

The Book of Genesis Introduction

When you open your Bible to its first book, you are introduced to Genesis. “Genesis” has come to mean the beginning of something. Not only is Genesis the beginning of the Bible, it is also the introduction to the Bible. It is our introduction to God, humans, the planet, Satan, sin, sacrifice, worship, Abraham, and the family of Israel.

NAME:

Jews often called books by their initial word. Thus “Genesis” was called *b’reshith*, “In the beginning.” The word “Genesis” comes from the LXX¹ Greek word in 2:4a: *geneseos*. The Hebrew names for the books come from their opening words while the Greek names come from their content. In Jewish tradition these first five books are known as “Torah,” while in academic study, they are called the “Pentateuch,” from the Latin translation of “Five Books.”

AUTHOR:

Nowhere do the first five books of the Bible, the Torah, explicitly affirm Moses as its author. God does command Moses to write (Exo. 17:14; Num. 33:1-2), to record laws (Exo. 24:4-8; 34:27), and to write a song (Deut. 31:9, 11, 22, 24; 32:1ff). The Torah, then, is clear that Moses was the recipient of the Law and a witness to certain actions of God recorded in those books, at least from Exodus through Deuteronomy. Other passages in the OT support this view: Joshua 1:8; 8:31-32; 1 Kings 2:3; 2 Kings 14:6; 21:8; Ezra 6:18; Nehemiah 13:1; Daniel 9:11-13; Malachi 4:4.

The Law is called the “Book” or “Law of Moses” in passages such as 2 Chronicles 25:4; Ezra 3:2; 6:18; Nehemiah 13:1. Designations for the law in the OT are as follows:

1. the law: Joshua 8:34; Ezra 10:3; Nehemiah 8:2, 7, 14; 10:34, 36; 12:44; 13:3; 2 Chronicles 14:4; 31:21; 33:8.
2. the book of the law: Joshua 1:8; 8:34; 2 Kings 22:8; Nehemiah 8:3.
3. the book of the law of Moses: Joshua 8:31; 23:6; 2 Kings 14:6; Nehemiah 8:1.
4. the book of Moses: Ezra 6:18; Nehemiah 13:1; 2 Chronicles 25:4; 35:12.
5. the law of the Lord: Ezra 7:10; 1 Chronicles 16:40; 2 Chronicles 31:3; 35:26.
6. the law of God: Nehemiah 10:28, 29.
7. the book of the law of God: Joshua 24:26; Nehemiah 8:18.
8. the book of the law of the Lord: 2 Chronicles 17:9; 34:14.
9. the book of the law of the Lord their God: Nehemiah 9:3.
10. the law of Moses the servant of God: Daniel 9:11; cf. v. 13; cf. Malachi 4:4.

These designations describe the Torah well. It is *legislation* (law), in a permanent form (book), written by a man (Moses), but given by Deity (Lord God).² The designation above illustrates that for biblical writers, the Torah was viewed as a whole, as one “book.” The division of the Torah into five parts, a “Pentateuch,” is found in the Jewish philosopher Philo and Jewish historian Josephus, contemporaries of Jesus and Paul, as well as rabbinic Judaism, from post-Christian times. As we expect, early Christian writers, after the NT, also used the same five-fold division of the Pentateuch.

¹ LXX is the common abbreviation for the Greek translation of the OT, the Septuagint, around 250 B. C. Properly speaking the LXX was only the Pentateuch, translated in Alexandria, Egypt three hundred years before Christ. The rest of the OT had been translated into Greek as well by the time Jesus came to earth.

² Edward J. Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 41.

There are evidences that the author of the Pentateuch was intimately familiar with Egyptian culture and was an eyewitness of much of the history that he recorded. He also wrote with a high degree of skill illustrating a strong education (cf. Acts 7:22). Specific illustrations will be pointed out as we move through the text. It is also clear that some additions have been made to the Torah, Moses' death, for example (Deut. 34; cf. Num. 12:3). Some updates also appear in the text.

