

Lamech in the Genealogies of Genesis

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This note will argue for the transitional role of Lamech in the literary form of the genealogies of Cain (Gen 4:17-24) and of Seth (Genesis 5). It will observe the position of Lamech in each genealogy, the glosses associated with the name in the text, and the origins and interpretation of the name.

1. In the genealogy of Cain, Lamech appears sixth in the sequence. Lamech occurs at the midpoint of an enumeration of twelve different names. Although the names preceding Lamech occur in for mulaic style in a linear genealogy, those which follow Lamech appear in a segmented genealogy concerning whose kinship Lamech serves as the central figure. Lamech is husband of Adah and Zillah, and father of Jabal, Jubal, Tubalcain, and Naamah. Lamech serves as the single genealogical link between the earlier genealogy of v 17 and that of Lamech's generation in vv 18-24. He alone is mentioned in both. The literary structure of Lamech's song, especially the parallelism of subjects in each of the couplets,¹ further demonstrates the position of Lamech as one who brings Cain's line to an end and who sees the beginning of new lines in his own offspring.

First, there is the parallelism which serves as a basic element to the form of the poem. The names of Adah and Zillah parallel the reference to them as wives of Lamech in the first couplet. The man corresponds to the "boy" (לִילָד) in the second couplet. Both designations indicate the same individual.² In the third couplet, Cain corresponds

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to Lamech. Even if there is a disintegrating parallelism, as Gevirtz suggests, it seems clear that the poem serves to tie together Cain and Lamech, not only by the deed of vengeful murder which each commits, but also by the parallel structure of the lines themselves. From the perspective of the poetic parallelism, Lamech is a new Cain. He brings Cain's line to an end and begins his own.

Second, Lamech alone mentions the founder of the line, Cain, and begets a child whose name includes the name of Cain. The references to Cain in the names of the offspring and in the poem form a literary inclusio, mentioning at the end of the genealogical account the same name which began it. Further, Lamech's character culminates the murderous trait characteristic of this line,

¹ U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis. Part I: From Adam to Noah. Genesis I-VI* 8 (trans. 1. Abrahams; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1961) 239-44; D. K. Stuart, *Studies in Early Hebrew Meter* (HSM 13; Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1976) 97-99; and especially S. Gevirtz, "Lamech's Song to His Wives," *Patterns in the Early Poetry of Israel* (Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization 32; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963) 25-34.

² U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis* 242; S. Gevirtz, "Lamech's Song to His Wives," 30-34; G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (WBC 1; Waco, Texas: Word, 1987) 114.

originally exhibited by Cain in the narrative which precedes the genealogy. Again, the line of Cain has come to an end with Lamech and his generation. The numbers 7 and 77 conclude Lamech's song. They suggest Lamech's own status as seventh in the line from Adam. The number 7 may convey the idea of completion.³ With the segmentation of the genealogy, the line no longer remains distinctive to Cain. Henceforth, the identity of each of the figures is established by their deeds. Two become "fathers" who establish their fame through their cultural achievements and contributions rather than through their ancestral connection to Cain. The association of the number 7 with Lamech implies that the line of Cain comes to an end with this figure. The other name-bearers of his generation begin their own "families," though of a cultural rather than a genealogical sort.

2. In Genesis 5 the line of Seth ends with Lamech and Noah. Again Lamech is unique in this line as the one figure who speaks (v 29). His naming of Noah and his prophecy suggest a literary connection with the chapters which follow. This is true however the prophesied "comfort" is understood. Lamech completes the line of Seth as the last named figure in that line whose name does not appear in the following narrative or in the subsequent genealogies of Genesis 10 and 11. On the other hand, Noah and his sons inhabit the narratives of chaps. 6-9 and begin the new genealogies which follow. Noah bridges the genealogies of Genesis 5 and those of chaps. 10 and 11. However, Lamech is the transitional figure between those who appear in the formulaic sequence in Genesis 5 and those who inhabit the narratives of the following chapters. This is true for two reasons.

First, Lamech's position in Genesis 5 is seventh in the line from the "new Adam," Enosh, whose name suggests a new beginning to

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the line.⁴ Lamech's lifespan is 777 years. Here, as in the song of Cain in Genesis 4, the number 7 signifies completion. The line of Seth ends with Lamech.

