to write their primordial history in a similar fashion to that of other ancient Near Eastern societies.[4]

Furthermore, Blenkinsopp stipulates that the transition from myth to history can best be explained by taking a closer look at the lifespans of the patriarchs as the reader moves from mythical time to historical time. He moves on to suggest that this transition is made evident by the "steep fall-off in human life expectancy," which marks the end of the "story of origins."[5]

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1. Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1978), 188.
2. Cassuto, "Commentary on Genesis," 188; For Cassuto, what constitutes mythical tradition is a form of history telling that incorporates the gods and heroes (normally revered as semi-gods), and their role in forming and shaping the outcome of human events ("Commentary on Genesis," 188).
3. Cassuto, "Commentary on Genesis," 188.
4. Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Creation, Un-creation, Re-creation: A Discursive Commentary on Genesis 1-11* (New York: T & T Clark, 2011), 1.
5. Blenkinsopp, "Creation, Un-creation, Re-creation," 1.

The concept of longevity is an important factor in understanding how it is that the ancient Israelites understood time measurement and what role the patriarchal lifespan played in shaping how one was to measure time in the primordial versus the historical. The following paper will argue that the motif of "longevity" was one that was associated with the primordial time motif that is well attested in the creation narratives of ancient Mesopotamia and ancient Greece. The paper will also investigate whether the authors of Genesis 3 to 11 relied on the narrative tradition of Israel's neighboring nations in Mesopotamia to create an Israelite primeval history by paying close attention to the genealogical structure used to incorporate the motif of patriarchal longevity. Furthermore, the paper will examine the distinctions between Mesopotamian primeval histories and those found in ancient Greece between the 8th and 6th century B.C.E. Once the motifs and themes of "pre-history" or primeval history within the Mesopotamian narrative traditions have been identified, the paper will move on to assess whether these same "primeval elements" have been incorporated into the narratives of Genesis 3 to 11 and the role played by the genealogies within the overarching narrative.

Establishing how the ancient Israelites understood and measured time will be imperative in determining whether Blenkinsopp's claim is correct that the lifespan motif was indeed utilized by the author of the genealogies in Genesis to distinguish between primordial and historical time. A closer examination of Genesis 5 and 11 will provide a clearer understanding of how longevity was understood prior to and after the flood to establish if the genealogies were indeed intended to provide more than just information of patriarchal lineage. Additionally, an investigation of how the genealogical form was constructed and understood will establish whether the structure was intended as a marker for the transition between primordial and historical time.

## 1. Time Measurement in Ancient Israel

According to D. Miano, by the first millennia B.C.E. most societies of the ancient Near East "maintained both a cyclical and a linear understanding of time."[6] Cyclical time should be understood as time in which one can

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6. David Miano, *Shadow on the Steps: Time Measurement in Ancient Israel* (Atlanta: Society of

observe "predictable and repeating natural phenomena," whereas linear time is when one tries to understand the past through the process of recollection in the present, and of events as succeeding one another and as related by cause and effect.[7] It is well attested by scholars, such as J. C. Vanderkam, that in ancient Near Eastern societies cyclical time was measured with different calendrical systems.[8] The linear form of measurement, moreover, could be understood through a greater number of functions; for instance, the simple act of counting is linear in nature.[9] The authors of the biblical narratives, however, presented linear time by "relating one event to another," which was then "measured by the number of units between one occurrence and another."[10] It is important to note that, unlike the cyclical structure of measurement which repeats itself, these events are "historical" and hence only occur once in the linear form of measurement.[11] Miano points out that what is placed into question is not the form or even the function of measurement itself but how it is that the ancient Israelites "counted."[12]

The counting of years is a prominent feature of both the Priestly author and of the Deuteronomistic Historian. For both authors, time measurement is understood as adding single units together. For instance, in the genealogy of Genesis 5, the Priestly author presents two periods of time which can be understood as separate units that can be added together to constitute a measurement of time. The first unit is the patriarch's birth until the birth of his first-born son; the second unit is from the birth of the son to the patriarch's death. These two units can be added together and represent the lifespan of that patriarch, thus providing the reader with a measurement of time for longevity. Additionally, the units are measured by beginning and ending with an important date (here referring to a significant event). The Priestly author is the one who scholars have identified as using a

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Biblical Literature, 2010), 49.

