

## THE TOLEDOT OF THE BOOK OF GENESIS AND THEIR REDEMPTIVE-HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

MARTEN H. WOULDSTRA

THE OCCURRENCE of a system of ten *toledot*-divisions throughout the book of Genesis has long had the attention of Old Testament scholars. These *toledot*, translated "generations" in the American Standard Version, occur in Gen. 2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1, 11:10 and 27; 25:12 and 19; 36:1 (and 9); 37:2.

In recent years Professor Donald J. Wiseman, disagreeing with both the standard documentary hypothesis and the oral tradition approach to the Pentateuch, has developed the thesis that the *toledot* in Genesis are evidence of the fact that at the time of Moses' writing activities written texts were already available in great abundance. Calling attention to the colophons or catch phrases which are used as titles of ancient texts, Wiseman expresses the opinion that the phrase "these are the generations of. . ." is such a colophon, identifying texts used by Moses, the inspired author, in setting forth the history of God's dealing with the line of promise (cf. Bulletin of Westminster Theological Seminary, Vol. 8, No. 4, 1969).

The present writer's interest in the possible significance of these *toledot* for the development of the line of promise was first aroused by the lectures which the late Professor B. Holwerda presented in 1946 at Kampen Theological Seminary in the Netherlands. Professor Holwerda then lectured on the "generations" of Isaac (Gen. 25:19). Unfortunately, Professor Holwerda's views were available only to Dutch readers until a few years ago. But in 1964 Dr. Samuel R. Kulling, professor of Old Testament at the Prediger Seminar in Sankt Chrischona near Basel, in a study entitled *Zur Datierung Der "Genesis-P-Stücke"* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1964) made these views available in the German language as well. Moreover, in a commentary on the first few chapters of Genesis written by Professor W. H. Gispen of the Free University of Amsterdam the views of Professor Holwerda have again found further endorsement (*Schepping en Paradijs* [Kampen : J. H. Kok, 1966]). A brief summary of Professor Holwerda's views would seem to be called for in a

journal in the English language, primarily because of the intrinsic value which these views possess.

What will be presented in the following lines will be Kulling's discussion of Professor Holwerda's views, set within the framework of what other Old Testament scholars have held with regard to this matter.

Julius Wellhausen, followed by Budde, believed that the occurrence of these *toledot*-formulas was added proof for his thesis that the so-called P document was a late and schematic construction imposed on the materials of the Pentateuch. But B. D. Eerdmans observed that the schematism of the *toledot* was not as great as had been supposed and that this lack of complete uniformity argued against the Wellhausen thesis. One difficulty from the critical point of view is the occurrence of a *toledot*-formula in Gen. 2:4. The critics belonging to the Wellhausen school hold that this *toledot* is really out of place. It should have been written ahead of the materials presented in Gen. 1:1-2 :3. Eichrodt correctly observed that no amount of exegetical art could ever explain why a formula that should have been used as a superscription ended up as a postscript instead. But, thus Eichrodt, if Gen. 2:4a stands where it stood originally, this has its consequences for our opinions on the question of whether the *toledot* are an evidence of P's supposedly very schematic procedure (cf. Kulling, p. 217). Noth has sought to explain this strange phenomenon as a literary exception, but Kulling correctly remarks that in the other nine instances the *toledot* heads the section to which it belongs. But this the Wellhausen critics have not been able to admit with respect to Gen. 2:4a. For they believe that Gen. 2:4a belongs to P, but Gen. 2:4b ff. belongs to J.

W. H. Green has called attention to other instances in which the theory of the Wellhausen school about the *toledot* as evidence for a late P construction does not apply. For in Gen. 37:2 the *toledot* introduces a section composed out of J and E materials. Also in 25:19 the *toledot* is followed by long sections out of J, mixed with E materials, with only an occasional reference to P materials. Eissfeldt believes that Gen. 36:10-39, one of the *toledot*, belongs to a source called "L." Kulling therefore raises

the question: if these *toledot* can stand at such places in other parts of the book of Genesis, why not then in Gen. 2:4a? But if, in spite of all this, we must still count this formula as belonging to P, this document then becomes discontinuous (*lückenhaft*), and it does not possess the systematic character which the critics say it has.