Second, Lamech's naming of Noah also includes an implicit wordplay on the meaning of Noah as a means of explaining his name. This occurs with two other name givers, Adam (who names Eve) and Eve (who names Cain and Seth). In all these cases, the name-giver designates the first of a new line (the case of the naming of Eve involves the first named figure of the line of the entire human race). As with the I number of years and position in the line, Lamech's act of name-giving implies the end of one line and the beginning of a new one. Thus the Lamech of Seth's line also plays a transitional literary role, bringing Seth's genealogy to an end and introducing the new figures and their line.

3. The triradical nature of the name, לַמֶּכ, suggests a Semitic etymology. However, no such root is known in West Semitic. The Arabic, *ylmk*, "strong man," has found support in the

³ U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis* 243; J. M. Sasson, "A Genealogical 'Convention' in Biblical Chronography?" *ZAW* 90 (1978) 171-85, esp. p. 173.

⁴ In the line of Seth, this corresponds to Enoch who is seventh in position from Adam. See B. Jacob, *Das Erste Buch der Tora. Genesis Übersetzt und Erklärt* (Berlin: Schocken, 1934; reprinted, New York: Ktav, 1974) 166-67; U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, 243.

etymological search.⁵ Outside the Semitic language family, the Sumerian *lumga* serves as the title of the deity Ea as patron of music.⁶ This has had special interest because of Jubal, son of Lamech and "father of those who play the lyre and pipe." We also find compared the obscure Akkadian, *lamakku*, the title of a priest of lower rank which appears in lexical texts.⁷

A problem with these suggestions is the lack of attestations of other names with such roots. Earlier attempts located לַמֶּכַח in third millennium B.C. personal names,⁸ or in names from Mari of the early second millennium.⁹ However, the first element in these names should

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now be read differently.¹⁰ As neither the etymology of Lamech nor possible parallels have received certain identification, all such comparisons remain tentative. Further, evidence remains lacking for the *lmk* root in Amorite and in West Semitic.

While the origin of the name Lamech remains uncertain in Ancient Near Eastern onomastics, the transitional role played by the name in both genealogies may suggest a direction for investigation. Lamech encompasses the three middle consonants of the Hebrew alphabet. Could it be that, as these letters join the first half of the Hebrew alphabet with the second half, so Lamech joins two halves of the genealogies in the line of Cain just as he also joins the lines of Seth and those genealogies which follow in Genesis 10 and 11?

The discovery and study of abecedaries found throughout the West Semitic world of the second and first millennia B.C. provides an interesting perspective on this hypothesis. For example, M. D. Coogan finds, in abecedaries of Hebrew and Ugaritic, as well as those of Greek and Latin, the tendency to divide the alphabets into two halves for pedagogical purposes.¹¹ This division is obvious as each half of the alphabet is placed on a separate line. Coogan cites three abecedaries of interest. Two are Hebrew abecedaries and one is Ugaritic. All three begin the second half of

⁵ HALAT, 3rd ed., vol. II, 505.

⁶ S. Landersdorfer, *Sumerisches Sprachgut im Alten Testament. Eine Biblisch-Lexikalische Studie (Beiträge zur Wissenschaft vom Alten Testament 21; Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1916) 19; J. Gabriel, "Die Kainitegenealogie Gn 4, 17-24," Bib 40 (1959) 420-27, esp. p. 415; C. Westermann, *Genesis 1-11* (trans. J. J. Scullion, S.J.; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984) 329.*

⁷ U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis 233; CAD*, vol. 9, 244-45; the Sumerian equivalent is *gudu₄.tur.ra*.

⁸ See *Lam-kí-um* and *lam-gi₄-ma-ri*; in the *Man-ištušu* obelisk with index in *Mémoires de la Délégation en Perse*, 2, 41-52; RA 31:140; in I. J. Gelb, *Glossary of Old Akkadian* (Materials for the Assyrian Dictionary 3; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957) 162. Cf. also S. Gevirtz, "Lamech's Song to His Wives," 26.

⁹ See the *šakkanakku* texts, which include two occurrences of the personal name, *lam-ki*. H. Limet, *Textes administratifs de l'époque des šakkanakku* (ARM XIX; Paris: P. Geuthner, 1976) 311.5; 332.4.