7. Miano, "Shadow on the Steps," 50.

8. James C. VanderKam, *Calendars in the Dead Sea Scrolls: Measuring Time* (London: Routledge, 2003), 3.

9. VanderKam, "Calendars in the Dead Sea Scrolls: Measuring Time," 3.

10. Miano, "Shadow on the Steps," 50. For instance, in 1 Samuel 6:1, the reader is told that the ark stayed in the Philistine camp for seven months and then in 1 Samuel 7:2 the ark stayed in Kireath-Jearim for twenty years.

11. VanderKam, "Calendars in the Dead Sea Scrolls," 3.

12. Miano, "Shadow on the Steps," 50.

chronological system that employs genealogies; i.e., that uses the births of important people to measure time.[13] It is certain, moreover, that the concept of 'generations' was not measured in the same manner in ancient Israel as it is in our modern-day context. In the latter, a parent would normally be understood as the first generation and his or her children as the second generation; the authors of the biblical text, however, do not use this same system.[14] The Israelites abandoned their inclusive[15] system of counting when structuring their generations, thus allowing them to date events by the lifespan of an individual.[16]

Miano argues that it is ultimately the Priestly narratives that build chronology based primarily upon genealogies.[17] The scope of the Priestly chronology includes events prior to the Exodus that are dated by being placed in "a specific year in the lifetime of an individual."[18] The Priestly author appears to be particularly interested in the births of sons and more specifically the births of first-born sons. Additionally, history is not presented as we see it in other ancient Near Eastern kingdoms, that is, history is presented according to the passing of time in the lives of the patriarchs "rather than to regnal years of kings and judges or to dates of other notable events."[19] Even the "greater" events that would have affected the larger

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13. Miano, "Shadow on the Steps," 55-58.

14. Miano, "Shadow on the Steps," 60.

15. Miano suggests the ancient Israelites typically utilized an "*inclusive* system of counting." That is, *one* corresponds to the *first* in the sequence, whereas in modern conceptions of numerals the number *one* will not correspond necessarily to the *first* position in a sequence; if it does not, it is *exclusive* counting. When it comes to measuring between two points in time, in the modern understanding, the units are only counted *exclusively* ("Shadow on the Steps," 51). For instance, if it is Monday morning and we agree to meet in two days, following an inclusive system, we will meet on Tuesday (i.e., Monday is included in the count); but if we follow an exclusive system, we will meet on Wednesday (i.e., Monday is excluded from the count).

16. Miano, "Shadow on the Steps," 62-63. Curiously, while Israelites did not use an inclusive system in the context of counting generations, moderns do (p. 62). For example: I am the 3rd generation if I take my grandfather as being the starting point of the lineage and so are my sister and brother; thus, from a modern perspective, one new generation encompasses the birth of all the children from any given father (first, second, third, etc.). But in ancient Israel, one generation begins and ends with the birth of the firstborn son. The birth of any successive child is irrelevant.

17. Miano, "Shadow on the Steps," 63.

18. Miano, "Shadow on the Steps," 63.

19. Miano, "Shadow on the Steps," 63.

community are dated in correspondence to the lifespan of a patriarch.[20] Thus, the flood that wiped-out humanity began in the six hundredth year of Noah's life; however, making this reference alone would not constitute a meaningful chronology unless the patriarchs were associated to known dates. Hence the logic of the Priestly chronology is as follows, "if I know that event X occurred in year Y of individual Z, I still do not know when event X took place unless I know when individual Z was born."[21] For the Priestly author, this information takes the form of a genealogy the structure of which allows the Priestly author to provide necessary information concerning the beginning and end of an individual's lifespan. The genealogy provides a framework for the history of the world, so that the events in that history can be dated.

## 2. Genealogy as a Literary Form

We have established that the Priestly author utilizes the genealogy to provide a chronology of history. This structure of measurement of time can be found throughout the book of Genesis but is concentrated in Genesis 5 and 11. However, the genealogy is embedded within a larger narrative framework and is being utilized to recount a "story" about the beginnings. Thus, it should not only be understood as a method of time measurement but also as a literary form. First, a distinction must be made between the narrative and genealogical forms of literature. R. Robinson argues that the narrative form "treats the reader to a dramatic complication, explores and develops nuances of individual character, and pursues a perceptible telos, as the story moves, often fitfully, from initial tension to fitting denouement."[22] The genealogies on the other hand offer no such structure. They do not provide the reader with "dramatic tension" or character development, rather, the purpose of the genealogical form is to offer a continuous and monotonous pattern of paternal information.[23] Robinson describes the genealogy as being a "single-minded economy" whose sole preoccupation

