

THE GENEALOGICAL LIST IN THE BOOK OF RUTH: A SYMBOLIC APPROACH

ZVI RON

The Book of Ruth concludes with a genealogical list tracing the ancestry of King David all the way from Perez son of Judah.

Now these are the generations of Perez: Perez begot Hezron; and Hezron begot Ram, and Ram begot Amminadab; and Amminadab begot Nahshon, and Nahshon begot Salma; and Salmon begot Boaz, and Boaz begot Obed; and Obed begot Jesse, and Jesse begot David.
(Ruth 4:18-22).

This genealogical list is constructed in a way that indicates a particular symbolism. In this article, we will note the symbols found in the list and determine at what point the list shifts from a historic record to a symbolic one. Additionally, we will see that the symbolic approach to this list solves a major chronological difficulty.

There are ten people listed in this genealogy, paralleling other such lists in Genesis. In Genesis 5, we have a genealogical list of the ten generations from Adam to Noah. Genesis 11:10-26 contains another genealogical list of ten generations, from Shem to Abraham. The first major era is from the Creation to the Flood. The next list is found after the description of the nations descended from Noah (Gen. 10) and the Tower of Babel narrative (11:1-9), when the world is divided into many languages. These two sections indicate that the world is now divided into many different groups. The genealogical list in Genesis 11 covers the period from the Flood until the birth of Abraham, patriarch of the Israelite people, the group on which the Bible will focus from this chapter onward. A list of ten generations is used to indicate a transition from one major era to another. These ten-generation epochs were understood to be significant by the rabbis as well.¹

Note also that if we follow the genealogy from Adam through his descendants, Noah is the tenth in line, Abraham the twentieth, and Boaz the thirtieth.² The list of ancestors in Ruth was written as a ten-generation list to

Zvi Ron received semikha from the Israeli Rabbanut and his Ph.D. in Jewish Theology from Spertus University. He is an educator living in Neve Daniel, Israel and the author of Sefer Katan ve-Gadol (Rossi Publications: 2006) about the large and small letters in Tanakh. He is the Deputy Editor of Jewish Bible Quarterly.

evoke these earlier lists, and also to indicate that here a new epoch was beginning; the epoch of the Davidic monarchy. Just as Noah began the post-Flood world and Abraham began the Israelite people in a new world divided into nations, David began the dynasty that will ultimately lead to messianic times under the Messiah son of David.

The fact that David occupies the tenth position in this list is noted in rabbinic literature as being significant. For example, Hayyim Yosef David Azulai (the Hida) explains that the reason King David's name is written with an extra letter "yud" in Books of I and II Chronicles [דויד] is to indicate that he is tenth in the genealogical list found in Ruth.³ Others ascribe mystical importance to the fact that David is the tenth from Perez.⁴

In this list the seventh person is Boaz, the hero of the Book of Ruth. In Genesis 5, the seventh person in the list is the saintly Enoch, who *walked with God* (Gen. 5:24). Seven is always a significant number in the Bible; the seventh person on the list would draw special attention. The figures who occupy the seventh position and its multiples from Adam onward and on all have either biblical or rabbinic significance; Enoch is the seventh, Eber the fourteenth,⁵ Isaac the twenty-first, and Nahshon the twenty-eighth.⁶ Even if the Bible itself did not always indicate that the seventh descendants were special, the Rabbis did feel this way and noted in the Midrash what was so significant about them. Note also that in I Chronicles 2:15 David himself is listed as the seventh son of Jesse.^{7,8}

Even the term used to introduce this genealogical list, "generations [תולדות –*toldot*]," is only found in the Torah, and nowhere else in the Prophets or Writings. In the Torah, this term is found eleven times in Genesis and once in Numbers.⁹ Using this particular word in Ruth hints that the list should be viewed as part of the Genesis family of genealogical lists. Furthermore, the word *toldot* itself is only written using the letter "vav" at the end (תולדות) as opposed to being written (תולדת) in two places in Tanakh, here in Ruth 4:18 and in Genesis 2:4, the prelude to the sin of Adam. The Midrash comments that this is to hint that the six curses that came to the world as a result of the sin of Adam will be undone with the coming of the Messiah.¹⁰ A similar theme is found in Exodus Rabbah, 30:3, which connects Ruth to Genesis 2:4 by explaining that the curse of mortality stemming from the sin of Adam will be undone with the coming of the Messiah. The Rabbis understood that the

Ruth list was written in a way that indicates that it represents the culmination of the cosmic saga of Genesis, the coming of the Messiah.

