

Aquifer Open Study Notes (Book Intros)

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Genesis

Genesis is the book of beginnings—of the universe and of humanity, of sin and its catastrophic effects, and of God's plan to restore blessing to the world through his chosen people. God began his plan when he called Abraham and made a covenant with him. Genesis traces God's promised blessings from generation to generation, to the time of bondage and the need for redemption from Egypt. It lays the foundation for God's subsequent revelation, and most other books of the Bible draw on its contents. Genesis is a source of instruction, comfort, and edification.

Setting

When Genesis was written, the children of Israel had been slaves in Egypt for four hundred years. They had recently been released from bondage and guided through the desert to meet the Lord at Mount Sinai, where he had established his covenant relationship with them and had given them his law through Moses. Israel was now poised to enter the Promised Land and receive the inheritance that God had promised Abraham.

While enslaved in Egypt, the Israelites had adopted many pagan ideas and customs from their Egyptian masters (see [Exod 32:1–4](#)). They were influenced by false concepts of God, the world, and human nature, and were reduced to being slaves rather than owners and managers of the land. Perhaps they had forgotten the great promises that God had made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, or perhaps they had concluded that the promises would never be fulfilled.

Before entering the Promised Land, the Israelites needed to understand the nature of God, his world, and their place in it more clearly. They needed to embrace their identity as descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Genesis provided the needed understanding.

Summary

Genesis traces God's work to overcome with blessing the curse that came on humankind because of sin. The book arranges family traditions, genealogies, historical events, and editorial comments into a single, sustained argument.

Every section of Genesis but the first has the heading "This is the account" (or *These are the generations*; Hebrew *toledoth*). Each of the *toledoth* sections explains the history of a line of descent. In each case, a deterioration of well-being is followed by an increasing focus on God's plan to bless the world. This plan is the basis for God's covenant with his people; as the blessing develops, the covenant is clarified. By the end of the book, the reader is ready for the fulfillment of the promises.

The first section ([1:1-2:3](#)) does not have the *toledoth* heading—it is the account of creation "in the beginning" ([1:1](#)). The work of creation is wrapped in God's approval and blessing as he fulfills his plan.

The next section ([2:4-4:26](#)) focuses on the creation of human life ([2:4-25](#)) and traces what became of God's creation because of Adam's and Eve's sin ([3:1-13](#)), the curse on their sin ([3:14-24](#)), and the extension of sin to their descendants ([4:1-24](#)). Humanity no longer enjoyed God's rest; instead, they experienced guilt and fear. So they fled from God and developed a civilization marked by pride.

Independence from God resulted in the downward drift of human life ([5:1-6:8](#)). The genealogy of [5:1-32](#) begins by recalling that human beings were made in God's image and were blessed by him ([5:1-2](#)). As the genealogy is traced, the death of each generation reminds the reader of the curse, with Enoch providing a ray of hope that the curse is not final. In [6:1-8](#), we learn that God regretted having made humans and decided to judge the earth. Noah, however, received God's favor and provided a source of hope ([5:29](#); [6:8](#)).

The next section ([6:9-9:29](#)) relays the curse of judgment through the flood followed by blessing in a new beginning. Creation was renewed, purged of the abominable evil that had invaded and ruined the human race.

But as the world's population increased and expanded into various nations ([10:1-11:9](#)), the people were again bent on disobedience. Because

of their rebellion, God dispersed them to prevent greater wickedness ([11:1-9](#)).

After the chaos of the scattered nations, [11:10-26](#) brings the focus to Abram, through whom God chose to bring blessing to all. The rest of the book ([11:27-50:26](#)) tells of God's blessing Abram and his descendants. God first made a covenant with Abram ([11:27-25:11](#)), promising him a great nation, land, and name. As time went on, God made the specific terms of the covenant clearer, and Abram's faith grew deeper.

As it discusses each generation, Genesis gives a brief account of the families that are not Israel's ancestors before turning to the line of Israel. For example, after briefly reporting what became of Ishmael ([25:12-18](#)), Genesis traces in detail what happened to Isaac and his family ([25:19-35:29](#)). Likewise, Esau's line (Edom) is dealt with briefly ([36:1-37:1](#)) before the lengthy final section, which concerns the chosen line of Jacob the heir ([37:2-50:26](#)).

In this final section, Genesis records how Jacob's family winds up in Egypt rather than in the land of Canaan. In spite of the tragic set of circumstances which led to their being in Egypt, God was still unfolding his plan for the people of Israel. The book closes with the promise of the Lord's coming to rescue his people from Egypt ([50:24-26](#)).

