

Genesis

Creation

Genesis majestically opens with the creation of the heavens and the earth. God is the almighty creator of the universe. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is no mere localized or tribal deity, but the sovereign Lord of the whole earth. Yahweh has no rivals. He is without peer and competitor. He does not have to establish his power in struggle with other members of a polytheistic pantheon. His word is supreme. He speaks and it is done. And as creator God is also the possessor of the universe. It is all his. And he is sovereign over it all.

Man is the pinnacle of God's creation, and is a creature endowed with special dignity and importance. Humanity, made in God's image, is given a mandate: rule the world for God. Adam and Eve are to have dominion over the earth and subdue it. They are given work, responsibility, purpose, and a relationship with God. And they are placed in the garden of Eden which serves as a temple where humans meet with God.¹

Excursus: Ancient Near East

Genesis is written in the context of the Ancient Near East. It was birthed in a specific intellectual, religious, and cultural climate. The ideas presented in Genesis are highly critical of contemporary ideas in the ancient world about the natural world and supernatural world. Genesis serves almost as a polemic against many commonly received notions about the gods and man.

Genesis affirms the unity of God over against the polytheism current everywhere else in the Ancient Near East. God is not a part of nature, he transcends nature. The sun, moon, stars, and sea monsters - powerful deities according to pagan mythology - are merely creatures. Genesis presents the origins of the world with a view to presenting the nature of the true God as one, omnipotent, omniscient, and good, as opposed to the fallible, capricious, weak deities who populated the rest of the ancient world.

Man is not an afterthought of the gods but is the climax of creation. Man doesn't exist to supply the gods with food but God provided the plants as food for man and is concerned for man's welfare. Humanity is central in the divine plan, not an afterthought.

Genesis flatly contradicts the humanistic and polytheistic optimism of the Ancient Near East: humanity's situation in its view is hopeless without divine mercy. Man's plight is the product of his own disobedience and indeed is bound to worsen without divine intervention. Whereas the Ancient Near East clung to the wisdom of primeval man, Genesis records his sinful disobedience.

Genesis affirms God's justice rather than his caprice, his power as opposed to his impotence, his concern for mankind rather than his exploitation of mankind. The message of Genesis presents an entirely original and alternative worldview to that of the Ancient Near East.

¹ Later temple language echoes Eden language.

The Fall, the Flood, and the Tower

Adam's sin resulted in a cosmic curse. And from there on out there would be ongoing enmity between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman. There would be difficulty in childbearing and male-female relations. And there would be problems with the land. However, God promises that the seed of the woman, a genealogical hope for the human race, will restore the lost glory. Human - and therefore divine - dominion will be established over the world.

The story of Cain and Abel puts on display the effects of the fall and humanity's downward spiral into sin, corruption, and wickedness. Cain demonstrated that he belonged to the children of the serpent by slaying Abel, the offspring of the woman.² Although there are parallels between the story of Cain and Abel and the story of the fall, the murder of Abel is not presented simply as a rerun of the fall. There is development: sin is more firmly entrenched and humanity is further alienated from God.

Genesis 3	Genesis 4
No sense of alienation between man and God to start with	Alienation from the outset because God does not accept Cain's sacrifice
Eve has to be persuaded by the serpent to disregard the God's command (3:1-5)	Cain is not dissuaded from his murderous intentions by God's appeal (4:6-7)
When Adam was challenged, he at least told the truth if not the whole truth (3:10)	Cain tells a barefaced lie, "I do not know", and follows it up with an impertinent witty remark, "Am I my brother's keeper?" (4:9)
When God pronounces sentence on Adam and Eve, they accept it without protest (3:14-20)	Cain protests that he is being treated too harshly (4:14)

From Adam to Noah death passed upon all persons. And there was increasing corruption on earth. The account of the flood generation underscores the depth and horror of human sin. Human beings are not stained with a light imperfection; the evil that besets the human race is at the core of humanity and is not easily erased. God, having prerogative over all of life, brings about the destruction of all of humankind, except Noah and his family, through the flood as an act of judgment.

The Noahic covenant ensures the preservation of the world. God's saving promises for the world will be realized. Although there is still the problem of sin, God is committed to rescuing his fallen world, he won't just destroy it.