Considering that one of the major reasons given for the writing of the Book of Ruth is to trace the lineage of King David,¹¹ it makes sense that the genealogical list was written using symbols that would indicate that Boaz and David are figures of great significance.

THE CHRONOLOGICAL PROBLEM

If we understand that this genealogical list was intended as a symbolic representation, the chronological problem in this passage can be resolved. This well-known problem is spelled out by Abraham Ibn Ezra in his commentary to Ruth 4:17. He begins by explaining that we know Nahshon was the leader of the tribe of Judah at the time of the Exodus from Egypt (Num. 1:7), and since that entire generation died in the wilderness, only his son Salma would have been the first in the lineage to enter Israel. Even though only those over the age of twenty at the time of the report of the spies died in the wilderness, it is reasonable to assume that Nahshon was in fact over twenty at that time, since he was already the leader of the tribe of Judah. In any event we are not told that he entered Israel. This concurs with *Seder Olam* Chapter 12: "Nahshon son of Amminadab died in the second year after the Exodus. Salmon was of those who entered the Land."

Ibn Ezra continues the calculation by stating that in I Kings 6:1 we are told: *In the four hundred and eightieth year after the Children of Israel's exodus from the land of Egypt, in the fourth year of Solomon's reign over Israel, in the month of Ziv which is the second month, he built the Temple to God.* Since the Israelites wandered for 40 years before entering the Land of Israel, we are left with 440 years from entering Israel until the Temple. If we then subtract the 70 years of King David's life and the four years of King Solomon's reign before the Temple was built, we are left with 366 years from entering Israel to the birth of David. This period of 366 years is covered by only four ancestors of David: Salma, Boaz, Obed, and Jesse.

Based on this calculation, even if Salma was an infant when he entered Israel, each one of these Davidic ancestors would have had to father the next in line at a very advanced age (an average age of 91!) in order to encompass more than three-and-a-half centuries. Ibn Ezra further states that even if you

say that Nahshon was less than twenty years old in the wilderness and did in fact enter Israel (in contradiction to *Seder Olam*), this still leaves us with an average age in the eighties for each member of the lineage to father the next in line.

The Midrash deals with this difficulty by explaining that certain of the ancestors of David lived extremely long lives. Based on different midrashic texts,¹² either Obed¹³ or Jesse¹⁴ lived to be over 400 years old, or alternatively, Boaz, Obed and Jesse together lived for a period of over 400 years.¹⁵

Ibn Ezra himself accepts that David's ancestors in fact fathered sons when in their eighties. Boaz indicated that he was an old man when he told Ruth, *'You have made your latest act of kindness greater than the first, in that you have not gone after younger men'* (Ruth 3:10). Ruth Rabbah 6:2 states that Boaz was eighty years old at the time the story in the Book of Ruth took place. Since we know that David was the eighth son of Jesse (I Sam. 16:10-11) it is reasonable to assume that Jesse was an old man when he begot him. Ibn Ezra concludes that the four immediate patriarchal ancestors of King David must have all fathered the next in line when they were at least in their eighties.

Ramban, in his commentary to Genesis 46:15, also mentions that the ancestors of King David all fathered sons at a very advanced age. He notes that even though by that time in history people did not live as long as in the time of Abraham, miraculously these four men fathered children close to the time of their death, at very advanced ages. Thus, the traditional rabbinic answer to the puzzle of the genealogical list in Ruth is to explain that in fact Salma, Boaz, Obed, and Jesse all fathered children while in their eighties or nineties.

It seems strange that these four ancestors all begot children at such an old age.¹⁶ Even more so when we compare the last four ancestors to the earlier ancestors of King David: Judah, Perez, Hezron, Ram, Amminadab and Nahshon. Here we have six individuals covering the entire period of the sojourn in Egypt. The Talmud calculates that the time in Egypt was 210 years,¹⁷ making the time from one generation to another about 35 years. This means that according to the approach of Ibn Ezra and Ramban, before the Exodus the next in line was born when his father was in his thirties and after the Exodus this age more than doubled.

