

LECTURE 2
GENESIS OVERVIEW
CREATION OF A COVENANT PEOPLE

INTRODUCTION

1. Name

In the ancient Near East, it was customary to name books by their first word(s). Thus the first book in the Pentateuch is *B'reshith*, meaning "in the beginning." The Septuagint gave it the name Γένεσις, meaning "birth", "creation", "cause", "beginning", "source" or "origin," reflecting the book's emphasis on beginnings.

2. Theme

3. Purpose

To teach the Israelites God's design for them as a nation through the background of early world history and the lives of their Patriarchs.¹

The purpose of the first book of the Pentateuch is to give a brief survey of the history of Divine revelation from the beginning until the Israelites are brought into Egypt, ready to be formed into the theocratic nation. It relates the creation of the world, of man, God's covenant with man, the fall into sin, the covenant of grace, and the lives of the patriarchs.²

The purpose of Genesis is to document the fact that the God of Israel is Creator of all things and to trace the history of the human race from creation to the time of Israel's development as a special people. Genesis reveals God's cosmic intentions, describes humanity's sinful refusal to conform to the divine purposes, and introduces those covenant arrangements and promises by means of which God would ultimately achieve his objectives despite human disobedience. This involves the selection of Abraham, who, through his innumerable offspring, would become the fountainhead of blessing to the whole world.³

4. Key verses

¹ *Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 3.

² E J Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (London: The Tyndale Press, 1953), 52

³ E H Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books House, 1992), 23.

5. Key truths

I. AUTHOR

Questions concerning Mosaic authorship have been addressed in Lecture 1.

II. DATE

Earliest date:

Latest date:

III. HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

1. Historical purpose

Genesis was written as a prologue to the rest of the Bible and to the History of Israel. Moses prepared Israel for being a theocratic nation in the Promised Land by describing the origin of the universe, of the physical world, of human life and cultures, and of the nation of Israel.

David Dorsey has argued that not only Genesis but Genesis 1:1 to Exodus 19:2 serves as a historical prologue to Yahweh's great treaty with Israel at Sinai.

As such it traces past relations between the two covenanting parties, Yahweh and Israel, with the purpose of engendering gratitude, respect and trust on the part of vassal Israel toward their suzerain, Yahweh. It begins at the beginning, with creation, and surveys the historical relations between Yahweh and Israel from the earliest times until Israel's arrival at Mt Sinai.⁴

2. History or myth?

3. Chronology

The book of Genesis covers a period of 2,200 years from the days of creation (4000+ BC) to the death of Joseph (1800 BC). The dates we can be reasonably sure of are:

⁴ David Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament* (Baker Books, 1999), 48.

2166 BC	Abram's birth
2092 BC	Abram's call
2066 BC	Isaac's birth
2006 BC	Jacob's birth
1991 BC	Abraham's death
1915 BC	Joseph's birth
1909 BC	Jacob & family move to Canaan
1886 BC	Isaac's death
1876 BC	Jacob and family move to Egypt
1859 BC	Jacob's death
1805 BC	Joseph died ⁵

4. Historical Periods

J E Smith proposes that the history of Genesis be divided up as follows:

Four Pivotal Events: Creation, Fall, Flood, Dispersal (1-11)

Four Pivotal Persons: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph (12-50).⁶

Before relating the personal story of national Israel, the Bible first tells the sad universal story of all humankind.⁷

5. Genealogies

Chapter 5 traces ten generations of the faithful line of Adam from Seth to Noah. The long lives of these generations hint at the quality of humanity God created, though now gradually decaying as a result of sin.

The chapter 10 genealogy shows the decreasing lifetimes of the post-flood generations, thus again emphasizing the effects of sin. The patriarchs who lived before the Flood had an average lifespan of about 900 years (Gen. 5). The ages of post-Flood patriarchs dropped rapidly and gradually leveled off as can be seen from the ages of significant figures: Shem 600 years (Gen.11:10,11), Eber 464 years (Gen.11:16,17), Terah 205 years (Gen.11:32), Abraham 175 years (Gen.25:7), Isaac 180 years (Gen.35:28), Jacob 147 years (Gen.47:28), Joseph 147 years (Gen.50:26).

