

Genesis - Introduction

In the Beginning

Introduction

The Hebrew title taken from the first word of the book: *In the beginning* (בְּרֵאשִׁית). The English title, *Genesis*, is a transliteration of the Greek title in the Septuagint (LXX) which means “origins, source, race, creation”. Both titles are appropriate for this book of beginnings. Appropriately, it begins at the beginning with the creation of the universe (1:1), but then quickly begins to narrow its focus to the earth, mankind, nations (Chapters 1-11), and culminates with the origins of the Israelites in Abraham (chapters 12-50). As the bulk of the book is devoted to the patriarchs of Israel, this its primary focus with the first 11 chapters providing a background and context for God’s calling of Abraham. And Genesis as a whole serves as a background and context for the rest of the Pentateuch – the story of Israel’s exodus from Egypt and journey through the wilderness.

It is critical to read Genesis within this context first to know the initial audience of the book and the primary messages the author needed to convey as the foundation for the rest of the Pentateuch. While the book contains information about the history of the universe, the world, and mankind, it is not intended as a detailed history or scientific treatise, but the author has only included what was needed as the context for the start of Exodus and what Israel needed to understand about this God, Yahweh, who was choosing them, especially as it differed from other ancient Near East understandings of gods and creation. He was not just some local deity with limited powers, but the sole and sovereign Creator of everything – including such things often attributed with divinity such as the sun or moon.

Furthermore, even though this book initially served as the start to the Pentateuch, it also now stands as the first book of the entire inspired Word of God. The purposes of God begun in Genesis flow through the Pentateuch and continue through the Old Testament and even to ultimate fulfillment in Christ, Himself. It is in Genesis that we are introduced to humanity’s hopeless situation in our corruption and wickedness but also God’s promises of a plan of ultimate blessing.

Author and Sources

It is not stated in the Bible itself who “wrote” Genesis. Traditionally, it has been credited to Moses whereas scholars have proposed multiple authors and editors compiling different parts of Genesis over centuries. However, the language, customs, and names are consistent with what is known about life in the 2nd millennium, and Mosaic authorship of the majority of Genesis is not unlikely. At the same time it has to be admitted that even if the author was Moses, clearly, he was not present for the events described in Genesis. Thus the material for Genesis would have had to have been assembled from other material – written or oral – and edited to make it a more coherent whole. And there might have been minor edits or additions by others besides Moses.

It is interesting to note that there are other creation and flood accounts from the ancient Near East that have some remarkable similarities to Genesis as to the creation of man by gods from clay or clay and blood, a flood, and the rise of kingdoms. However, there are significant differences in the Genesis account stressing God alone as the sole creator and His care and compassion for mankind. There was also a significant difference in that the other accounts presented a history that showed man progressing and getting better, whereas Genesis shows quite the opposite with God’s creation as good but mankind’s wickedness and corruption growing worse and worse.

Structure

As mentioned above, there is an initial section of Genesis (chs 1-11) that describes the origins of the universe, earth, mankind, and the nations. This is then followed by a much larger section that details the stories of the patriarchs of Israel from Abraham to the sons of Jacob. After the prologue of chapter 1, the book is broken into 10 (11 with the repetition of the History of Esau) sections each designated with the phrase, “this is the account of” (or “these are the generations of” – ESV). In the LXX, this is that same Greek word that we transliterate as “Genesis.” Some sections are simply genealogies while others are narratives. Thus the structure of the book can be laid out as follows:

- Creation
 - 1:1-2:3 – Creation Prologue
- Before the Patriarchs
 - 2:4-4:26 – Account of heaven and earth
 - 5:1-6:8 – Account of Adam
 - 6:9-9:29 – Account of Noah
 - 10:1-11:9 – Account of Noah’s sons
 - 11:10-26 – Account of Shem
- The Patriarchs
 - 11:27-25:11 – Account of Terah
 - 25:12-18 – Account of Ishmael
 - 25:19-35:29 – Account of Isaac
 - 36:1-37:1 – Account of Esau
 - 37:2-50:26 – Account of Jacob

As we will be focusing on chapters 1-11 for this winter/spring session, more details of that outline are below:

- Creation
 - 1:1-2:3 – Creation Prologue
- Before the Patriarchs
 - 2:4-4:26 – Account of heaven and earth
 - Creation and mandate of Mankind
 - The fall
 - Cain and Abel
 - Cain’s genealogy
 - 5:1-6:8 – Account of Adam
 - Seth’s genealogy
 - Sons of God
 - Introduction of the flood
 - 6:9-9:29 – Account of Noah
 - Noah and God
 - Flood
 - Covenant
 - 10:1-11:9 – Account of Noah’s sons
 - Table of Nations
 - Tower of Babel
 - 11:10-26 – Account of Shem

Themes

The following are some of the major themes that flow through the book.

- Character of God

- Sole creator, His justice, power, and concern for mankind, His control and activity in history
- Blessing
 - Initial blessing – Gen. 1:28, “Be fruitful and multiply”
 - Blessing of Abraham, blessing through Abraham
- The downward spiral of wickedness of mankind leading to the choosing of Abraham
- Covenant/Promise
 - Covenant to Noah
 - Covenant to Abraham

Goals for Class

The following are what we hope will be the result of attending this class – whether it is a single class or a section or you are able to stay with us for the entire book:

- We will gain a better understanding of the character of God as revealed in Genesis
- We will grasp the power of God as the Creator of the universe and what that means for our lives
- We will see the purposes of God played out in world history and take comfort in His mercy, compassion, and control
- We will learn what it means to be made in the image of God
- Our faith will increase as we learn to trust in God’s goodness, compassion, mercy, and sovereignty

²⁷ Why do you say, O Jacob,
 and speak, O Israel,
 “My way is hidden from the LORD,
 and my right is disregarded by my God”?
²⁸ Have you not known? Have you not heard?
 The LORD is the everlasting God,
 the Creator of the ends of the earth.
 He does not faint or grow weary;
 his understanding is unsearchable.
²⁹ He gives power to the faint,
 and to him who has no might he increases strength.

Isa 40:27-29