A SYMBOLIC APPROACH

The difficulty raised by this section in Ruth disappears when we understand that the list is a symbolic one, and not meant to be understood as an actual historical record. There were in fact more ancestors between Perez and David, but they were excluded from the genealogical list in order to maintain the special seven-ten symbolism.¹⁸

Where in this list is the ellipsis, where would the missing ancestors of King David fit in? The lineage from Ruth is also found in I Chronicles 2:5-15. There are additional details there regarding brothers and sisters, but the Davidic lineage is the same.

The sons of Perez: Hezron and Hamul . . . The sons of Hezron who were born to him: Jerahmeel, Ram, and Chelubai; and Ram begot Amminadab; and Amminadab begot Nahshon, the leader of the sons of Judah; and Nahshon begot Salma; and Salma begot Boaz, and Boaz begot Obed; and Obed begot Jesse; and Jesse begot his firstborn Eliab, and Abinadab the second, and Shimea the third, Nethanel the fourth, Raddai the fifth, Ozem the sixth, and David the seventh (I Chron. 2:5-15).

We see that the lineage through Hezron and Ram includes additional information, the brothers of the Davidic ancestors. The siblings of David are listed as well. From Amminadab to Jesse we have a simple list of fathers and sons. This is the formulaic part of the list that can shift from the historical to the symbolic. The chronological problem only begins after the Exodus, so we can understand the genealogy until that point (Nahshon) to be a complete historical record. Since the birth of Obed is an integral part of the Ruth narrative, and David being the son of Jesse is integral to the narrative in Samuel I, these connections should also be viewed as literal and historical.

This leaves us with only a few points on the list where we can veer from the historical to the symbolic, Nahshon to Salma, Salma to Boaz, and Obed to Jesse.¹⁹ It is interesting to note that other than in the genealogical lists in Ruth and I Chronicles, Boaz and Jesse are never referred to as "Boaz son of Salma" or "Jesse son of Obed." It seems that the best candidate for the actual ellipsis point on the genealogical list is Salma, the figure who outside of these two genealogical lists is not found linked to either his father or son.²⁰

The story of Ruth takes place *in the days when the judges judged* (Ruth 1:1). We do not know when exactly during the period of the Judges the story took place, and there are many approaches found in rabbinic literature.²¹ The opinion of Rav is that Boaz is to be identified with the judge Ibzan from Bethlehem (Jud. 12:8).²² Even if we do not accept that Boaz was literally the same person as Ibzan, this timeline puts Boaz living 105 years before the end of the time of the Judges, which works out well historically in terms of having David the fourth generation from Boaz.²³ The one person in the genealogy who covers all the years from entering the Land of Israel through Joshua and over 200 years of judges until the time of Ibzan is Salma. If we understand that there were in fact many unrecorded generations leading up to and descending from Salma, the non-historical element of the genealogical list is minimized to just one link in the lineage. All of the ancestors before and after him can be viewed as historic and literally fathering the next in line, and at a reasonable age.

Salma's role as a representative of many unmentioned generations can also be seen in his position in the lineage. The Nahshon-Salma transition is found in the exact middle, covering the shift between the first five ancestors and the last five. It also covers the transition from wandering in the wilderness to entering the Land of Israel, from Mosaic to post-Mosaic times.²⁴

While it may seem unusual to view Salma as a representative of many unlisted generations, this understanding resolves the chronological problem that the genealogy raises and fits in with the idea that the lineage itself is written in a symbolic style. In fact, there are other places where we find shortcuts in genealogical lists. Radak notes that for the sake of brevity, in I Chronicles 1:17, four of the grandsons of Shem; Uz, Hul, Gether, and Meshech, are listed as if they were his sons. Similarly, Radak explains that in I Chronicles 1:36, Timna is listed as if she was the child of Eliphaz, while in actuality she was his concubine, again for the sake of brevity. Radak further explains that it is common practice to refer to grandchildren simply as children, as in I Chronicles 3:15 where Shallum is listed as the son of Josiah even though, according to Radak, he was actually the son of Jehoakim and grandson of Josiah. While Radak explains that generations were sometimes skipped for the sake of brevity, here in the Davidic lineage they were skipped in order to create a symbolically and numerically significant list of ancestors.