Jesus and His apostles are unanimous in attributing the authorship of the law, including Genesis, to Moses: Matt. 8:4; 19:8; Mark 1:44; 7:10; 10:5; 12:26; Luke 5:14; 16:31; 20:37; 24:27, 44; John 5:46-47; 7:19. See also: Acts 3:22; 13:39; 15:5, 21; 26:22; 28:23; Rom. 10:5, 19; 1 Cor. 9:9; 2 Cor. 3:15; Rev. 15:3.

SOURCES:

There have been some sources referenced, if not used, in the writing of the Torah: Numbers 21:14; Exodus 24:7. At the end of Genesis, when Joseph was on his death bed, he refers to God (50:24) and the oath God made to Joseph's great-grandfather, Abraham, his grandfather, Isaac, and his father, Jacob. For Joseph to know about God and the oaths He had made, the information was either passed down *orally* or in a *written* form. It is reasonable, based on our knowledge of God's nature, that He would have made sure that generations subsequent to Adam, Noah, and Abraham would know of God's works with those patriarchs so future generations could have faith in the God of the patriarchs.

Similarly, the Israelite midwives in Egypt, having been there for hundreds of years, feared God (Exodus 1:17). How did they know about God in order to fear Him? There are two options: there was oral testimony or tradition which had been passed down or there were some written documents which had been preserved and shared. Either way, the evidence points to Moses, indeed guided by the Spirit of God, who wrote down or compiled those stories into a single form for the use of the nation of Israel and all future generations of God-fearers.

PURPOSE:

As its name suggests, Genesis is about origins, primarily the origin of God's nation within the family of Abraham. Since Moses wrote Genesis first for his audience as it came out of Egyptian slavery, it was important for Israel to understand her origin was unique in the eyes of God. Yet that origin is set within the context of the origin of the universe, the earth, and everything on it. The origin of God's nation, however, is not important without understanding the origin of sin and man's first temptations. As a part of that introduction, we have also the origin of sacrifices for sin as well as the origin of the family itself. Marriage, Genesis shows us, is created and designed by God. As such, it is under His divine guidance and instructions.

GENERATIONS:

A phrase that recurs through the book of Genesis is "this is the account of." This phrase is found eleven times (cf. 2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10, 27; 25:12, 19; 36:1, 9; 37:2) and it seems, occasionally, to point *backward* and at other times, to point *forward*. The general pattern is that the designated person comes *before* the phrase; cf. 5:1. The word "account" is not the ordinary word for the idea of a genealogy. It does carry the idea of "history," or "narrative," or "genealogical record." The individual listed in the expression, "Noah" for example (6:9), might be the author of that respective section of Genesis.

These sections, or tablets, are divided as follows:

Tablet 1 - 1:1 - 2:4

Tablet 2 - 2:5 - 5:2

Tablet 3 - 5:3 - 6:9a

Tablet 4 - 6:9b - 10:1

Tablet 5 - 10:2 - 11:10a
Tablet 6 - 11:10b - 11:27a
Tablet 7 - 11:27b - 25:12
Tablet 8 - 25:13 - 25:19a
Tablet 9 - 25:19b - 36:1
Tablet 10 - 36:2 - 36:9
Tablet 11 - 36:10 - 37:2

This list, of course, ends early in chapter 37 and leaves the so-called “Joseph Narrative” separate. This section of Genesis, however, is so thoroughly inundated with Egyptian words, ideas, and phrases, that it is easy to imagine that it was fresh in the minds of the Israelites during the days of Moses, who wrote the history (cf. Exo. 34:28). Genesis is the only book in the OT which incorporates historical narrative and genealogies.

See Matthew 1:1 and John 1:1 and how both gospel writers begin their gospel accounts by suggesting a pattern with Genesis 1:1ff.

GENRE:

Genesis presents itself and has the characteristics of basic, straightforward history. There is no break between Genesis and Exodus or chapters 1-11 (primordial history) with 12-50 (the history of Abraham’s family).

Since most of the rest of the Torah is law, we can identify Genesis as “theological history,” the historical context in which the law was given. To put it another way, Genesis is the story of God’s relationship with humanity.

