

A LOOK AT A BOOK: Genesis, Pt. 1

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The name “Genesis” is a transliteration of the Greek word meaning “source, origin,” the name given to the book by the LXX. The Hebrew name is “in the beginning,” the book’s opening word. Both are excellent names, for Genesis tells the beginnings of all things connected with biblical faith.

On the basis of content, the book divides into two clearly separate sections: chs. 1-11, the primeval history, and chs. 12-50, the patriarchal history. Genesis 1-11 is an introduction to salvation history, setting forth the origin of the world, humanity, and sin; 12-50 sets forth the origins of redemptive history in God’s election of the patriarchs and his covenantal promise of land and posterity. As such, Genesis is complete in itself. These two prologues are an introduction to the account of the chosen people, formed through God’s gracious deliverance at the Red Sea and his granting of the Mosaic covenant at Sinai.

On the basis of literary structure, the book divides into ten sections. The clue to this external form is the “*toledoth* formula”: “And these are (this is) the descendants (or story) of...” (see 2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 11:10, etc.).

Who Wrote Genesis?

For many centuries nobody seemed to question the authorship of the Pentateuch, including Genesis, presumably because everyone was satisfied with the ancient traditional ascription to Moses. But in the seventeenth century this all changed through the writing of a Jewish philosopher called Baruch (later Benedict) Spinoza. He rejected Moses’ authorship of the Pentateuch, including Genesis, because it speaks of Moses in the third person and also describes his death, and therefore could not possibly have been written by Moses.

Spinoza’s thinking triggered many avenues of critical study which began to flourish in Europe during the latter part of the nineteenth century. One of the foremost theologians at that time, Julius Wellhausen, building on the work of other scholars, developed the hypothesis which attributed the writings of the Pentateuch to numerous sources identified by the letters JEDP which, far from being written by Moses, had actually appeared over a period of several centuries.

It should be noted that the rest of the Scriptures speak about the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch (see, for example, Joshua 22:9; 2 Kings 21:8; Matthew 19:8).

What Was the Author's Objective in Writing Genesis?

The Pentateuch, written as it was for the Hebrew people, concentrates on the two major events of Jewish history – namely the covenant with Abraham and the exodus. In the covenant Jehovah took the initiative and declared that He would be Israel's God and they would have the unspeakable privilege of being His people. In the exodus God demonstrated in the most dramatic fashion that He was strong on behalf of His people and that He would indeed lead them into the land He had promised to Abraham and his seed. So Genesis tells the story of how the children of Israel arrived in Egypt in the first place. That filled in the gap between the covenant and the exodus but did not explain the details of how man came to be on earth in the first place, or why it was necessary for God to intervene in the human experience in redemption and blessing. The creation narrative met that need in the same way that numerous other details, recounted in Genesis and the other four books, explained the wonderful workings of God in the affairs of His chosen people.

What Is the Structure of Genesis?

One of the most common approaches to the structure of Genesis is to divide the book into two unequal sections. The first one includes chapters 1-11 and is often called "Primeval History." The second, containing chapters 12-50, is known as "Patriarchal History." The "Primeval History" section, as its name suggests, covers the dramatic events relating to the "first age" of man culminating in the tragic showdown between man and God at Babel. The "Patriarchal History" covers the lives of the "fathers" or "family rulers," through whom God's purposes for His people began to unfold. These men – Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, plus the sons of Jacob (later Israel) – lived turbulent, exciting lives which serve as a magnificent vehicle for God's faithfulness and power.

Canonicity

By "canonicity" we mean the acceptance by religious communities (Jewish, Christian) of certain authoritative documents in the shaping of their faith, practice, and doctrine.

No Christian or Jewish source ever raised questions over the legitimacy of Genesis' presence in the biblical canon. In only a few of these sources is Genesis mentioned by name. Normally it is subsumed under the umbrella word *Torah*. For

example, Ben Sira's grandson (ca. 130B.C.), in his preface to the Greek translation, speaks of "the law and the prophets and other books of our fathers."

The New Testament distinguished the Law and the Prophets (John 1:45) or Moses and the Prophets (Luke 24:27). In both cases, the New Testament gives to the Law a Christocentric emphasis (John 1:45, "the one Moses wrote about in the Law"; Luke 24:27, "and beginning with Moses...he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself"). According to one source, there are 238 quotations from or allusions to Genesis in the New Testament. Every chapter of Genesis is represented in this listing except 10, 20, 31, 34, 36, 43, and 44.

Contents of Chapters 1-11, the Primeval Prologue (based on the first five *toledoths*)

Creation (1:1-2:4a)

Eden and the Fall (2:4b-4:26)

Patriarches before the Flood (5:1-32)

The Flood and its Aftermath (6:1-11:9; see 6:9)

Patriarchs after the Flood (11:10-26)

Theology

The author weaves into his account four major theological themes, often in a continuously recurring pattern: first, the nature and implications of the fact that God is Creator; second, the radical seriousness of sin; third, the way in which God's judgment meets human sin at each point; and fourth, the presence, nonetheless and almost surprisingly, of his preserving, sustaining grace.