The Midrash also understood Salma to be a transitional figure. In Ruth Rabbah, 8:1, the Midrash asks why Salma is called Salma when he is mentioned as the son of Nahshon, but his name is changed to Salmon when he is listed as the father of Boaz. The answer given is that the name Salmon is meant to evoke the word *sulam* [ladder], to indicate that "up until this point it is a ladder for princes, from this point in the lineage onward it is a ladder for kings." We can view Salma as a representative of many missing generations in the lineage, called in the Midrash the "ladder for princes" before the transitional mid-point, and the "ladder for kings" after.²⁵

NOTES

1. *Avot* 5:2.
2. From Abraham to Boaz: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah, Perez, Hezron, Ram, Amminadab, Nahshon, Salma, Boaz.
3. *Torat Hida HaShalem – Ruth* (Jerusalem: Ahavat Shalom, 1997) p. 104. The numerical value of the letter "yud" is ten.
4. See for example the commentary *Melo HaOmer* to Ruth 2:17 and *Lehem Lefi Ha-Taf*, dalet, 7.
5. According to rabbinic tradition, Eber was the teacher of Jacob (Megillah 16b, 17a). He was also a great prophet (Genesis Rabbah 37:7) and moral authority (Genesis Rabbah 52:11).
6. According to rabbinic tradition, in addition to being the head of the tribe of Judah, Nahshon was the first Israelite to jump into the Red Sea (Sotah 36a, see also Numbers Rabbah 13:7).
7. This is in contradiction to I Samuel 16:10-11 where he is the eighth, see Radak on I Chronicles 2:15 who offers multiple resolutions to this conflict.
8. On the prominence of the seventh and tenth position in genealogical lists in general and in Ruth in particular, see Jack M. Sasson, *Ruth: A New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation*, 2nd Edition (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989) pp. 183-184. See also the remarks of the Ben Ish Hai in his work *Aderet Eliyahu*, Parshat Va-Yehi, where he takes this idea even further, noting that Judah was the seventh Jew in the world (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Reuben, Shimon, Levi, Judah).
9. *Da'at Mikra – Hamesh Megillot* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1990) p. 4, note 2.
10. Genesis Rabbah 12:6. The numerical value of the letter "vav" is six.
11. See *Torah Shelema – Megillat Ruth* (Jerusalem: American Biblical Encyclopedia Society, 1999) pp. 113-116, and *Da'at Mikra – Hamesh Megillot* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1990) p. 4.
12. See Midrash Lekah Tov, Genesis 47, note 22, for a discussion of the textual variants.
13. Midrash Tanhuma, Va-Yehi, 2.
14. See the commentary *Anaf Yosef* to Midrash Tanhuma, Va-Yehi, 2.
15. Genesis Rabbah, 96:4. See there the commentary of Rabbi David Luria. This Midrash also appears in Yalkut Shimoni, Genesis, 156. See also Rashi on I Chronicles 2:11, where he states that Boaz was over 300 years old when he fathered Obed.
16. For a traditional/literalist approach to these and other figures who lived extremely long lives, see David Havlin, *Lehatzdik Kodesh* (Israel, 1991) pp. 171-173.

17. See Rashi, Exodus 12:40.

18. Other approaches have been suggested to resolve this chronological difficulty. See for example, Philip Biberfeld, *Universal Jewish History* vol. 1 (New York: Spero Foundation, 1948) pp. 29-33.

19. See also Robert L. Hubbard, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament – the Book of Ruth* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988) p. 284.

20. See also *Entziklopediyah Olam Ha-Tanakh – Megillot* vol.1 (Jerusalem: Revivim, 1987) pp. 104-105, for additional evidence that the ellipsis occurs with Salma.

21. *Da'at Mikra – Hamesh Megillot* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1990) p. 16.

22. Bava Batra 91a.

23. *Da'at Mikra*, p. 16.

24. Hubbard, p.280. The significance of the Nahshon-Salma transition is found in traditional rabbinic literature as well, see for example the commentary of the Vilna Gaon to the Song of Songs, 2:8, where he writes that the Israelites were originally only supposed to leave Egypt during the time of Salma, but due to God's mercy the Exodus took place during the time of his father Nahshon.

25. Thanks to my dear friend and student Jonathan Engel for pointing out this interpretation of the Midrash.



INSTRUCTIONS FOR AUTHORS

Detailed *Instructions for Authors* and journal style
can be found on our Internet website:

<http://www.jewishbible.org>