Noah, like Adam, was given the mandate to be fruitful and multiply. And Noah, like Adam, sinned in a garden by getting drunk from the fruit of the vine. And just as Adam and Eve

² See Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem*, 107-108.

were ashamed of their nakedness after their sin, so Noah was ashamed of his nakedness.

Humanity once again spirals into sin and there is increasing corruption on earth. The building of the tower of Babel was an attempt to reach God's realm without God. It represented the apex of human pride and folly. God responded by dispersing humanity throughout the earth.

Genesis 1-11 presents a fundamental challenge to the ideologies of men and women, past and present, who like to suppose their own efforts will ultimately suffice to save them. Mankind is without hope if individuals are without God.

Yet Genesis, so pessimistic about mankind without God, is fundamentally optimistic, precisely because God created men and women in his own image and disclosed his ideal for humanity at the beginning of time. Through Noah's obedience and sacrifice, mankind's future was secured. And in the promise to the patriarchs the ultimate fulfillment of the creator's ideals for humanity is guaranteed.

The Patriarchs

Of the fifty chapters of Genesis, only eleven are devoted to the primeval history. This indicates where the book's main interest lies - with the patriarchs, the forefathers of the nation of Israel. The apparently petty and insignificant family stories that will occupy the bulk of the book are in fact of cosmic consequence, for God has chosen these men so that through them all the nations of the earth shall be blessed.

Genesis 1-11 gives the background to the call of Abraham in two main ways. First, it discloses the hopeless plight of mankind without the gracious intervention of God. Second, it shows how the promises made to the patriarchs fulfill God's original plans for humanity.

The promises first made to Abraham began to repair humanity's hopeless situation. Abraham was bidden to do something of which God is the sole guarantor of its successful outcome. He had to leave his home to find God's blessing in a foreign land.³ God promised land, countless offspring, and worldwide blessing. Abraham believed the Lord and the Lord counted it to him as righteousness.

In the making of the covenant with Abraham, God solemnly obligated himself to fulfill the terms of the covenant, symbolically indicating that he would himself be split asunder if he failed to carry out his promises. By walking between the carcasses God submitted himself to the fate of the slaughtered animals as a penalty for covenant breaking. God will unilaterally fulfill his promises, but circumcision is the required obedience by which people identify themselves with the Abrahamic covenant.

The promise of Abraham was passed on to Isaac and then Jacob. Jacob blessed his son Judah, and so from Judah will come the ruler who will defeat the Lord's enemies. The promise that the offspring of the woman will triumph over the serpent will be obtained through the tribe of Judah.

³ Abraham's grandson Jacob and great-grandson Joseph will do the same.

Joseph

Genesis concludes with the story of Joseph. Joseph's brothers rejected him, sold him as a slave, and against all expectations he was exalted as a ruler over Gentiles. Then he forgave his brothers and provided for them. God sovereignly orchestrated circumstances so that: Joseph was identified as his chosen representative, God's own people rejected the one God identified as his chosen one, and through suffering that rejected leader then found acceptance among Gentiles before accomplishing for Israel what God said he would do. Joseph became ruler in Egypt, and thus Jacob's family was sustained in Egypt during the famine so that a remnant would continue to exist. What Joseph's brothers meant for evil, God meant for good.

Genesis ends with Israel in the wrong place and the promises unfulfilled: the offspring of Abraham were scarcely as many as the stars, they did not live in the land of Canaan, and worldwide blessing has not been realized. The preservation of the offspring was clearly the Lord's work, for Abraham's family survived despite barrenness, sin, stupidity, squabbles, and famine. Genesis teaches that the kingdom will come, for ultimately it depends upon the Lord. And it will be realized through God's promise rather than human virtue.

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Appendix A: Genesis in its Ancient Near Eastern Context

The people of the Ancient Near East (ANE) regarded the various natural forces of the world as imbued with divine power and as divinities themselves. The earth was a divinity, the sky was a divinity, the water was a divinity. In other words, the gods were identical with or imminent in the forces of nature. There were many gods and no one single god was all-powerful.

The fundamental idea of pagan religion is the idea that there exists a realm of being prior to the gods and above them, upon which the gods depend, and whose decrees they must obey: the metadivine realm. This is the realm of supreme and ultimate power and it transcends the deities. The deities emerge from and are therefore subject to the laws, forces, and powers of the metadivine realm. The nature of this realm will vary from pagan tradition to pagan tradition. It might be water, darkness, spirit, fate, or something else entirely.