Authorship

Like many biblical books, the author of Genesis is not explicitly identified. Many scholars have argued that the Pentateuch (Genesis—Deuteronomy) is the product of a complex literary evolution. The prevailing view, called the *Documentary Hypothesis*, is that Genesis through Deuteronomy was compiled from various sources. This hypothesis proposes that the Pentateuch comes from four sources: J (“Jahwist,” from “Yahweh”), E (“Elohist,” from “Elohim”), D (“Deuteronomic,” from Deuteronomy), and P (“Priestly”). It is thought that these sources were written and collected between 850 BC and 445 BC, gradually being combined and edited until around Ezra’s time (400s BC).

Both Scripture and tradition attribute the Pentateuch to Moses, however. Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians ([Acts 7:22](#)), and he had the literary skills to collect and edit Israel’s traditions and records and to compose this theological treatise. His unique communion with God gave him the spiritual illumination, understanding, and inspiration needed to guide him. He had good reason to write this work—to provide Israel with the theological and historical foundation for the Exodus and the covenant at Sinai, and to establish the new nation in accord with the promises made to their ancestors.

It is possible that Moses served as the fundamental source of the material recorded in the Pentateuch and that some editorial adjustments were subsequently made (including the record of Moses’ death, [Deut 34](#)). Regardless, the Israelites accepted the Pentateuch as bearing the full force of Moses’ authority.

Composition

It is widely recognized that various sources were used in writing Genesis (and other historical texts in the Bible such as Kings and Luke). The author used collections of family records, oral traditions, ancient accounts of primeval events, and genealogies to write Genesis. Those sources could have been incorporated as received, or the author may have changed their style and wording, stitching them together with additional material for the particular purpose of tracing the foundations of Israelite faith.

Genesis also includes passages and expressions that are obviously later editorial glosses. Some sections (such as the list of Edomite kings, [36:31-43](#)) could have been added during the early days of the monarchy. There is no conflict in saying that Genesis was authored by Moses and augmented by subsequent editors whose work was guided by the Holy Spirit.

Literary Character

Genesis includes various types of literature. Several suggestions have been made as to the nature of the materials.

Myth. Mythological literature explains the origins of things symbolically through the deeds of gods and supernatural creatures. For ancient peoples, myths were beliefs that explained life and reality. Whole systems of ritual activities were developed to ensure that the forces of fertility, life, and death would continue year by year. Some of these rituals gave rise to cult prostitution (see [Gen 38:15, 21-22](#)).

It would be very difficult to classify the material in Genesis as simply a myth alongside the other myths of the earth's origins. Israel had one God, not a multitude. The nation of Israel had a beginning, a history, and a future hope. They saw God, rather than gods and other supernatural creatures, as the primary actor in the world. Their worship was not cosmic, magical, or superstitious, but a reenactment of their own rescue from Egypt and a celebration of God's actual intervention in history and their hope in his promises.

If Genesis uses elements of mythological language, it is to display a deliberate contrast with pagan concepts and to show that the Lord God is sovereign over such ideas. For example, many ancient peoples worshiped the sun as a god, but in Genesis the sun serves the Creator's wishes ([1:14-18](#)). The book of Genesis is a cemetery for lifeless myths and dead gods.

Etiology. A number of scholars describe the Genesis narratives as etiologies, stories that explain the causes of factual reality or traditional beliefs. The implication is that such stories were made up for explanatory purposes and do not describe historical events. For example, if one says that the story of Cain and Abel was made up to explain why shepherds and farmers do not get along, the account loses its integrity as factual history.

Etiological elements certainly occur in Genesis, as the book gives the foundation and rationale for almost everything that Israel would later do. For example, the creation account of [Genesis 2](#) ends with the explanation, "This explains why a man leaves his father and mother. . ." The event as it happened explains why marriage was conducted the way it was, but to say that a story explains something is quite different from saying that the

story was fabricated to explain it. The stories of Genesis are not simply fictional tales invented to explain later customs and beliefs.

History. Many scholars object to regarding Genesis as history, for two basic reasons: (1) Genesis explains events as caused by God, and the inclusion of the supernatural is regarded as proof that the material is theological reflection and thus not historically reliable; and (2) the events in Genesis cannot be validated from outside sources; no other records have demonstrated that Abraham existed or that any of his family history occurred.

Modern philosophies of history exclude the supernatural as an explanation of historical events, but there is no reason to do so arbitrarily. If God exists and is able to act, then he might very well be the ultimate cause of all historical events and the immediate cause of specific historical events. The Israelites were not as distrustful of supernatural events as are modern critics; they recognized such events as God acting among them to fulfill the promises recorded in Genesis.

