

HOW TO  
UNDERSTAND AND APPLY  
THE OLD TESTAMENT



TWELVE STEPS FROM EXEGESIS TO THEOLOGY

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by link by link. A lack of connection, however, forces one to pause, creating a disjunction in the text and marking something significant.

### Text Blocks and the Structure and Message of Genesis



Text blocks are often short, and many are embedded within higher-level text blocks, serving to explain what precedes. As already noted, however, at the highest levels of Scripture, text blocks can stretch for chapters, and we see an example of this in the book of Genesis. The most common structural feature within Genesis is the formula **אֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדוֹת**, which occurs ten times and is often translated “This is the account of” or “These are the generations of” (Gen. 2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10, 27; 25:12, 19; 36:1; 37:2).<sup>5</sup> Its recurring placement suggests that the author used it as a shaping device for the work.

Commentators most commonly treat all ten *toledot* formulae as equal and independent, as seen in figure 2.4.

	Preface (Gen. 1:1–2:3)
1	The <i>toledot</i> of the heavens and the earth (2:4–4:26)
2	The <i>toledot</i> of Adam (5:1–6:8)
3	The <i>toledot</i> of Noah (6:9–9:29)
4	The <i>toledot</i> of Noah’s sons (10:1–11:9)
5	The <i>toledot</i> of Shem (11:10–26)
6	The <i>toledot</i> of Terah (11:27–25:11)
7	The <i>toledot</i> of Ishmael (25:12–18)
8	The <i>toledot</i> of Isaac (25:19–35:29)
9	The <i>toledot</i> of Esau (36:1–37:1)
10	The <i>toledot</i> of Jacob (37:2–50:26)

Fig. 2.4. The Common View of Genesis’s Structure

Yet a close look at the recurring formula shows that some of the *toledot* are preceded by the connector **וְ** (gloss “and”), whereas others are not. This suggests that the author

5. The **אֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדוֹת** pattern also occurs in Genesis 36:9, but its presence here seems secondary to the overall structure of the book, even though it appears to separate a preliminary list of Esau’s descendants birthed in Canaan (36:1–8) from a more complete list of Esau’s offspring, including those birthed in Edom (36:9–43). For more on the question, see footnote 1 in Jason S. DeRouchie, “The Blessing-Commission, the Promised Offspring, and the *Toledot* Structure of Genesis,” *JETS* 56, 2 (2013): 219.

intended five, not ten, distinct units. Text blocks are here working at the macro-level to identify the structure of an entire biblical book.

		Preface (Gen. 1:1–2:3)
1.	∅	These are the <i>toledot</i> of the heavens and the earth (2:4–4:26)
2.	∅	This is the book of the <i>toledot</i> of Adam (5:1–6:8)
3.	∅ ‡	These are the <i>toledot</i> of Noah (6:9–9:29) And these are the <i>toledot</i> of Noah's sons (10:1–11:9)
4.	∅ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡	These are the <i>toledot</i> of Shem (11:10–26) And these are the <i>toledot</i> of Terah (11:27–25:11) And these are the <i>toledot</i> of Ishmael (25:12–18) And these are the <i>toledot</i> of Isaac (25:19–35:29) And these are the <i>toledot</i> of Esau (36:1–37:1)
5.	∅	These are the <i>toledot</i> of Jacob (37:2–50:26)

Fig. 2.5. Frontal Connection in the *Toledot* of Genesis

Whereas the connector ‡ links units of equal syntactic value, asyndeton marks disjunction in the text. In the given instances, every *toledot* heading without any fronted connector identifies a fresh beginning in the narrative, whereas the headings beginning with ‡ expand directly upon the previous unit. We can immediately draw three interpretive implications from these findings:

1. The length of the various *toledot* divisions gives prominence to God's covenant with the patriarchs within the book (Gen. 11:10–37:1).
2. The Shem *toledot* serves to introduce the patriarchal cycles rather than to close what has often been termed the *Primeval History*. Commonly, scholars distinguish Genesis 1–11 from 12–50, and this is not without some merit, for the narrative time slows drastically when we reach the patriarchs. Still, the ‡ at the beginning of 11:27 suggests that the actual beginning of the patriarchal cycle is not chapter 12 but 11:10, with the (second) genealogy of Shem moving us from the time of Noah to the time of Abraham.
3. The five major *toledot* divisions witness a progressive narrowing that places focus on the line of promise and the centrality of Israel in God's kingdom-building plan. The shift from the heavens and earth (Gen. 2:4) to Adam (5:1) to Noah (6:9) to Shem (11:10) and to Jacob (37:2) details the movement from (a) all creation to (b) humanity in general to (c) all living humanity (after the execution of the rest) to (d) a subset of living humanity (through a shift in

genealogical focus) and finally to (e) Israel. The call of the chosen line to reflect, resemble, and represent God’s excellencies is therefore placed within its global context.

While some form-driven translations such as the KJV and NASB are faithful to distinguish in English those *toledot* that begin with ׀ and those that do not, very popular translations such as the NRSV, ESV, NIV, and CSB make little to no distinction. In failing to represent the connector in any way, these versions do not give the reader a structural signal that Moses intended us to see (or hear) in order to understand the outline of his book.<sup>6</sup> Once again, knowing Hebrew is helpful.

	2:4	5:1	6:9	10:1	11:10	11:27	25:12	25:19	36:1	37:2
	∅	∅	∅	׀	∅	׀	׀	׀	׀	∅
KJV				Now		Now	Now	And	Now	
NASB				Now		Now	Now	Now	Now	
NRSV, ESV						Now				
NIV, CSB										

Fig. 2.6. How Some Modern Translations Render ׀ and Asyndeton in the *Toledot* of Genesis

### Discerning Subunits in Text Blocks: Paragraph Breaks



Any given text block can include multiple paragraphs, and the switch from one paragraph to the next is marked not only by changes in content but also by intentional changes in word order and verb pattern.<sup>7</sup> To discern how the Old Testament signals paragraph breaks requires first an understanding of text types and the verb patterns that signal them.

6. Whereas ׀ in Hebrew is merely a default connector, the conjunction “and” in English actually marks coordination. Hebrew ׀ is thus *not* equal to the English “and,” which means that English translators could actually misrepresent the Hebrew by attempting to translate ׀ in every instance. Ultimately, biblical interpreters will rightly identify some structural features in the Old Testament only by assessing the Hebrew text for themselves. For more on the structure and message of Genesis, see DeRouchie, “The Blessing-Commission, the Promised Offspring, and the *Toledot* Structure of Genesis,” 219–47; cf. DeRouchie, review of *These Are the Generations: Identity, Covenant, and the “Toledot” Formula*, by Matthew A. Thomas, *BBR* 22, 3 (2012): 412–15.

7. Some of this material is adapted from Duane A. Garrett and Jason S. DeRouchie, *A Modern Grammar for Biblical Hebrew* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2009), 291–93 (§ 37.F), 296–301 (§ 38.A), 312–14 (§ 39.A), and 330–33 (§ 40.B). Used by permission.