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20. Miano, "Shadow on the Steps," 63.
21. Miano, "Shadow on the Steps," 65.
22. Robert Robinson, "Literary Functions of the Genealogies of Genesis," *The Catholic Bible Quarterly* 48, no. 4 (1986): 595.
23. Robinson, "Literary Functions of the Genealogies of Genesis," 595.

consists in "the continuity of generation [upon] generation."[24] Thus, the characters presented within the genealogical construct are never detailed nor fully developed. The fundamental information provided by the structure of the genealogy concerns the "birth, death, and age at the crucial act of begetting the next generation." It provides no other in-depth information about the characters nor does it offer any additional information concerning the plot-line of the greater narrative structure in which the genealogy is embedded.[25]

Robinson notes that, although "the genealogies have a beginning, in themselves they do not move toward a final conclusion, a telos whose achievement would create a sense of definitive and satisfying closure."[26] This lack of "closure" as Robinson suggests leads one to question whether the function of the genealogy is much more than simply establishing patrilineal continuity between one generation and the next. Upon closer inspection, though, it can be argued that the possible function and intent of the genealogy is not solely to provide a link between the generations but to arrive at a climactic point by culminating a sequence of births until the structure introduces the "last" patriarchal character, which technically brings the genealogical structure to a close. The emergence of this final birth allows for a new character to be introduced as a "building block" within the greater narrative structure to create new plot lines and build upon the continuity of the larger narrative structure itself. Robinson does not give the genealogies any important role within the narrative framework, though; rather, he views them as being no more than "connectors."[27] He, much like Hayden White, argues that the genealogy is to be understood as a "nonnarrative" genre.[28] There is an importance attached to the narrative genre as being the mode that allowed ancient historians to reveal "*knowing* through the medium of *telling*," thus allowing scholars to argue that nonnarrative genres do not offer any "knowing" and should be categorized as primitive, as well as inadequate and less sophisticated modes of conveying reality.[29] This statement imposes

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24. Robinson, "Literary Functions of the Genealogies of Genesis," 595.
25. Robinson, "Literary Functions of the Genealogies of Genesis," 595.
26. Robinson, "Literary Functions of the Genealogies of Genesis," 595.
27. Robinson, "Literary Functions of the Genealogies of Genesis," 596.
28. Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 1 (1980), 12.
29. White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," 12.

a value judgment upon the genealogical structure, namely, that the form lacks complexity and depth. However, the statement does raise an important question; what content and details can be derived from the genealogical structure?

## 3. Content of Genealogy

Scholars, such as Robinson, argue that the biblical genealogy appears to present a "fixed" structure in respect to the "exact sequence of individuals" in order to provide an "expression of profound order."[30] Indeed, the succession of one generation to the next is the norm encountered when reviewing the content of genealogies in the biblical context. The genealogical structure at the very least contains the following details concerning the patriarchal line being introduced: birth, conception of the child who continues the line, and death.[31] However, other constructs of genealogy in Genesis 3 to 11 appear with a variety of different details; "some [include] expansions which tend toward narrative and reflect broader interests. Occasionally the genealogies expand to include the name of the wife who bears the next generation or the occupation or residence of a particular ancestor."[32] Thus, the structure and form of the genealogies within the context of Genesis 3 to 11 do appear to be fixed as Robinson tries to argue, however, the content varies at times from one genealogy to the next. In fact, in his exploration and analysis of the genealogical structure, Wilson distinguishes between two forms of genealogy based on the content of each.[33] The forms can be defined as follows: "Linear genealogies include only a single individual in each generation. Segmented genealogies trace more than one line of descent from a common ancestor, so that more than one individual appears in each generation."[34]

Another important feature is the incorporation of biographical details

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30. Robinson, "Literary Functions of the Genealogies of Genesis," 597.

31. "When Seth had lived a hundred and five years, he became the father of Enosh. Seth lived after the birth of Enosh eight hundred and seven years, and had other sons and daughters. Thus, all the days of Seth were nine hundred and twelve years; and he died" (Gen. 5:6-8 RSV).

32. Robinson, "Literary Functions of the Genealogies of Genesis," 597.

33. Robert Wilson, *Genealogy and History in the Biblical World* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1977), 19-20.