WRITING:

We note in Genesis 5:1 that Moses uses the word “book,” which refers, of course, to probably a clay tablet. Deuteronomy begins (1:1) referencing words spoken by Moses beyond the Jordan. Excavations of Ur, the city of Abraham, show the town hosted an advanced culture as early as 2000 B. C. (the time of Abraham), with large houses and schools. Tablets used by school boys were found, proving their children were educated in reading, writing, arithmetic, and religion.

TEXT:

The text of Genesis seems to be well-preserved, owing to the veneration held by the Jews of the Law of Moses. We have textual witness to Genesis in the Masoretic Text (MT), the Samaritan Pentateuch (SP), the Septuagint (LXX), and the Genesis fragments from the Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS). The evidence shows that the Genesis text is very well preserved and reliable.

The MT is the Hebrew text passed down by the rabbis known as the Masoretes who lived in the Medieval times. The SP originates from ancient Shechem and can be compared to the MT. It has roughly 6,000 minor differences. The LXX is the Greek translation, made by 70 Jewish scribes, for the library in Alexandria, Egypt around 300 B. C. The LXX came to be used by NT writers more often than the Hebrew text. There are a few other Greek translations as well: Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion. The DSS are a library of scrolls found in the Qumran community which date to the intertestamental period. Every book of the Bible has been found, in some form, except Esther. Its Hebrew texts date, obviously, before Jesus but are remarkably consistent with the MT.

DATING:

The patriarchs fit into the environment of the Middle Bronze II period (2000-1550 B. C.) in ancient Palestine. The book of Genesis covers a vast stretch of time, from the beginning of the world until the time of Joseph in Egypt, longer than any other single book.

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as well as the other people in Genesis are pastoral nomads. Because Genesis is largely a family history with a theological focus, there are not many events which relate these individuals to other nations and peoples.

The biblical historian will write in 1 Kings 6:1 that Solomon began to build the temple in Jerusalem 480 years after the children of Israel came out of Egypt. Solomon's reign was in the mid-900s B. C. If we take 961 as the 4th year of his reign (per 1 Kings 6:1), then 480 years earlier would put the exodus at around 1441 B. C. That would give us a fairly good date for the writing of the book of Genesis by Moses.

When we consider the people and events from Genesis in the context of second millennium B. C. Palestine, we see a number of parallels. The biblical text places the patriarchs roughly four centuries before the exodus (Gen. 15:13; Exo. 12:40). The Merneptah stele³ places Israel, after the conquest, in Palestine around 1220 B. C. That would place the end of Genesis around 1700 B. C. There are a number of agreements between the patriarchal portrayal and what we know of second millennium Palestine.⁴ The names of people are Early West Semitic but are rare among peoples of Palestine in the first millennium. The travels of Abraham fit the conditions and many of the cities were inhabited during that time frame: Shechem, Bethel, Hebron, Dothan, and Jerusalem. Many social and legal customs reflected in Genesis are seen in texts dating from the second millennium.

Finally, the religious practices of the patriarchs fit an early picture of humanity. God is portrayed as a personal God, rather than a national Deity (which would be true after Israel becomes a nation). There is no mention of Baal or any other specific deity in Genesis. There is largely no intermediary between the patriarchs and God; that is, there is no priest or prophet as we see later in Israelite history. Also, there is no mention of the city of Jerusalem (unless "Salem" is Jerusalem; see Gen. 14:18). As we move through Genesis, we will also observe the patriarchs committing acts that are in violation of later Mosaic Law, which would be inconceivable if some Jew fictionalized the stories of the patriarchs after the Law had been written and codified.

As Genesis presents history, the book covers the first 2,300 years of humanity. The first 1,948 years pass rapidly between Adam and Abraham (Twenty generations, divided evenly at Noah) but then Moses slows history down with the remaining 361 years, until the death of Joseph.

COMPARISON WITH ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN LITERATURE:

In contrast with pagan literature from the Ancient Near East, there is no indication of an origin for God nor a divine family tree in anyway. Even references to other members of the Godhead are not prominent (only the Spirit of God and Jehovah God are identified); it is an idea that is allowed to develop as God reveals Himself more fully with time. There are no wars or other conflicts among gods since there is only one God. There is no indication of a primeval chaos that must be tamed by God. The "chaos" mentioned in 1:2 is raw material, created by God, to be used for His purposes. There is also a high value given to all human beings, not just a king or even "Father" Abraham.