For all these reasons various solutions have been proposed concerning the origin and significance of these particular formulas. Some have held that there is no particular connection between them and that they are of various origins. There never was a P narrator document (Kulling, p. 219).

Another proposed solution has been the suggestion that these *toledot* formulas originated with a glossator who wanted to underscore the genealogical structure of Genesis but who proceeded without due care or consistency and who inserted the formula at times at the wrong place. Eichrodt endorses this position by asserting that the later redactor who inserted the *toledot* was attempting to divide the historical narrative by means of these formulas but that he was not successful in this attempt so that at a later point he gave it up. A still later redactor added a few more of his own. To the first editorial sequence belong 5:1; 10:1; 11:10 and 27; 25:12; 36:1. Here the phrase occurs in its proper sense. The second editorial sequence comprises the rest, namely 2:4a; 6:9; 25:19; 37:2. At these points the phrase has assumed a more figurative meaning. Editor number two also inserted 36:9, using the phrase again in its proper sense. Thus far Eichrodt's opinion (Kulling, p. 220).

From these and other opinions Kulling concludes that to assume that the *toledot* are not original where they now stand is to avoid the question of their present order. Why did these supposed editors insert the phrases where they did? Why presuppose that these editors lacked the necessary insight and consistency?

A third solution concerning the use of the *toledot* in Genesis comes from Eissfeldt. Eissfeldt assigns these formulas to the original P document. He observes that they occur at points in the narrative which describe a certain narrowing down of the

scene of action. This gradual narrowing, which can be readily seen from the study of the successive *toledot* passages, is illustrated by Eissfeldt--who, by the way, also includes Num. 3:1 in his discussion. Eissfeldt believes that Gen. 2:4a does not hail from P, neither does Gen. 36:9 (nor 36:1) . Kulling draws certain conclusions from this which are significant for the point of his argument but need not be recorded at this point. Kulling agrees with Eissfeldt that the *toledot* materials are the result of a conscious literary planning. But, so Kulling, this planning should not be restricted to a supposed P document; it should include the entire scope of the book of Genesis.

Having come to this point, Kulling reviews the opinion of Professor Holwerda. Admitting that the three solutions just recorded each contain some correct elements, Kulling observes that Holwerda has correctly understood that the *toledot* must be seen as integral to the larger context. In agreement with Holwerda, he views these formulas as providing us with the key to the understanding of the entire book.

The word *toledot* comes from the root *yalad*, "to bear," "to generate." It refers to the product of bearing; hence it stands for that which was produced, for the result. In Gen. 2:4 the word designates the historical result. Holwerda wishes to avoid the translation "history," which, in his opinion, does not always fit the true meaning of the word (cf. for this Gispén, p. 109, who, while agreeing with the thesis of Holwerda and Kulling, nevertheless knows no better translation for the word than "history"). Holwerda therefore understands Gen. 2:4 to say: this is what came forth from, this is what became of, heaven and earth. Holwerda does not feel that the word "history" is an appropriate translation here. What follows Gen. 2:4 is not really the story of heaven and earth but the story of Adam and Eve, the fall into sin, and the story of Cain and Abel.

In the word *toledot*, therefore, we find the meaning: this is what came of it. And in the genitive ("these are the *toledot* of..." we have the thought: this is where it started from. The word *toledot* indicates the end of a line; the added genitive marks a new starting point. To say what Eissfeldt did, namely, that the *toledot* serve to restrict the scene of action, does not

really do justice to the meaning of this term. It does not make clear why, for example, there is no *toledot* of Abraham while there is one of Terah, the father of Abraham. Terah's *toledot* has Abraham for its center; similarly Isaac's *toledot* (Gen. 25:19) has Jacob for its center; and Jacob's *toledot* places Joseph in the foreground.

To observe the true meaning of this phrase also helps us see the actual purpose of the biblical narratives. These narratives are not biographies; they are not novels concerning saints, although we often make this out of them. The Bible does not present histories of people; it contains no biographies; but it draws lines from a starting point to an end point. If it were otherwise, we should have had a *toledot* of Abraham and of Joseph, but we look in vain for such. Another consequence of this understanding of the *toledot* is that it cuts out all psychologizing about various "types of faith."

