

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. 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 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 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.² 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.

² 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.

Bibliography

Alexander, T. D. *From Eden to the New Jerusalem*

Hamilton, J. M. *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment*

Mathews, K. A. *Genesis* (NAC)

Schreiner, T. R. *The King in His Beauty*

Wenham, G. J. *Genesis* (WBC)