

תּוֹלְדוֹת *tôlēdôt* as introductory marker, also in Genesis 2:4

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Tons have been written about תּוֹלְדוֹת *tôlēdôt*. I will restrict myself to what is essential for understanding Gen 2:4.

1. The *tôlēdôt* formula and its function in Genesis

tôlēdôt occurs 13 times in Genesis. The occurrences are these:

Genesis 2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1/32; 11:10/27; 25:12/13/19; 36:1/9; 37:2.

tôlēdôt occurs almost always in the phrase ... אֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדוֹת *ēleh tôlēdôt* ... “These are the *tôlēdôt* of ...” – the so-called *tôlēdôt* formula. **All these cases are section headings, referring to what follows. Without question, they give some structure to the book of Genesis. Ideally, this should be recognizable in a translation.** Even if such an expression cannot be reproduced in the receptor language, the translator should be aware of the author’s way of organizing the book.

The regular instances where the formula occurs are these: The *tôlēdôt* of Noah (6:9), of the sons of Noah (10:1), of Shem (11:10), of Terah (11:27), of Ishmael (25:12), of Isaac (25:19), of Esau (36:1 and 36:9), and of Jacob (37:2).

2. The meaning of *tôlēdôt*

Tôlēdôt has been translated variously as “descendants / generation / genealogy / offspring / records / accounts” etc. Where it is used in genealogies, BDB calls it the “account of a man and his descendants”. NIDOTTE says (s.v. *yld*, # 3528, § 13 (b), vol. 2, p. 459):

Tôlēdôt comes from the vb. *yld*, father, give birth to, bear. As such, it refers to that which is born or produced. The expression “these are the generations of” points to the progenitor and the progeny.

Ross (Genesis, Cornerstone, 2008) puts it this way (p. 20): The *tôlēdôt* formula

... essentially explains “This is what became of [a given person or thing].” and the account that follows starts with the person and traces the records through subsequent generations, ...

He continues (p. 21):

The translation of *toledoth* cannot be limited to “genealogy” because the contents of the sections go beyond that; nor does the word simply denote biographies or histories, because the narratives do not follow that through. The sections tell what became of a given person, and the content of the sections is selected to trace the relevant particulars about that line, which help develop the argument of the book. Thus, the best interpretive translation would perhaps be “this is the account of the succession from.”

3. Exceptions to the formula

There are a few exceptional cases in Genesis. I deal with the simpler ones first.

3.1. Genesis 5:1

Gen 5:1 is an exception in that it adds סֵפֶר *sēper* ‘record’ to the formula: זֶה סֵפֶר תּוֹלְדוֹת “This is the book of the generations of Adam.” (NASB). Still, it functions as a heading.

3.2. Genesis 25:13

In Gen 25:13, we do not find the typical *tōlēdōt* formula. The word *tōlēdōt* is used differently here. The verse says:

וְאֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׁמָעֵאל בְּשֵׁמֹתָם לְתוֹלְדוֹתָם

and these are the names of the sons of Ishmael, by their names, in the order of their birth: ... (NASB)

This sentence is closely linked to the preceding verse, and together they function as an introduction.

3.3. Genesis 10:32

In Gen 10:32, again the *tōlēdōt* formula is absent. However, this case is different from the one in 25:13 in that *tōlēdōt* here refers *back* to the preceding section. The verse says:

אֵלֶּה מִשְׁפְּחוֹת בְּנֵי-נֹחַ לְתוֹלְדוֹתָם בְּגוֹיֵיהֶם

These are the families of the sons of Noah, according to their genealogies, by their nations; ... (NASB).

So in the case of Noah's descendants, who are listed in chapter 10, the text is properly introduced by the *tōlēdōt* formula, and also formally closed by the above remark.

3.4. Genesis 2:4

The last and most difficult exception to the formula is found in Gen 2:4. It says:

אֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדוֹת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְהָאָרֶץ בְּהִבְרָאָם

בְּיוֹם עֲשׂוֹת יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶרֶץ וְשָׁמַיִם:

This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created, in the day that the Lord God made earth and heaven. (NASB)

The verse begins with the same formula as elsewhere: אֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדוֹת "these are the *tōlēdōt* of ...". Thus, one may assume that here as well the formula refers to what follows – like in all other cases. It then refers to the account of Adam and Eve in the Garden Eden in Gen 2:5-25 (or even up to 4:26).

What makes one wonder whether this is correct is that the verse speaks of "the heavens and the earth", and the creation of heaven and earth was told in the preceding passage Gen 1:1–2:3. Therefore the formula could also be understood as referring backward.

I want to state why I think this is not what the writer intended.

3.4.1. The *tōlēdōt* formula referring forward here as well

The arguments for taking the formula in the same way as elsewhere are the following.