34. Wilson, "Genealogy and History in the Biblical World," 19-20.

in certain genealogical structures, such as those found in Genesis 3. These can be paralleled to the genealogical structures found in other ancient Near Eastern narratives concerning the beginnings. Cassuto indicates that the content found in the genealogies of Genesis can be compared to the content in the Sumerian King List.[35] As mentioned earlier, the genealogies of Genesis contain the names of the patriarchs and the length of their lifespans. Similarly, the Sumerian King List notes the names of the kings and their respective kingdoms, as well as the length of their reigns. In this list, the genealogical structure at times also incorporates details concerning the activities and occupations of the kings prior to their ascension to the throne.[36] Further, Cassuto argues that there are similarities between Genesis 3:20-22 ("…the father of…the forger of…"), and the structure of the Canaanite genealogical account offered by Philo Byblius.[37] However, Cassuto is primarily interested in the differences between the texts rather than the similarities they share. In Philo's account, those "inventing" tools or devices (e.g., fire, hunting and fishing) are described as gods and demi-gods; even in the Sumerian King List the content is mythological in nature.[38] Cassuto argues that it is specifically in the Torah that "we find only ordinary human beings and there is no mythological element whatsoever."[39] Therein, he emphasizes that the gods or demi-gods are not playing an active role in the outcome of the events.

In addition, K. Andriolo notes that in opposition to ancient Near Eastern narrative stories that speak about the beginnings, the Israelite descent line up until Abraham places a great deal of importance on the numerical value of the first position within the genealogical structure, that is, the firstborn son.[40] However, this is the only value that the genealogical structure provides the reader. Apart from the firstborn son's name and at times social status, no other details are provided; they are never described as the heroes of the stories as one would expect to find in other ancient Near

35. Cassuto, "Commentary on Genesis," 188.

36. Cassuto, "Commentary on Genesis," 188.

37. Cassuto, "Commentary on Genesis," 188.

38. Cassuto, "Commentary of Genesis," 188.

39. Cassuto, "Commentary on Genesis," 189.

40. Karin Andriolo, "A Structural Analysis of Genealogy and Worldview in the Old Testament," *American Anthropologist* 75, no. 5 (1973): 1660.

Easter stories.[41] This argument of a "non-mythical element" in the genealogy raises questions as to how the ancient Israelites understood and perceived the "stories concerning the beginnings." Can one then demonstrate that there are no "real" parallels to be drawn between the genealogies of the ancient Near East and those of ancient Israel?

## 4. Origins of Beginnings in the Ancient Near East

We begin by investigating the literary traditions of origins in Mesopotamia. According to Blenkinsopp, Mesopotamian scribal tradition was the dominant cultural and literary influence on Israel and early Judaism. In this tradition, humanity's appearance on the scene was part of a history that stretched back into the epoch of the gods.[42] For Instance, Atra-Hasis[43] is an origin narrative which can be dated back to 1700 B.C.E.[44] The story describes a three-decker world where the upper level is ruled by Anu, the lower level (also referred to as the underworld or subterranean waters) by Enki (Ea), and Middle Earth (the human sphere) by Enlil. The story recounts how Enlil puts the Tgigi, lower level gods, to work digging irrigation canals that are essential for the fertility of the lands in Middle Earth. Resenting the labor imposed upon them, the Tgigi refuse to continue their tasks and threaten Enlil. Enlil then seeks out the aid of his fellow gods, Enki and Anu, but because they sympathize with the rebels they refuse Enlil's appeal. However, Enki, who is often portrayed as cunning, offers Enlil another solution. He proposes that he petition the mother goddess, Mami, to create lower beings called 'lulu' who would take over the tasks of the Tgigi and the problem would be resolved. Mami and Enki then join forces to create the lower beings and fashion seven male and seven female figures out of clay mixed with the blood of a sacrificed god. The creation of mankind is celebrated and the goddess Mami is proclaimed *Belet-ili*, Mistress of the gods. The story then moves on to tell that some 1200 years later, the same rebellious pattern is repeated and Enlil is awakened from his sleep. This time, Enlil is livid and decides to deal with the situation himself. He chooses

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41. Andriolo, "A Structural Analysis of Genealogy and Worldview," 1660.
42. Blenkinsopp, "Creation, Un-Creation, Re-Creation," 12.
43. An Akkadian cuneiform text copied and recopied for more than a millennium and for which there is archaeological evidence that the text was recopied outside of Mesopotamia.
44. Blenkinsopp, "Creation, Un-Creation, Re-Creation," 12.