The order of the genealogies is important. Cain's genealogy (4:17–24) is given before that of Seth (4:25–26); those of Japheth and Ham (10:1–4 and 10:6–8) are given before that of Shem (10:21–22), even though Ham was presumably the youngest of the three brothers. The genealogies of Lot (19:29–30) and Ishmael (25:12–15) appear before that of Isaac (25:19). So also Esau's descendants (36:1–10) are listed before those of Jacob (37:2). The author's motive in each case seems to be to dispose more briefly of the non-elect branches of the human line before taking up the genealogy of those patriarchs who had a genuine faith in Jehovah.

⁵ J H Walton, *Charts of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 15.

⁶ J E Smith, *The Pentateuch* (2nd ed.). (Joplin, Mo.:College Press Pub. Co., 1993), Electronic Edition.

⁷ B Arnold and B Beyer, *Encountering the Old Testament* (Baker Books, 1999), 78.

2. Toledot Analysis

Historical analysis tends to divide Genesis into sections which begin with the Hebrew word “Toledot.” This can be translated “this is the family history, this is the account, these are the generations.” In each instance the person or entity has been introduced in the preceding unit. There then follows the person’s genealogy and narratives relating to him and his descendants. There are some interesting parallels between accounts 1-3 before the flood, and 4-6 after the flood.

Toledot 1-3	Toledot 4-6
1. Creation out of dark and “chaotic” waters	4. Recreation after the flood
2. Genealogy of Seth’s elect line	5. Genealogy of Shem’s elect line
3. Covenant with Noah	6. Covenant with Abraham

Abraham’s line is followed in the last four accounts. This time, parallels are drawn between the rejected children and the elect children.

Toledot 7&9	Toledot 8&10
Rejected offspring: Ishmael	Elect offspring: Isaac
Rejected offspring: Essau	Elect offspring: Jacob

3. Original Audience and Message

4. Genre

The form of literature will have an effect on our interpretation of it. So we have to ask questions regarding the genre of biblical literature.

a. Historical Narrative.

The book narrates history in a chronological manner from the creation to the sojourn in Egypt. The author intended his account to be read as accurate history.

...There are no dramatic genre shifts between the book of Genesis and the rest of the Pentateuch, and none between the Pentateuch and the so-called historical books that would lead us to read it in any other way than as history. Indeed, if we are speaking of the original intention of the biblical writer(s), the style of the book leaves little space to argue over the obvious conclusion that the author intended it to be read as a work of history that recounts what has taken place in the far-distant past.⁸

This conclusion rules out a mythological or parabolic interpretation of Genesis 1 and 2.

b. Heroic Narrative

Genesis sets before us a series of heroic narratives, accounts relating the conflicts of representatives of the community.

Heroes capture the popular imagination and focus a culture's self-awareness, and the heroes of Genesis are no exception. Martin Luther caught the heroic spirit of the book when he wrote that the patriarchs were "the heroes, as it were, of the entire world." Each of the hero stories that constitute the book of Genesis has its distinctive emphasis and flavor. Adam and Eve are the prototypical parents of the human race and the archetypal sinners. Noah is a solitary person of integrity in an evil age and the agent of God's rescue for the human race. Abraham's story is the story of a quest for a son and a land and of the spiritual conflicts and growth that this quest generates. The story of Jacob tells of a self-reliant trickster's struggle to become a godly person. Joseph's life reenacts the pattern of the suffering servant whose personal misfortunes bring about redemption for others.⁹

c. Epic

More recently, literary scholars have described Genesis as an "epic."

But the book of Genesis is more than an anthology of hero stories: it is also an epic. Tolstoy called it "the epic of Genesis," and Erich Auerbach, comparing Genesis to Homer's *Odyssey*, regarded it as being "equally epic." Genesis is epic because it is a story of national destiny, recounting the story of the ancestors of the nation of Israel. The plot recounts a familiar epic feat of the formation of a nation under divine providence.¹⁰

5. Realism

Another literary quality of Genesis, as with all of Scripture, is its realism.

Part of the humanity of Genesis consists of what literary people call realism – the unexpurgated portrayal of human life at its sordid worst. Genesis is a shocking book. In it we find magnified images of sin – stories of sibling rivalry, family conflict, hatred, rape, incest, sexual perversion, deceit, and a host of other destructive behaviors. The characters of Genesis are portrayed as Cromwell wished to be painted – warts and all. Franz Delitzsch said about the patriarchs of Genesis that they are so deeply flawed "there is almost more shadow than light in them. . . . Their faults are the foil to their greatness with respect to the history of redemption....But we also find heightened images of virtue in Genesis. Half of the roll call of heroes of faith in Hebrews 11 comes from the pages of Genesis – worshipful Abel, righteous Noah, obedient Abraham, fruitful Sarah, and

⁸ R Dillard & T Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 49.