Because of the metadivine realm, a realm that is beside or beyond the gods that is independent of them and primary, the gods are limited. They are not the source of all. They are bound by and subservient to this metadivine realm. There can therefore be no notion of a supreme divine will, an absolute or sovereign divine will. The will of any god can be countered by the decrees of the metadivine realm and perhaps also by the will of another god. So the gods are limited in power. And they are also limited in wisdom. They are not all-knowing or all-wise because of the existence of this realm that is beyond them and is mysterious and unpredictable to them.

The pagan religions of the ANE also contained mythologies and theogonies. Mythologies are tales of the lives of gods. The gods are born and they live lives very similar to human lives but on a grand scale and then they die. Theogonies are accounts of the births of gods. The impersonal metadivine realm contains the seeds of all beings: divine, human, and natural. Because of this, there is often a very fluid boundary between the divine, human, and natural world. They blur into one another because they all emerge ultimately from the same metadivine world. This is seen in how the gods are very often associated with natural forces. The sky is a god; the fire is a god; fertility is a god. So there is no real distinction between the worship of gods and the worship of nature.

Whatever power the gods have is not due to the fact that their will is absolute. The metadivine realm is that which has ultimate power and the material of which it is made is what has ultimate power. So power is materially conceived. Power inheres in certain substances, particularly substances or materials that are deeply connected to whatever this metadivine world material is. So if it's blood, then blood that courses through the veins of living creatures is seen to have some deep and powerful connection with the metadivine realm and that is where power resides. If it is water, then water will be viewed as particularly materially powerful. So gods have power only insofar as they are connected with the metadivine material. This means magic is possible in such a system. Because power is materially conceived, since it is believed to inhere in certain natural substances that resemble or are connected to the metadivine material that is the

source of all power, then magic is possible by manipulating those material substances in certain ways. It might be clay, water, blood, or something else. Through magical manipulation of certain substances, humans can harness the forces of the metadivine realm and make these forces come to bear on even the gods. So magic in a pagan system is a way of getting around the gods, circumventing the capricious will of the gods.

Additionally, in the pagan view evil is a metaphysical reality. It is built into the structure of the universe. The universe is an amoral universe. There are gods who are legislators and guardians of social order and justice. But their laws aren't absolute: they can be leveled by the decrees of the supreme metadivine realm. And since the knowledge and wisdom of each god is limited, morality can be defined as what a particular god likes or desires and that may be different from what another god likes or desires. And so there is no absolute morality.

Genesis presents an alternative view of God. There is one divine power, one God. And this God is outside of and above nature. This God is not identified with nature. He transcends nature and is not known through nature or natural phenomena. He is known through history, events, and relationship with mankind. God is himself the source of all being and is not subject to a metadivine realm. He does not emerge from some preexisting realm and he is therefore free of all the limitations of myth and magic. God's will is absolute and sovereign. There is no theogony or mythology in Genesis. God isn't born from some primordial womb; he doesn't have a life story. There is no realm that is primary to him or prior to him and there is no realm that is the source of his power and wisdom. So in the opening chapters of Genesis, God simply is. He doesn't grow, he doesn't age, he doesn't mature, he doesn't have a female consort, he doesn't die. God is unlimited, timeless, ageless, nonphysical, and eternal.

As the sovereign of all realms, God isn't by nature bound to any particular realm. He's not identifiable as a force of nature or identified with a force of nature. Nature certainly becomes the stage of God's expression of his will. He expresses his will and purpose through forces of nature. But nature isn't God himself. He's not identified with it. He's wholly other. He isn't kin to humans in any way either. So there is no blurring, no soft boundary between humans and the divine.

Magic in the Bible is represented as useless. There's no metadivine realm to tap into. Power doesn't inhere in any material substances in the natural world. God can't be manipulated or coerced by magic.

Sin is not caused by an independent evil power that exists out there in the universe and is defying the will of God. Instead evil comes about as a result of the clash of the will of God and the will of humans who have the freedom to rebel. There's nothing inherently supernatural about sin. It's not a force or a power built into the universe. Evil is a moral and not a metaphysical reality. It doesn't have a concrete independent existence. And that means that human beings and only human beings are the potential source of evil in the world. Responsibility for evil lies in the hands of human beings.