- One reason is that, if we follow the definitions further above, *tōlēdōt* is not restricted to "descendants", but, more broadly, refers to "that which is born or produced", or even "what became of someone / something". **This can also be applied to heaven and earth:** Gen 2–4 report more about what happened to the perfect creation that chapter 1 told us about. There is therefore no need to make an exception from the rule of the *tōlēdōt* formula referring forward.
- Secondly, taking the first line of 2:4 as referring to the preceding section ignores **the chiasm in the verse**. Cassuto explains (A Commentary on the Book of Genesis, Part 1, Genesis I - VI 8, Orig. 1944, 1. Engl. ed. 1961, repr. 1998, p. 98):

The structure of the verse follows the precise rules of sentence-building and parallelism that normally govern exalted prose as well as poetry. It is composed of two parallel half-sentences, each of which consists of two parts arranged in chiastic order, that is, like the Greek *chi* (χ): *when they were created* corresponds to *in the day that the Lord God made*; similarly, the phrase *the heavens and the earth* is parallel to *the earth and the heavens* in the second half of the verse – again an example of chiasmus.

Nobody would dare to tear apart such a chiasm if we were dealing with one of the poetic books.

- Thirdly, Hamilton (Genesis, NICOT, 1990) points to this observation by John Skinner (p. 151):

the *tôlēdôt* formula is always followed by the genitive of the progenitor, never of the progeny.

I.e., where *tôlēdôt* is in the construct state, the following word in the absolute state expresses what is bringing forth somebody / something else: Hamilton continues:

Thus the phrase *the generations of the heavens and the earth* describes not the process by which the heavens and the earth are generated, but rather that which is generated by the heavens and the earth".
- Also, the Masoretic Text, as presented in BHS, shows a ם (Pe), marking the end of a larger section, *before* verse 4 – just like at 6:9 and 10:1, for example. But within verse 4, the MT has no section break marker (neither a ם (Samekh) for a small one ('setuma'), nor a ם (Pe) for a large one ('petucha')).

Ross summarizes the above views as follows (Note on 2:4):

This is the account of the creation. The first part of this verse should not be divided from the next sentence in the verse; in the Hebrew it forms a beautiful parallel construction: "These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created, when the LORD God made earth and heaven." The word "generations" ... is used throughout Genesis as a heading, and never as a colophon ... So 2:4a should not be read as a summary of 1:1–2:3 but as the heading of the next section.

In conclusion, reading the *tôlēdôt* formula in Gen 2:4 as referring to what follows

- ensures a consistent structuring of the whole book,
- avoids the tearing apart of the chiasm,
- avoids the exception that the word after *tôlēdôt* would denote what is generated, instead of what generates something else.

3.4.2. Translating Gen 2:4

NLT07, for instance, takes verse 4 as concluding the previous account, then inserts a section heading, and continues the next account with the rest of verse 4. It looks like this:

4 This is the account of the creation of the heavens and the earth.

The Man and Woman in Eden

When the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, 5 neither wild plants nor grains were growing on the earth. ...

That misses the point of the *tôlēdôt* formula, and does injustice to the Hebrew verse.

In contrast, NIV11R does it like this:

Adam and Eve

4 This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created, when the Lord God made the earth and the heavens.

5 Now no shrub had yet appeared on the earth and no plant had yet sprung up, ...

This comes much closer to the understanding explicated above. However, this is still not very clear. Considered should be something like **"This is the account of what became of heaven and earth when they were created ..."**.

3.5. An additional note on Gen 2:5

Tied in with the above understanding of Gen 2:4 is the next verse, Gen 2:5.

Cassuto says: "The narrative begins with a description of the conditions existing prior to the creation of man." He says that this verse needs to be related to what we read later in the story, in Gen 3:18f.:

¹⁸ Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you; And you will eat the plants of the field; ¹⁹ By the sweat of your face You will eat bread, ... (NASB)

He makes a number of important points:

- “in the day” is not a day of 12 or 24 hours, but means “at the time when”. Cf. Num 3:1; 7:84.
- *terem* means ‘not yet’.
- The verse 5 is an independent sentence and is not, as many have supposed, subordinate to what follows.
- *śī(a)ḥ* and *‘ēśeb haśśādeh* are not any kind of plants. Rather,
 - *śī(a)ḥ* is synonymous with the “thorns and thistles”
 - *‘ēśeb haśśādeh* comprises wheat, barley, and the other kinds of grain (for bread)

Neither thorns and thistles nor fields of wheat and barley did exist before Adam’s transgression. (The first are a curse, the second a way of cultivating that was not needed before.)

Observing these points avoids the wrong impression that the accounts in Gen 1:1–2:3 and Gen 2:4–25 are incompatible.