

The Abbreviated Genealogy¹

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1. General Remarks

The second half of Exodus 6 contains a curtailed genealogical table that furnishes details regarding the descendants of Reuben, Shimon and Levi, the three eldest sons of Yaaqob. In a departure from standard genealogical tables it provides information about its individuals in a most uneven manner. Of course Exodus 6 was not a natural location for a genealogy, in the midst of a narrative, but the partial genealogy appearing at this point serves an important purpose. The primary interest here was in Moshe and Aharon, and once their lineage and several other relevant details were registered there was no purpose in continuing. As fuller family background for Moshe and Aharon, central protagonists of the narrative, was called for, more particulars were provided about their tribe, their direct forbears and important personages of their tribe than about the others.

By beginning with Reuben, Levi was placed in perspective (once again pointing to the reversal of primogeniture). In citing portions of what might have been a large national genealogical table, despite “skimming” through the first two tribes and concluding after Levi, Moshe and Aharon’s lineage is more fully appreciated and legitimated (a critical concern as we shall soon discuss).

The primary purpose of this genealogy appears to have been achieved after it listed the basic details of Aharon and Moshe. However, with the benefit of hindsight at the time of its writing, knowing who played significant roles in the coming events of the Torah, the narrative provided pedigree details about several other Levite individuals. Thus, it includes information about Aharon’s four sons, Qorah’s sons (who do not die with their father, Num. 26:11) and the grandson of Aharon, Pinehas, the son of Eleazar. Foreshadowing the latter’s important accomplishment and ascension to priestly prominence, his pedigree is more fully elaborated with details included as to his maternal grandfather as well as to his paternal grandmother’s father.

No mention is made of Moshe’s sons, whose births are recorded elsewhere in the Book of Exodus. One may wonder: since his sons did not become prominent, did the Torah here pass over them to make the historic point that a man’s greatness did not bring with it the securing of positions of eminence for his sons? *

The need to provide the pedigree of Moshe and Aharon may explain the structure of the genealogy, but there remains a question. Why was it placed exactly here, after Moshe and Aharon had already been interacting with Israel and Pharaoh and not at the point that they presented themselves to Israel or to Pharaoh (towards the end of Chapter 4 or the beginning of Chapter 5)? And why, in the two verses attached to the end of the genealogical table (Ex. 6:26-27), is there so much clustered repetition in different ways emphasizing the identities of Moshe and Aharon, a unique phenomenon in Tanakh: הוּא אַהֲרֹן וּמוֹשֶׁה (“It is he Aharon and Moshe that Hashem spoke to”); הֵם הַמְדַבְּרִים אֶל פַּרְעֹה (“it is they who spoke to Pharaoh”); הוּא מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן (“it is he, Moshe and Aharon”)? It is written as if there is keen interest in assuring that these details,

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more than others, never be forgotten and that, more than with other data, there should be no possibility that anyone would ever make a mistake.

2. Rabbi S. R. Hirsch's Explanation

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (Commentary on *Shemot*) pointed out that the genealogical table is set exactly at the spot that the account of the supernatural wonders and successes begin. In ancient times an awed public often attributed divinity to human beings who seemed to have dominion over nature, and there would have been a great temptation to deify Moshe and Aharon, if not during life then after death. This would be a great violation of a cardinal principle of the Torah. It is precisely at this juncture that there was a critical need to assert and reassert in various ways that Moshe and Aharon were mortal human beings. The point was thus made from all angles that they are like all humans. They were part of a family tree, born of father and mother, with uncles, aunts and cousins, relations known to the contemporary public. Their ancestors also were born, lived a certain number of years and died, and they likewise were part of a larger population group. Once Moshe and Aharon's human background was established and confirmed, and certain linked data were furnished, there was no need to continue with the genealogy.

We may support this view with what otherwise appears to be an anomalous feature of the text. The genealogical table interrupts the narrative after the brief accounts that relate of G-d instructing Moshe to go to Pharaoh, Moshe expressing reluctance, followed by G-d speaking to Moshe and Aharon and formally "commands them to the Children of Israel and to Pharaoh the king of Egypt to take the Children of Israel out of Egypt" (vv 10-13). These particulars are repeated immediately after the genealogical table, with slight, albeit significant, variations in both G-d's opening statement and Moshe's reply, but also with a detailed response from G-d attached. In *peshat* interpretation, despite the variations, the second account "is exactly the one mentioned earlier... but because the subject was interrupted to provide their pedigree the text repeated it to begin again with it... as a man would say to his friend 'let's return to the subject'" (Rashi, on 6:29-30; also see Rashbam, Ibn Ezra). The text indicates the repetition by introducing the later account with, "And it was on the day that Hashem spoke to Moshe in the land of Egypt" (v. 28), referring back to those instructions.