⁹ L Ryken and T Longman III (Editors), *The Complete Literary Guide to the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 108.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 109.

promise-expecting Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. If the book of Genesis gives us memorable images of evil—the Fall, the corrupt earth destroyed by the Flood, Babel, Sodom and Gomorrah, a despised brother sold into slavery – it also gives us heightened images of good – the perfect creation, Paradise the perfect garden, covenant, altar, rainbow, Abraham’s willingness to offer Isaac on a mountain, Jacob’s being blessed by an angelic wrestler, Joseph’s refusal to give in to sexual temptation, and his reconciliation with his brothers. Genesis is more than a monument to our humanity, but it is not less. Writes one literary critic, “Genesis is not only the beginning of the Bible but the beginning of the biblical process: that record of our humanity at its worst, best, most mediocre, and most noble.”¹¹

6. Narrative Patterns and Typology

a. Repeating Patterns

b. Narrative Typology

It seems clear that a “narrative typology” lies behind the composition of these texts. The author wants to show that the events of the past are pointers to those of the future.¹²

V. THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis looks for the theological themes and principles being revealed in the sacred historical narratives. It asks questions such as “Why? How?” and searches for the meaning of God’s acts in history.

1. Beginnings

The Bible may be described as a four-part symphony, moving from creation to the fall, then on to redemption and finally re-creation. The book of Genesis lays the foundation for the rest of the Bible by narrating briefly the first two movements, while beginning the third. The fourth movement is the subject of the last two chapters of the Bible (Rev.21-22), and it is interesting to note the pervasive creation imagery in those chapters (Rev. 21:1, 5; 22:1-6). The end of history is like the beginning in that a harmonious and wonderful relationship with God is reestablished.¹³

2. Covenant

These two covenants, universal in extent, failed to preserve among men the true religion and hence provided the need for the more limited covenant made with Abraham the head of the chosen race. Since man broke the universal covenants, the Lord segregated the chosen people from the remainder of the world, so that the true religion might grow and flourish and finally, in the open

¹¹ Ibid., 110

¹² Ibid., 110.

¹³ R Dillard & T Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 51.

stage of the world, contend with and overcome the forces of evil. Thus, the two preliminary periods serve the purpose of making clear the insufficiency of the first two universal covenants and the necessity of selecting a particular people to be the Lord's chosen race.¹⁴

3. Election to a purpose

Implicit in God's call of Abraham was the divine election. Explicit was the purpose for a future nation (Gen.12:2-3).

God brought the nation of Israel into existence for a purpose: to serve as his instrument of salvation for the world. Too often, she assumed this election was only a privilege, and forgot it also brought responsibility.... God's election of the patriarchs focuses more on his plans for them as his instruments of salvation to the world...Election in the patriarchal narratives is primarily to service.¹⁵

God chose Shem from the three sons of Noah as the one from whom the Savior would ultimately come. He chose Abraham from an idolatrous nation and made him the father of His chosen nation. He chose Isaac instead of Ishmael and Jacob instead of Esau. He appointed Joseph to be Israel's deliverer raising him from the pit to the palace. He passes by the elder of Joseph's sons and grants the blessing of the first born to Ephraim.

VI. NEW TESTAMENT ANALYSIS

What was begun in Genesis is fulfilled in Christ. The genealogy begun in chapter 5 and advanced in chapter 11 is completed with the birth of Jesus Christ (Mat.1; Luk.3:23-38). He is the ultimate offspring promised to Abraham (17:15-16; Gal.3:16)...The bold prophecies and subtle types in Genesis show that God was writing a history that was to be completed in Jesus....This marvelously unified sacred history certifies that the focus of Genesis is ultimately Christ.¹⁶

VII. THE MESSAGE OF GENESIS

Original Message:

Present Message:

¹⁴ E J Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (London: The Tyndale Press, 1953), 52.

¹⁵ B Arnold and B Beyer, *Encountering the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 99.

¹⁶ *Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 5.