to afflict the Earth and its inhabitants with a plague of famine every 1000 years in order to thin out the human population, but his plan is thwarted by Enki. So, Enlil then decides to send a great flood upon the Earth that covers it for seven days and nights. Enki, however, has plans of his own and assists a hero-like figure named Atra-Hasis (which would be considered the counterpart to Noah) to escape the deluge along with his family.[45]

There are other versions of the story, too, which have been found in Mesopotamia, Asia Minor and the eastern regions of the Mediterranean.[46] The version of the story found on the tablets of the Sumerian King List recounts how the Sumerian king, Ziusudra, is forewarned of the flood and builds a huge boat, which allows him to survive the flood that lasts for seven days and nights. Afterwards, the king offers sacrifice to the gods and is elevated by them to eternal life. Additionally, the Sumerian King List introduces genealogical structures of ante and post-diluvian king lists. In the Sumerian genealogical structure, there is also a decrease in lifespan as one moves from prehistorical to historical time; the antediluvian kings reigned for thousands of years, while the kings in the post-diluvian period only reigned for about a tenth of that period.[47]

In his history of Babylonia, Berossus presents yet another version of genealogical structure. Unlike the Sumerian King List, which lists 8 antediluvian and 23 post-diluvian kings, Berossus notes that there were 10 ante and 10 post-diluvian rulers, which is reminiscent of the Genesis genealogical structure that also lists the same number of figures.[48] It is important to highlight that Berossus would not only have been familiar with the stories of Atra-Hasis and the Epic of Gilgamesh but also with the Genesis genealogy-narrative stories as well.[49] Thus, the argument can be made that the Greek mythic-historiographical tradition was very familiar with the ancient Near Eastern tradition of narratives that recounted the

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45. The above summary was taken from the text used in Lambert & Millard's translation of the tablet which contained the story of Atra-Hasis: W. G. Lambert, A. R. Millard, and Miguel Civil, *Atra-Ḫasīs: The Babylonian Story of the Flood* (Oxford: Clarendon Print, 1969).

46. Blenkinsopp, "Creation, Un-Creation, Re-Creation," 12.

47. Thorkild Jacobsen, "The Eridu Genesis," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 100, no. 4 (1981): 519-21.

48. Russell Gmirkin, *Berossus and Genesis, Manetho and Exodus: Hellenistic Histories and the Date of the Pentateuch* (New York: T & T Clark, 2006), 108-110.

49. Blenkinsopp, "Creation, Un-Creation, Re-Creation," 14.

deluge and the early history of humanity.[50] Blenkinsopp is very careful to make this distinction, because we do not find this "familiarity" of the ancient Near Eastern tradition in the writings of Hesiod in the 8th century B.C.E. where it is the Trojan wars that marked the end of the mythic epoch.[51] In the ancient Greek tradition of Hesiod's *Theogony*, the world of the gods is chaotic and his narratives are not about the genesis of humans but that of the gods.[52] It is only two centuries later that Hecataeus of Miletus makes mention of the flood that wiped out all life on Earth, all except for its sole survivors: Deucalion and his three sons.[53] These are then presented as the ancestors of the three branches of the Hellenic race, which can be paralleled with the story of Noah and his three sons.[54] Then, one generation after Hecataeus, Hellanicus of Lesbos constructs his origin narrative of the people of Attica by tracing it back to the flood and inserting ante and post-diluvian genealogical structures.[55] What seems to be common amongst all of these myths of origins is the belief that humanity appears on the scene as an episode in a narrative already in progress, one that they do not control and in which they are not voluntarily involved.[56]

In both ancient Mesopotamia and Greece, the past always weighed heavily upon the present. According to Blenkinsopp, the primary concern of mythic stories was not to entertain or even to present an accurate account of the past and their history. Rather, the narratives concerning beginnings/origins, fictive genealogies and dramatic events set in the context of the remote past were intended as tools and mediums to allow the authors to think and speak about their present.[57] The narratives express convictions and ideas about their present life and context. When we speak about mythic time, therefore, we should not understand myth as being in opposition to history, or that which we understand as being factual, but as a way to address and

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50. Blenkinsopp, "Creation, Un-Creation, Re-Creation," 14.
51. Blenkinsopp, "Creation, Un-Creation, Re-Creation," 14.
52. Blenkinsopp, "Creation, Un-Creation, Re-Creation," 15.
53. John Van Seters, *In Search of History: Historiography in the Ancient World and the Origins of Biblical History* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 23-4.
54. Van Seters, *In Search of History*, 23-4.
55. Van Seters, *In Search of History*, 23-4.
56. Blenkinsopp, "Creation, Un-Creation, Re-Creation," 15.
57. Blenkinsopp, "Creation, Un-Creation, Re-Creation," 14, 16.