It is true that no direct evidence of the patriarchs or the events in Genesis has been found, but archaeology confirms the plausibility of Genesis by showing that the historical situation in that era (Middle Bronze I, 2000-1800 BC) corresponds closely to what Genesis portrays. The details of the narratives make perfectly good sense in that context.

Theological Interpretation. Genesis was not intended as a chronicle of the lives of the patriarchs, a history for history's sake, or a complete biography. It is clearly a theological interpretation of selected records of the nation's ancestors, but this does not damage its historicity. Interpretations of an event can differ, but the offering of interpretations is a good witness to the actuality of the events. The author retold the events in his own way, incorporating particular theological emphases, but that does not mean that the stories were invented.

Tradition. What was thus committed to writing is tradition in the reverent care of literary genius. It is possible that Abram brought the primeval accounts and the family genealogies from Mesopotamia, and stories about the family were added to these collections. Joseph could easily have preserved all the traditions, both written and oral, in Egypt with his own records. Then, Moses could have compiled the works substantially in their present form while

adding his editorial comments, working under God's inspiration and guidance.

Instructional Literature. Since Genesis is the first book of the Pentateuch (the "Torah" or Law), it may be best to classify it as "Torah Literature" (Hebrew *torah*, "instruction, law"). Genesis is instructional literature that lays the foundation for the Law. It includes theological interpretation of the historical traditions standing behind the covenant at Sinai. It thus prepares its readers to receive God's law and to connect themselves to the promises made to their forefathers. Genesis is therefore a unique work. Theology, history, and tradition come together to instruct God's people and prepare them for blessing.

Meaning and Message

Israel's most important questions were answered by the Genesis narratives. Life and death, the possession of the land of Canaan, and how Israel ended up in Egypt are explained as God's providential working in history. Israel is presented as having an integral part in God's plan for the world. His plan had a starting point at creation and will have an end point in the future when the promises are completely fulfilled.

Israel, the Chosen People. The central theme of Genesis is that God made a covenant with Abraham and his descendants. He promised to make them his own people, heirs of the land of Canaan, and make them a blessing to the world. Genesis gave Israel the theological and historical basis for its existence as God's chosen people.

Israel could trace its ancestry to the patriarch Abraham and its destiny to God's promises ([12:1-3; 15:1-21; 17:1-8](#)). Because the promise of a great nation was crucial, much of Genesis is devoted to family concerns of the patriarchs and their wives, their sons and heirs, and their birthrights and blessings. The record shows how God preserved and protected the chosen line through the patriarchs. Israel thus knew that they had become the great nation promised to Abraham. Their future was certainly not in slavery to the Egyptians, but in Canaan, where they would live as a free nation and as the people of the living God, and where they could mediate God's blessings to the people of the world.

Blessing and Curse. The entire message of Genesis turns on the motifs of blessing and cursing. The promised blessing would give the patriarchs innumerable descendants and give the descendants the land of promise; the blessing would give them fame, enable them to flourish and prosper, and appoint them to bring others into the covenant blessings. The curse, meanwhile, would alienate, deprive, and disinherit people from the blessing. The effects of the curse are felt by the whole race as death and pain and as God's judgment on the world.

These motifs continue throughout the Bible. Prophets and priests spoke of even greater blessings in the future and an even greater curse for those who refuse God's gift of salvation and its blessings. The Bible reminds God's people not to

fear human beings, but to fear God, who has the power to bless and to curse.

Good and Evil. In Genesis, that which is good is blessed by God: It produces, enhances, preserves, and harmonizes with life. That which is evil is cursed: It causes pain, diverts from what is good, and impedes or destroys life. Genesis traces the perpetual struggle between good and evil that characterizes our fallen human race. God will bring about the greater good, build the faith of his people, and ultimately triumph over all evil (cp. [Rom 8:28](#)).

God's Plan. Genesis begins with the presupposition that God exists and that he has revealed himself in word and deed to Israel's ancestors. It does not argue for the existence of God; it simply begins with God and shows how everything falls into place when the sovereign God works out his plan to establish Israel as the means of restoring blessing to the whole world.

God's Rule. Genesis is the fitting introduction to the founding of theocracy, the rule of God over all creation that was to be established through his chosen people. Genesis lays down the initial revelation of God's sovereignty. He is the Lord of the universe who will move heaven and earth to bring about his plan. He desires to bless people, but he will not tolerate rebellion and unbelief. His promises are great, and he is fully able to bring them to fruition. To participate in his plan has always required faith, for without faith it is impossible to please him ([Heb 11:6](#)).