³ This stele dates to the fifth year of the reigning Pharaoh, which would be between 1220 and 1209 B. C. However, it can be proven that the "Israel" on the stele is the post-exodus Israel.

⁴ William Sanford LaSor, David Allan Hubbard, and Frederic Wm. Bush, *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament*. 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; 1996), 41-43.

Two sources for comparative studies of the culture of this historical period are the documents from Mari and the Nuzi tablets. The contribution these two sites have made to the study of Genesis is that they illustrate striking parallels in social customs, economic behavior, and legal practices. In other words, the customs found in Genesis are parallel with those reflected in both the Mari and Nuzi documents which situate the people and events of Genesis into their historical time frame, the second millennium before Christ. We will point out many of these parallels as we move through the text.

Mari - Mari is the name of a 54 hectare mound located in Syria just west of the Euphrates River. It is roughly halfway between Babylon in the south and Haran in the north. The site has been excavated extensively and has provided 20,000 texts written in cuneiform. The tablets date from the Old Babylonian Period (2000-1600 B. C.), which would be contemporary with the book of Genesis and Hammurabi, king of Babylon.

Nuzi - The second archaeological site is Nuzi, the administrative center of the land of Arraphe, located near modern-day Kirkuk, Iraq. This would place this town east of Mari, east of the Tigris River. The remains date contemporary with the Mari documents but have produced only 3,500-4,000 cuneiform tablets. These tablets were written in an Akkadian dialect. Certain similarities and parallels have been found between the Nuzi settlement and the patriarchal narratives.

Sarna⁵ gives nine broader categories in which Genesis presents patriarchal history in a way that reflects antiquity. This evidence argues strongly if not overwhelmingly for a pre-Mosaic provenance for its history. For example, there are names for God which are not found later in the OT. Certain patriarchs perform actions which are later forbidden in the Law of Moses. We will point these out as we move through our study. Sarna concludes: "The many different kinds of internal biblical evidence cited above reinforce the case viewing Genesis as an authentic mirror of early historical tradition and weaken a claim of later inventiveness."⁶

THEOLOGY:

It seems best to summarize the theology after we have studied the text. While working our way through the text, however, we will pause periodically to bring to the reader's attention certain theological points. Those points will then be summarized and compiled at the end of the commentary. However, we have not found a better summary of the entire theology of the Bible than that of the late, beloved Bible professor at Faulkner University, Wendell Winkler, who said the theme of the Bible, in one sentence is: *The salvation of man through Jesus Christ to the glory of God*. We will show, through our comments, how Genesis relates to that theme.

APPROACHING THE NEW TESTAMENT:

We will point out as we progress through the text where the New Testament uses the text or persons or events from the book of Genesis. It will be made clear that Jesus and His apostles accepted the historicity of the first book of the Bible. There are more than 200 quotations or allusions to Genesis in the NT, with every chapter used in some way except chapters 10, 20, 31, 34, 36, 43, and 44.

History argues that the Jews did not form a canon of Scripture and then dictate that the canon should be accepted as God's Word. Rather, the books of Scripture, and here we're talking about Genesis, exhibited qualities of being God's Word so that the Jews accepted them

⁵ Nahum Sarna, *Genesis*, (Philadelphia: JPS, 1989), xv-xvii.

⁶ *Ibid.*, xvii.

as Scripture. As we study Genesis, we'll see that it heads the list of canonical Scripture, both for Jews and for Christians. If Moses did, in fact, write Genesis following the events of Mount Sinai and sometime during the wilderness wanderings, the Israelites would have had ample motivation to accept his writings as being God's Word.

PLAN OF THE COMMENTARY

Since we anticipate Bible students from all backgrounds making use of this commentary, we will present comments that will be of interest to all levels. After making our own translation, we will point out significant words and grammar, relevant points from archaeology and history, and then make appropriate comments (the heart of a "commentary"). Finally, we will suggest ideas of application, beginning with those who experienced the events immediately, followed by Moses's audience (who would have *read* about the events rather than experienced them first hand), later Jewish audiences, and then the Christian audience which would include you and me.

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