God as Creator. At the very beginning of his work, in Genesis 1:1-2:4a, the sacred author marshals the Hebrew language with wondrous beauty to affirm that all that exists came forth simply and solely at the free and sovereign command of God. A central element in chapter 1, almost a refrain, is the affirmation that God's created world is good (vs. 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). The final summary (v. 31) is, "And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good." No evil was laid upon the world by God's hand. It has ultimate value, but only because God made it. This teaching of the pristine goodness of creation, including mankind, is of utmost theological importance.

The conscious apex of this creative activity is humanity (Genesis 1:26-28). "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them" (v. 27).

Mankind's relationship to God, unique among created beings, is expressed by the deliberately ambiguous phrase "the image of God."

Problem of Sin. After the refrain of Genesis 1: "God saw that it was good," the way has been prepared to tell what corrupted that world. The serpent's subtle wiles induce the woman to doubt first God's word (3:1) and then his goodness (3:4f.). Seeing the tree now in an entirely different light (v. 6), she takes of its fruit and eats, and the man follows suit. So simple the act: "She took...and she ate"; so drastic the results: humanity has lost the state of innocence forever; so hard the undoing: God himself will taste poverty and death before "take and eat" become verbs of salvation.

In the sequel, the author depicts very graphically the new dimensions of man's relationship to God: where before all had been harmony and intimacy, there is now shame at his nakedness (3:7). Once introduced into the world, sin rapidly reaches avalanche proportions. Humanity's second generation experiences fratricide (Cain and Abel). And then great wickedness (6:5).

God's Judgment on Human Sin. In each of these narratives, God's judgment meets human sin. In the story of Eden, first the serpent (3:14f.), then the woman (3:16), then the man (3:17-24) are judged by God.

The author clearly indicates that the woman's descendants will struggle ceaselessly against the enslaving power of evil symbolized by the serpent. In broad terms he hints of the victory that will one day be theirs (3:15). Christians rightly interpret his unformulated hope as having found its realization in Christ's victory over sin and death (cf. Luke 10:17-20).

As a further judgment upon the sin of the man and the woman, God expels both from the garden, and the way is barred from their ever returning.

Severe as was the judgment upon Adam and Eve, that upon Cain (ch. 4) was more severe still. Since the soil has drunk his brother's blood at his hand, it will no longer yield to Cain its produce, and he is doomed to be a fugitive and a wanderer in the earth. He leaves the Lord's presence to live in the land of ceaseless wandering in the far distant East.

The supreme example and paradigm of God's judgment on human sin, however, is the flood story. Through this story the author seeks to express in a most terrifying way that human sin brings God's judgment.

So, too, God's judgment confronts the sin of corporate humanity in the Tower of Babel story. To meet the threat of the evil propensities inherent in collective existence, God scatters mankind by confusing their language, breaking them into countless nations and states. So at the end of the primeval prologue mankind is in the state it has known since those times, alienated and separated by sin from God and from one another in a broken world of enmity and death. Individual is pitted against individual, social element against social element, nation against nation.

God's Sustaining Grace. But there is a fourth theological theme that, almost surprisingly, winds through the primeval prologue: God's supporting, sustaining grace. That grace is present in and along with each judgment except the last. In the Eden story, the penalty prescribed for eating the forbidden fruit is death that very day (2:17), yet God shows his forbearance in that death, though certain, is postponed to an unspecified time in the future (3:19). Further, God himself clothes the guilty pair, enabling them to live with their shame. Moreover, the story of Cain does not stop when the guilty Cain, merely contemplating his punishment, cries out in despair at his lot. In signal evidence of unmerited mercy, God responds to this bitter complaint by decreeing a sevenfold vengeance upon anyone who takes Cain's life, placing a mark upon him to make this protective relationship obvious to all.

The flood story, although the supreme example of God's judgment on human sin, also evidences in subtle ways his preserving grace. The flood story is a measure of the grace of the living God as well as of his judgment. This contrast, which pervades the whole Bible, is presented here in all its unrelieved starkness: the same condition set forth as the grounds for God's terrible judgment ("every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually," 6:5) is shown here as the grounds for his grace and providence ("for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth," 8:21).

This theme of God's supporting, sustaining grace is missing, however, at one point in the account – the very end:

The story about the Tower of Babel concludes with God's judgment on mankind; there is no word of grace. The whole primeval history, therefore, seems to break off in shrill dissonance, and the question...now arises even more urgently: Is God's relationship to the nations now finally broken; Is God's gracious forbearance now exhausted; has God rejected the nations in wrath forever? That is the

burdensome questions which no thoughtful reader of ch. 11 can avoid; indeed, one can say that our narrator intended by means of the whole plan of his primeval history to raise precisely this question and to pose it in all its severity. Only then is the reader properly prepared to take up the strangely new thing that now follows the comfortless story about the building of the tower: the election and blessing of Abraham. We stand here, therefore, at the point where primeval history and sacred history dovetail, and thus at one of the most important places in the entire Old Testament.

The desperate problem of human sin so poignantly portrayed in Genesis 1-11 is solved by God's gracious action and initiative that begins with the promise to Abraham of land and posterity. But the redemptive history that begins there will not come to fruition until its consummation in the Son of Abraham (Matthew 1:1), whose death and resurrection will provide the ultimate victory over the sin and death that so soon disfigured God's good work.

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