

BIBLICAL LISTS MAKE BORING READING

Some of the most boring reading in the world is in the Bible. Especially those interminable lists which seem to go on and on forever. Without ever getting any place. It's enough to drive you out of your gourd.

In fact, it's those tedious lists which have stopped some beginning Bible readers in their tracks. They started with Genesis and sailed right through the stories of Creation, Adam and Eve, and Cain and Abel.

Then they came to the "begats": So-and-so begat who's-your-mom, and lived after the birth of who's-your-mom so many years and he died; so all the years of so-and-so were this many.

Then who's-your-mom begat what's-his-name, and he lived, etc. etc.

Lists like that can squelch the most ardent Bible readers. The worst of the lot are the opening chapters of 1 Chronicles. The book starts off with a bald list of names: Adam, Seth, Enosh, Kenan, and so on. It doesn't get any better.

Subsequent paragraphs contain inane detailed genealogies. Start reading at 1 Chronicles 4:24, for example: The sons of Simeon: Nemuel, Jamin, Jarib, Zerah, Shaul; Shallum was his son, Mibsam his son, Mishma his son. The sons of Mishma: Hammuel...ad infinitum.

Careful readers can pick out a few tantalizing details from the welter of names. A fellow named Hezron remarried at the age of 60 (1 Chron.2:21). King David had over half a dozen wives, plus a few concubines (ch. 3).

Some Simeonite princes exterminated the inhabitants of a neighboring valley just to get an extra pasture (4:39-41). A woman (!) named Sheerah was remembered as the founder of the strategic military posts of Upper and Lower Beth-horon (7:24).

But by and large the first nine chapters of 1 Chronicles are about as interesting as a computer printout of registered voters. Who cares how many voices sang in the Levitical Tabernacle Choir? It's one long yawn.

On the other hand, if we're going to be fair with these ancient writings, we need to understand why they are what they are. Even when they're at their monotonous worst.

In many ancient cultures genealogies and other lists were highly valued. If you could produce a string of ancestors back to year one, that meant you were somebody. And the biblical writers were no exception.

The author of 1 Chronicles lived at a time when things didn't look too good for his people. The handful of Jews who made it back to their homeland after decades of exile were not very well off.

They didn't have their own king, because they were living under the thumb of some Persian governor. Jerusalem, their capital city, was still an urban renewal project. And their rebuilt temple was a sorry copy of King Solomon's original production.

So the Chronicler needed all the ammunition he could find to build up his compatriots' spirits. One of the best things he had going for him was a catalog of ancient lists. By piling them together he could at least give the impression that their roots were ancient and honorable.

In that light those interminable genealogies look a little better. They're still not exciting reading, not by a long shot. But they're part of the biblical collection.

Modern readers can't be expected to do any more than skim over them. But at least we can appreciate why they're there. Even the most boring passages in ancient scriptures had a healthy purpose once upon a time.

[FILE 40]