explore concerns about life, society and periods of history.[58] What function, though, does the genealogical structure play within the larger narrative structure concerning the beginnings and/or origins? Miano believes that the function of the genealogy can best be deciphered by examining the role of list making in ancient Mesopotamia and Greece.[59]

## 5. List Making in the Ancient World

List making in the ancient Near East, especially lists that involved some form of time measurement, was viewed as important as they would enable communities to keep track of their histories. According to J.G. Taylor, memorizing and reciting lists that involved some form of counting or measuring in the ancient world was deemed "a powerful medium for creating, organising and disseminating knowledge of the past."[60] In Mesopotamia, lists were a way of organising the cosmos to better understand it. In Greece, lists were used to organize segments of time and space, as seen, for instance, in Homer's Catalogue of Ships in book 2 of the *Iliad* and in Hesiod's *Theogony*.[61] According to Miano, these lists "are likely to predate the works in which they are now found."[62] Hence, the structure of the genealogy *qua* list will stand-out as a distinct literary form from that of the narrative in which it is embedded.

Hesiod's use of genealogies is to provide an explanation of the origins of the gods while introducing separate "mythical episodes."[63] It can be argued that the Priestly author uses the genealogical structure in exactly this manner as well. The Priestly genealogies are comprised of the names of specific figures that would have been memorized and recited by the priestly community in order to demonstrate their capacity to retain important information. When the lists were finally written down by scribes, the material contained in the lists could have been reviewed and organized.[64]

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58. Blenkinsopp, "Creation, Un-Creation, Re-Creation," 16.
59. Miano, "Shadow on the Steps," 66.
60. Miano, "Shadow on the Steps," 67. Cf. J.G. Taylor, "Framing the Past: The Roots of Greek Chronology" (PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, 2000), 164-74.
61. Robinson, "Literary Functions of the Genealogies of Genesis," 608.
62. Miano, "Shadow on the Steps," 66.
63. Robinson, "Literary Functions of the Genealogies of Genesis," 608.
64. Miano, "Shadow on the Steps," 67.

It is important to note that the lists were not static but dynamic, which in turn allowed for them to be changed and adapted to the needs of the chronographer or the historiographer. Robinson, for instance, argues that the genealogical lists compiled by the Priestly author are placed together with the narrative, by the author of Genesis, in such a way that allows the overarching narrative to constantly shift from one focal point to another. Thus, this enables the narrative and the genealogies to be in a constant "state of tension."[65]

Much like the lists compiled in ancient Mesopotamia, in which the reader is introduced to a linear sequence of male family members, so to in Genesis, with the continued interplay between genealogy and narrative comes also the sense that one is tracing a family history. This family noticeably acquires greater importance as the genealogical structure takes the reader from antediluvian time to post-diluvian time.[66] This in turn allows for the familial events and drama to take on greater importance as the reader moves through the narrative structure of Genesis.

Robinson argues that the literary genre of narrative and genealogy were not understood in the same manner as we understand them today. Hence, the literary genre would have been attached to a specific convention understood by both the author and the audience, a convention that is no longer attached to the literary structure but lost through its transmission.[67] Tzvetan Todorov notes, for instance, that in the Odyssey, "the narration of every event in the poem is actually the retelling of an earlier prophecy."[68] Thus, the convention attached to the literary genre of narrative was that "every action is the fulfillment of a predestinating prophecy," a convention which we would not normally associate with the modern concept of plot.[69] Contrary to this convention, the modern conception of plot is generally understood as a culmination of successive events, which are not determined by any predestinating will but are understood as being at the root cause of the outcome of the narrative.[70] This implicit logic in respect to our modern

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65. Robinson, "Literary Functions of the Genealogies of Genesis," 604.
66. Robinson, "Literary Functions of the Genealogies of Genesis," 604.
67. Robinson, "Literary Functions of the Genealogies of Genesis," 604.
68. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1977), 63-4.
69. Todorov, "The Poetics of Prose," 63-4.
70. Todorov, "The Poetics of Prose," 63-4.