¹⁰ *LAM* has been read as iš₁₁, in personal names from Ebla and Abu Salabikh. See A. Arehi, "Studies in Eblaite Prosopography," *Eblaite Personal Names and Semitic Name-Giving. Papers of a Symposium held in Rome July 15-17, 1985* (ed. A. Archi; Archivi Reali di Ebla Studi 1; Rome: Missione Archeologica Italiana in Siria, 1988) 228; M. Krebernik, *Die Personennamen der Ebla-Texte. Eine Zwischenbilanz* (Berliner Beiträge zum Vorderen Orient Band 7; Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1988) 62; idem, "Prefixed Verbal Forms in Personal Names from Ebla," *Eblaite Personal Names and Semitic Name-Giving*, 68 accept this reading for the personal names at Ebla. See also R. D. Biggs, "The Semitic Personal Names from Abu Salabikh and the Personal Names from Ebla," *Eblaite Personal Names and Semitic Name-Giving*, 96.

¹¹ "Alphabets and Elements," *BASOR* 216 (1974) 61-63. I thank A. R. Millard for this reference.

their alphabet on a second line with ל restored in the case of the Ugaritic text) followed by מ. In the one Hebrew example recording all the letters of the alphabet, the first half of the alphabet ends with מ.¹² This evidence demonstrates a consciousness of the central place of these letters in West Semitic alphabets of the biblical world. A reader who had learned the alphabet using similar abecedaries would naturally associate the name Lamech with a transitional movement from the first to the second half of the text, similar to the change in the alphabet at these letters.¹³

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Perhaps the background of Lamech is to be found in a proper name which once existed as a personal name in the Ancient Near East but whose origins have yet to be identified or attested outside of Genesis. As part of the lines of Cain and Seth, Lamech would have served the purpose of the author in the position which it occupied in both genealogies. It would exist both as a name received in the tradition behind Genesis 4 and 5, and as one which functions at a transition point in the genealogies.

Although not in the same position in the two genealogies, the name Lamech serves a transitional role in both.¹⁴ Although possessing a different character in the two lines, the figure of Lamech plays a similar role in the words he speaks, bringing to an end one line and introducing the subsequent line. This similarity in function helps to explain the function of an identically spelled name in both genealogies, something found elsewhere in Genesis 1-11 only in the case of Enoch.

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Prepared for the Web in September 2006 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

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¹² The other ends in מ with no מ anywhere in the inscription. As Coogan observes, it is probably a mistaken omission in a student's exercise.

¹³ Y. T. Radday has suggested that Lamech is a palindrome for Hebrew מלך "king." Thus Lamech is "king in reverse" or non-king. See Y. T. Radday, "Humor in Names," *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible* (eds. Y. T. Radday and A. Brenner; JSOT Supplement 92; Sheffield: Almond, 1990) 78. However, this is not a true palindrome, unlike Radday's other examples. The palindrome of מלך is לםל, not מלך. Further, while a mocking name for the Lamech of Genesis 4 may be appropriate, it is not appropriate for the Lamech of Seth's line. It seems preferable to see in "Lamech" a sequence of consonants deliberately chosen to avoid association with any Hebrew root.

¹⁴ The issue of similarity in other names which occur in both genealogies has been addressed elsewhere with reference to the oral aspect of genealogies and the source critical implications. See especially the variant views of J. M. Miller, "The Descendants of Cain: Notes on Genesis 4," *ZAW* 86 (1974) 171-73; R. R. Wilson, *Genealogy and History in the Biblical World* (Yale Near Eastern Researches 7; New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977) 28-55; and D. T. Bryan, "A Reevaluation of Gen 4 and 5 in Light of Recent Studies in Genealogical Fluidity," *ZAW* 99 (1987) 180-88. The function of Lamech as a transitional figure leaves open both options, either (1) two distinct names in separate genealogies whose similarity to the spelling of Lamech provides for their identical spelling in Genesis, or (2) a single name Lamech whose appearance in two separate genealogies leads to the occurrence of the name in two separate but related contexts in Genesis. Ancient Near Eastern examples exist for both developments. See R. S. Hess, "The Genealogies of Genesis 1-11 and Comparative Literature," *Bib* 70 (1989) 246-47.