Regarding variations, as Ibn Ezra on occasion states, G-d's prophecy should be thought of as communicated in conceptual terms, not limited to a particular literary formulation; it contains more than can be compressed into finite words. The prophet, as recipient or narrator formulating the conceptual message into words, in his prophetic capacity, may one time highlight one aspect, the next time another, varying the word usage. Going beyond Ibn Ezra, based on compelling research, we assume that there are subtle reasons, part of the prophetic process, that explain why the literary formulations are different even when referring to the identical experience.

In the resumptive account there are several significant additions that awaited the genealogical table before being incorporated into the text. G-d now introduces His instructions for Moshe to speak to Pharaoh with "*Ani Hashem*" (6:29), a detail that has no parallel in the first formulation. It is a statement implying His supremacy and His intent to reveal His wondrous power, as will be explicitly elaborated in the continuation of His response (7:5).**

After repeating that Moshe expressed his reservations, G-d's response was recorded at length, a matter not known from the earlier formulation to which it corresponds. There, His response was

not quoted or paraphrased at all; it had merely been described in the third person narrative informing us in a general way that He had spoken to Moshe and Aharon, וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל אַהֲרֹן, and commanded them to get on with their mission, וַיִּצְוֵם אֱלֹהִים בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֶל פְּרַעֲוֹה, (6:13). Those two back-to-back clauses constitute a most unusual construction. We are surprised that we are not told the words G-d spoke as is the standard in the many other cases of וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה. It is as if there was a reluctance to record the details of G-d's response at that point and His words were skipped over.

In the resumption it is very different. G-d says to Moshe רְאֵה נִתְּתִידְךָ אֱלֹהִים לְפַרְעֹה וְאַהֲרֹן אָחִידְךָ יִהְיֶה – “See, I have appointed you as a god for Pharaoh, and Aharon your brother will be your prophet” (7:1). G-d goes on to speak about the numerous great wonders He is imminently going to perform in Egypt in order that the Egyptians will know that “*Ani Hashem*.” It is this response to Moshe (just before the plagues begin) that prompted insertion of the genealogy and explains its location exactly at the spot where it is, an insertion designed to counter the fear that Moshe might be deified. The passage depicts Moshe as a god to Pharaoh, who was himself perceived as a god! With the many coming wonders that are alluded to, Moshe would surely be seen as Pharaoh's superior and might accordingly be thought of as a god.

Thus, although the readers of the previous chapters of Exodus are aware of Moshe's human birth, the structure of the present narrative segment reflects (and transmits to us) the concern that then existed with deification. Until the genealogy was recorded and Moshe's humanness established, the fullness of G-d's response to Moshe was withheld in the text, reflecting the lesson that was being transmitted.

3. Number Symbolism Based on Rabbi Sassoon's Insights

In Exodus 6 and 7, a central objective in the message to Israel as well as in the goal for Egypt is to get to know “*Ani Hashem*,” each nation, of course, in its distinctive manner. Israel's enlightenment is associated with its Covenant with G-d, while Egypt's is to reject idolatry and promote religious truth. In our previous study we have demonstrated a patterned presence of the *gematria* of Hashem's Tetragrammaton, the number twenty-six, within the structure of the celebratory passage in which He reveals His name to Moshe and instructs him to transmit it to Israel. We also pointed out that Moshe's generation was the twenty-sixth from Creation. It is also the case that the number twenty-six, through its multiples, is incorporated in the genealogy at the end of Exodus 6, as we shall soon see.

The symbolism of seven and its multiples, especially its decimal multiple of seventy, is also present in the genealogy. It is well established that in the ancient Near East seven and its multiples were markers of completion and perfection. Here, they apparently represent religious attainment of the highest rank in the “old order,” that which preceded the Covenant symbolized by eight and its multiples. In addition, the symbolism of thirteen and its multiple one hundred thirty, associated with the concept of *Hashem Ehad* (one G-d), is also attested in this passage. (As Rabbi Sassoon explained, thirteen was used to refer to matters connected to the concept of one G-d since it is the *gematria* of ט-ח-א. Such usage is attested throughout the Torah. See our study *On Number Symbolism in the Torah From the Work of Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon*.)