Pagan Religion	Israelite Religion
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many gods • Gods are limited • Mythology/Theogony • Fluid boundary between divine/human/natural world • Power is materially conceived • Magic to manipulate metadivine realm • Evil is metaphysical • Amoral universe 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One God • God is unlimited • No mythology/theogony • God is transcendent above nature, not identified with it • No material power • Magic is useless • Evil is moral • Absolute morality defined by God

Appendix B: The Abrahamic Covenant

Genesis 12:1-3 is the fountainhead of all election literature. Everything derives from this: God chose Abraham. It is a sudden, unilateral act of God. Nothing in the text prepares us for this. There is nothing that indicates that God was suddenly going to speak to Abraham and declare that he is going to be chosen. God chooses Abraham and then gives him a unilateral promise. God will accomplish what he promised.

God promised land, offspring, and blessing. The Abrahamic promise is for Abraham and his offspring, Israel. Israel will possess a land, be numerous, and God will bless them. But the Abrahamic promise is also a promise through Israel for the world. The nations will be blessed through Abraham and his offspring. This means that salvation will come about through Israel. The nations will come to know God through Israel (cf. Isaiah 2).

In Genesis 15 Abraham is perplexed and distressed because he has no son. God reassures Abraham by promising him that his offspring will be more numerous than the stars in the sky. God then tells Abraham to bring animals for a sacrifice. Abraham cuts the bodies of the animals in half and makes a trail with half of the body on one side and half on the other side. This is a common covenant-making ceremony in the ancient world. You look down at these animals and it is very gory. And you walk between them so you see the blood and gore clearly. It is a solemn way to promise in the context of a covenant, making a guarantee, that you will keep your word, that you will do what is required of you. You are in effect saying, "If I break the terms of the covenant, may what happened to these animals happen to me." You are calling down a curse on yourself should you break the covenant.

A brightly burning torch and a dense column of smoke goes between the animal pieces. The fire and smoke represent God. God is the only one who goes between the pieces. No stipulations are laid on Abraham. He simply receives the promise from God. God gave Abraham a formal guarantee, in the form of a covenant, that he will unilaterally fulfill his promises.

In Genesis 17 circumcision is a requirement of obedience to identify with the covenant of Abraham. It is not that the Genesis 12 promise and Genesis 15 covenant will be nullified if Israelites are not circumcised, but those individuals who are not circumcised will be excluded from the covenant.

Appendix C: Christological Interpretation of Genesis

Jesus is the Word of God creating the heavens and the earth. His death happens on the 6th day and his words “it is finished” is an echo of God resting after he finished his creation work. Jesus’ resurrection happens on the 1st day - the day of new creation.

Jesus is the second Adam who perfectly obeyed God and passed the test in the garden. Jesus breathed the Spirit upon his disciples (John 20:22) which echoes how God breathed the Spirit into Adam. Mary meets Jesus in the garden where Jesus is depicted as the beginning of new creation.

Jesus is the better Eve who is able to resist the temptation of Satan by trusting in God’s word, not in a plentiful garden, but in a barren desert. Jesus is the seed of the woman who has come to crush the head of the serpent and restore humanity to Edenic paradise. Jesus is the better Abel who offers the perfect sacrifice, himself, and whose blood cries out not for our condemnation but our acquittal. Jesus is the better Noah who protects us from God’s wrath. Jesus is the better Abraham - he leaves his father’s place and enters into our world and it is through him all the families of the earth shall be blessed. Jesus is the better Isaac whose miraculous birth is promised and who is sacrificed by his father. Jesus is the better Jacob’s ladder who serves as the link between heaven and earth.

Jesus is the better Joseph. Although God identified Joseph as a chosen one, Joseph’s brothers rejected him and betrayed him, causing him to suffer before being exalted as a ruler over Gentiles. Then Joseph forgave his brothers and provided for them, saving the ones who betrayed him. In Joseph’s life we see a pattern that God identifies a leader, God’s own people reject the one God identified as his chosen one, but then through suffering the rejected leader finds acceptance among Gentiles before accomplishing for Israel what God said he would do. This pattern comes to a culmination in Jesus, who was anointed by the Holy Spirit at his baptism, then rejected by Israel, only to be embraced by many Gentiles as Savior and Lord. Romans 11:25-27 indicates that when Jesus returns he will save all Israel, completing the pattern seen in the likes of Joseph.