understanding of plot now becomes a sort of prejudgement that confuses the conventions that were once attached to the narrative-genealogy relationship.[71] Hence, to reiterate the argument posited by White: the interplay between the narratives and the nonnarrative genealogies along with their combined structures allows the overarching narrative of Genesis to fluctuate between the complete predestination of events here embodied in the genealogical structure, and the nearly complete autonomy of successive events that can be found in the narrative structure.[72] The genealogies offer structure, order and a sort of prophetic fulfilment of what is to come, while the narrative offers the complete opposite. Robinson suggests that the genealogical lists in Genesis have been structured and compiled in such a way that the reader is left with the sense that God is in charge, and creation follows the will of its creator by creating order within disorder.[73] Moreover, the genealogical lists are compiled by the Priestly author to introduce the reader to a list of ante and post-diluvian ancestors. The structure established in these genealogies is that the age of each patriarch be given at the birth of the first-born son and at the time of the patriarch's death, and that the length of time between these two events be also noted. An important and striking feature of the genealogies in the book of Genesis is then the abnormally long lifespan of the patriarchs.

## 6. Longevity – Lifespan of the Patriarchs

In general, the lifespans of the patriarchs in the book of Genesis, as well as throughout the Torah, move in decreasing order. The reader is told in Genesis 5 that Noah was six hundred years old at the time of the flood, but Noah's spectacular age coincides with the extreme ages of all the patriarchs on the list, so this particular element of the genealogy does not pose any difficulties. What does pose a difficulty is trying to understand why anyone would compose such a genealogy in the first place. After all, the genealogical lists do not provide any chronological information, since death ages are irrelevant to chronology.[74] Furthermore, the years found in the genealogies cannot be added together to measure an era or any significant

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71. Robinson, "Literary Functions of the Genealogies of Genesis," 608.
72. White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," 12-14.
73. Robinson, "Literary Functions of the Genealogies of Genesis," 608.
74. Miano, "Shadow on the Steps," 91.

period of time. Hence, Miano concludes that the lifespans must have served an ideological purpose rather than a time measurement purpose.[75]

For instance, Miano takes Hesiod as an example and notes that in his presentation of the cycle of ages, he points to the lengthy lifespans of those who lived in the past as a sign of their superiority. Hesiod also indicates how the lifespans decrease with each passing generation.[76] A similar list in the biblical narratives of the book of Genesis may also be intended to present the ancestors as superior and the successive generations as inferior. In addition, there is a correlation between the length of an ancestor's lifespan and the time period in which he lived; demarcating the antediluvian genealogies from the post-diluvian genealogies.[77] Prior to the flood, the patriarchs are said to have lived between seven hundred and one thousand years, while after the flood and up until Abraham, they are said to have lived between two hundred and six hundred years. This possibly distinguishes between a golden age and a later "inferior age," an interpretation reinforced by a further division: from Abraham to Moses, the patriarchs are said to have lived only between one hundred to two hundred years of age.[78] Hence, leading scholars, such as Miano, conclude that a distinction is evidently being drawn between three eras: the antediluvian patriarchs, the post-diluvian patriarchs and the succession of patriarchs from Abraham until Moses.[79] Thus, contrary to Wilson's argument that Israelite genealogies were conceived to provide historical information concerning time measurement,[80] Israelite genealogies should be understood as playing a similar function to that of earlier Greek narratives, which were used to demarcate eras or epochs of time. It is conceivable that different authors later picked up the genealogies and assigned a certain length of time to any given generation, much like Herodotus who devised "chronologies based on several different generation lengths."[81] However, Miano argues that it may be more accurate to say that chronologies were created independently and then were harmonized with the genealogies. Thus, similar to the Greek

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75. Miano, "Shadow on the Steps," 91.
76. Miano, "Shadow on the Steps," 91.
77. Miano, "Shadow on the Steps," 91.
78. Miano, "Shadow on the Steps," 91.
79. Miano, "Shadow on the Steps," 91.
80. Wilson, "Genealogy and History in the Biblical World," 199.
81. Miano, "Shadow on the Steps," 94, fn. 45.

historians, the Israelite historiographers "played with generation lengths and imposed them on preexisting genealogies in order to fit famous persons of the past properly into an accepted timeline. No single generational 'norm' figure was in use across the board."[82]