The genealogy represents the transition of what had been occurring through recent generations from the sons of Yaaqob onward. The three patriarchs are not included in this section. To some extent, their immense achievements were as individuals, and although they had established a potential for the future, they were now viewed as part of history. This genealogy is concerned with their offspring. The forebears of Moshe beginning with Levy, as indicated by the number of years they lived, were men of stature, preparing the path for him and the forward motion he leads, but, nonetheless, were within the realm of “seven,” not having entered the new national covenant symbolized by “eight” and “eighty.”

Most of the following is from Ronald Benun’s applications of Rabbi Sassoon’s guidelines.

The total number of words in the genealogical passage, from *setumah* to *setumah* (Ex. 6:14-28) is 182, 7 x 26. The number of words for the Reuben and Shimon portion is 28, 7 x 4, while from the introduction of Levi to the end of the passage (which is all within the realm of Levi) is 154, 7 x 22. Twenty-eight individuals are mentioned in the genealogy. The total number of years of Levi is 137, or 130 + 7. Moshe’s father Amram’s years are also 137, while those of his grandfather, Qehat, are 133, 7 x 19.

Aharon, instrumental in the transition from the old order of “seven” to the new Covenant of “eight,” marries Elisheba, or “My G-d is seven.” (His connection to the old order was stronger than Moshe’s, who’s wife was the daughter of the priest of Midian “who had seven daughters.”) Elisheba’s father is Aminadab, while her two first sons were termed *Nadab* and *Abihu* (literally: “he is my father”), both obviously named after her father. Eventually, the two of them offer “strange fire” in the sanctuary on the “Eighth Day” and die. It was the day that the Covenant was to reach the pinnacle of acceptance. Their case may imply that they could not separate themselves from the old order when the new order replaced it, a particularly grievous matter in the case of the priests.

Aharon’s name appears as word number 80 and word number 130 in the genealogy. In the passage that follows the resumption of the narrative (at the beginning of chapter 7), in which he is designated as Moshe’s “prophet,” his name appears as word number 77 (v. 6) and word number 88 (v.7).

The opposition to Moshe through the years comes in great part from those who insisted on remaining committed to the “old” system after the nation had been bidden to accept the Lawgiving and the Covenant, symbolized by “eight” and “eighty.” The leader of a major rebellion against Moshe was Qorah, obviously a distinguished individual. The number of deaths associated with the secondary effects of his rebellion, that is, aside from the deaths of the rebels themselves, was 14,700 (Num. 17:14), a distinctive multiple of seven. In our genealogy, Qorah’s name and that of his father, Yishar, are in the eminent positions of being exactly the two central words of the passage – Yishar being word number 91 (7 x 13) and Qorah word number 92, or number 91 counting from the end – indicating their leadership positions within the tribe of Levi, a discussion for another occasion.

G-d’s response to Moshe (Ex. 7:1-5), instructing him concerning the upcoming interaction with Pharaoh and His goals for the Egyptians, that “Egypt shall know that I am Hashem” (“וַיִּדְעוּ הַמִּצְרַיִם כִּי אֲנִי ה'”, v. 5), comprises exactly seventy words (counting only G-d’s words, excluding

the four-word superscription at the beginning of 7:1). This aspect of G-d's revelation is articulated strictly from the standpoint of His input toward Egypt, specifically apart of His Covenant with Israel. It symbolizes religious stature and completion for Egypt.

The attached verses (7:6-7) provide a statement of Moshe and Aharon's faithful fulfillment of their charge together with information concerning their ages when they were speaking to Pharaoh. Moshe was eighty years of age (symbolizing the Covenant in its fullness) while Aharon, the intermediary to Egypt, was eighty-three years of age (within the sphere of "eighty," but possibly to be understood as seventy plus thirteen).

This barely touches the tip of the iceberg. As Rabbi Sassoon often pointed out, enormous work must be done to comprehend what the prophecy of the Torah connotes beneath the surface.

Endnotes

* The genealogy informs that Amram, son of Qehat, son of Levi, married Yochebed, his paternal aunt, who bore him Aharon and Moshe. Such a relationship is later forbidden by the Torah, included with the incest laws (Lev. 18:12; 20:19), but before the Lawgiving it was permitted. This is similar to the cases with Abraham, who stated he married his sister from his father (Gen. 20:12) and Yaaqob who married two sisters. It is important to note that there is no inhering blemish or shortcoming associated with the prohibition that might exist independently of the law. Relationships, actions or items that are prohibited are prohibited only to the extent that the law so declares them.

** We must again point out that those who established the chapter divisions widely used in our printed Bibles did not always grasp the subject matter well. In our case they did not recognize the cohesiveness between the end of Chapter 6 (the resumption) and the beginning of Chapter 7 (Hashem's response).