The author of Genesis, therefore, is concerned to show where the ways begin to part: for example, with Terah, and then again with Ishmael (25:12-18), with Isaac (25:19-35:29), with Esau (36:1-37:1), and with Jacob (37:2-50:26).

Going back to some of the earlier *toledot*, we notice that Gen. 5:1, 2 begins with the creation of man and ends with God's repentance about ever having made man (6:6-8). The third *toledot* begins with Noah (6:9), and ends with the curse upon Ham (9:29). The fourth one begins with the survivors of the flood (10:1) and ends with the building of the tower and the confusion of tongues. This line is then continued via Shem (11:10-26) to Terah.

Thus it becomes clear that the composition of Genesis consists of ten *toledoth*-sections, each appropriately introduced with the well-known formula: "these are the *toledoth* of...." Holwerda considers this to be a fundamental argument in criticism of the documentary hypothesis. In this he is followed by Kulling. The author of Genesis, in other words, has himself given us a clue as to the composition of his book, a composition which suggests a well thought-out plan. The *toledot* formulas have not been subsequently added to an already existing text, but are the very fabric around which the whole of Genesis has

been constructed. Even those materials in Genesis which do not belong to the alleged P document are an integral part of the original composition of the book. Kulling concludes that the *toledoth* have shown us that Genesis is "eine konstruierte Tendenzschrift" (p. 226). But--and this is the important thing --this construction is an original one, not a later addition; and it runs through the entire book of Genesis, not just the supposed P materials.

The present writer considers the approach of Holwerda-Kulling-Gispen to be a fruitful one. Many important benefits can be gathered from it, both for the question of the origin of the Pentateuch and for a correct understanding of the message of this part of Holy Scripture. For this reason this viewpoint is offered to the readers for consideration.

In conclusion, attention should be called to Professor Gispen's reaction to the views of Professor Wiseman reported above. Commenting on the view that the *toledot* must be regarded as colophons, written at the end of the section, not at the beginning, and designating the names of the persons who were in possession of the clay tablets used by Moses in the writing of his book, Gispen remarks : "This hypothesis is very improbable and does not suffice as an explanation of the *toledot* formulas" (Gispen, p. 111).

-M. H. WOULDSTRA

This material is cited with gracious permission from:  
Calvin Theological Seminary  
3233 Burton St SE  
Grand Rapids, MI 49546--4387  
[www.calvinseminary.edu](http://www.calvinseminary.edu)

Please report any errors to Ted Hildebrandt at: [thildebrandt@gordon.edu](mailto:thildebrandt@gordon.edu)

What are the different instances of toledot in the book of Genesis? Toledot can have slightly different meanings depending on the context. In Genesis 2:4, it's used somewhat metaphorically as "heaven and earth" don't literally procreate. Instead, the word refers to the events that came about with the advent of heaven and earth—namely, all of human history. In the other instances in Genesis, toledot identifies both the progeny of these men and the stories that ensued in their time—we might say the "era" in which they lived. The toledot or generations don't necessarily end when the next begin; they're more layered, each encompassing those that come after. If the "toledot" structure of the book of Genesis 1. Serves to display the existing relationship between kinship groups by tracing their lineage back to a common ancestor. 2. Serves to link one narrative to another, thereby establishing continuity over stretches of time without narrative, and 3. Highlights the existence of a unique line of "seed" which will eventually become a royal dynasty for God's purpose of Redemption. But in His grace, God continually intervenes so that the seed of the woman can advance according to God's redemptive purpose leading to the coming of Christ. Reference: Sidney Greidanus "Preaching Christ from Genesis" Eerdmans 2007, pp 11-20. 1.7k views. The Book of Genesis (New International Commentary on the Old Testament Series) 1-17. Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans. ISBN 0-8028-2521-4. Woudstra, Marten, The Toledot of the Book of Genesis and Their Redemptive-Historical Significance, Calvin Theological Seminary, 1980. Retrieved from "https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Wiseman\_hypothesis&oldid=946465850". Categories