Although many scholars[83] contend that the genealogical structure found in Genesis can be compared to the genealogies of Hesiod, as well as those found in other Greek writings, they fail to note that the comparable elements from the latter do not present the reader with a comprehensive system that encompasses all of humanity. The Greek genealogical framework is restrictive to a certain extent, presenting only a few ethnic divides and is not concerned with a universal presentation of human origins. In Genesis, however, it is different. According to F. Crüsemann, the world of ancient Israel was experienced and described as a family.[84] He moves on to explicate that, for people who were not organized by a state system, genealogies played a role that cannot be underestimated, for the entire social order could be described by them. Thus, the place of each individual within society, and in this case within creation, was structured by the genealogies in Genesis. Furthermore, Crüsemann indicates that no parallels can be found in this regard between the genealogies of the ancient Near East or Greece and those found in Genesis.[85] Genesis encompasses single families and entire ethnic groups, including connections with ancestors from primordial time, a unique system with the propensity to include all of humanity – both its neighbouring peoples as well as the whole internal structure of its own.[86] In fact for some scholars, such as K. Andriolo, the structural patterns that are present in the genealogies of Genesis do not function as a form of time measurement but rather should be understood as a means by which the author of the genealogies attempted to provide readers with a map of relations.[87] Thus, every Israelite descent line not only describes the fathering

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82. Miano, "Shadow on the Steps," 94.

83. E.g., Joseph Blenkinsopp ("Creation, Un-Creation, Re-Creation," 12), John van Seters (*In Search of History*, 23-24) and David Miano ("Shadow on the Steps," 91).

84. Frank Crüsemann, "Human Solidarity and Ethnic Identity: Israel's Self-Definition in the Genealogical System of Genesis," in *Ethnicity and the Bible*, ed. Mark G. Brett (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2002), 63.

85. Crüsemann, "Human Solidarity and Ethnic Identity," 62-63.

86. Crüsemann, "Human Solidarity and Ethnic Identity," 63.

87. Andriolo, "A Structural Analysis of Genealogy and Worldview," 1657.

of Israelite sons but also of non-Israelite sons as well. This structure in turn allowed for the people of other nations, which also populated the world known to Israel, to depart from the Israelite ancestry, making the latter's descent line the starting point of all peoples.[88]

## Conclusion

In conclusion, it is evident that stories concerning the "beginnings and/or origins" in the ancient Near East and in ancient Greece were, as Blenkinsopp argues, shaped in the language of myth, which is defined by Cassuto as a literary tradition whereby history telling incorporates the gods and heroes (normally revered as semi-gods) and their role in forming and shaping the outcome of human events.[89] However, the argument that this same mythical language was being used by the ancient Israelites in their origin narratives to reproduce a comparable worldview is one that can be disputed. To this end, Cassuto rightly argues that this mythic-tradition was not adopted by the ancient Israelite Historiographers and thus scholars should not confuse the ancient Near Eastern and Greek worldviews about beginnings with those of ancient Israel. In turn, this forces scholars to pay closer attention to the way in which the Israelite Historiographers chose to present different time periods. Miano has argued that the longevity aspect found within the genealogies is not demarcating "mythical" time from "historical" time, as Blenkinsopp has argued, but rather is establishing distinct periods of time that are closely related to the aspect of longevity. This in turn supports the argument of Cassuto who wants to dispel the claim that the origin narratives of Genesis can be distinguished by the language of myth.  Furthermore, a distinction in longevity can be observed and appears to be associated to the periods before and after the flood. Hence, it can be argued that the combination of a climactic event, such as a deluge, alongside differing lifespans can be used to present different time periods within the history of a people. Thus, for the ancient Israelite Historiographers, the conception of primordial time was not solely encompassed within the language of myth, as posited by Blenkinsopp, but rather was shaped by specific events and patriarchs who in turn were demarcated by their ancestry

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88. Andriolo, "A Structural Analysis of Genealogy and Worldview," 1657.
89. Cassuto, "Commentary on Genesis," 188.

and lifespans.

On the other hand, scholars such as Crüsemann and Andriolo have contended that the function and role of the genealogical structure were not intended to demarcate periods of time but rather to provide means of differentiation between those inside and those outside of Israel's group-specific identity; an argument that still, nonetheless, needs to be understood in the context of a literary tradition about origins and beginnings. The ancient Israelite Historiographers were indeed concerned with the group specific identity of Israel, but they were also concerned with the proximity of all those who surrounded Israel as well. This concern was not only present in the Historiographers' own time and context but also depicted by them as present from the very beginning of creation; a mapping that I believe presents not only the formation of the group specific identity but also how it was formed and became increasingly distinct as the reader moves from primordial time (antediluvian period) to historical time (post-diluvian period).