

Introduction to Genesis

Genesis, as its name implies, is about *beginnings*. It is about the *origins* of creation in general and the origins of humankind, sin, and the Jewish people in particular. Jewish tradition, following ancient Near Eastern custom, named the first five books of the Bible by their opening words. The Hebrew word *bereshith* (Gen 1:1) means “in the beginning.” In Christian tradition, the title comes from the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the OT) where it translates the Greek word *Geneseos* (based on Gen 2:4a): “This is the book of the *generation/origin* of heaven and earth.”

Genesis permits us to view the beginning of a multitude of realities that shape our daily existence: the creation of the universe and the planet earth; the origins of plant and animal life; and the origins of human beings, marriage, families, nations, industry, artistic expression, religious ritual, prophecy, sin, law, crime, conflict, punishment, and death.

Authorship and Unity

Although technically anonymous, Jewish and Christian traditions assume a single author, Moses, an enormously influential Israelite leader from the second millennium B.C. with an aristocratic Egyptian background; this is Pastor Steve’s view. Both the OT and NT recognize Moses as the author.¹ At the same time, evidence in Genesis suggests that minor editorial changes dating to ancient times have been inserted into the text.² Others, however, discern multiple authors, editors and compilers that lived after Moses, individuals who made more than minor changes. This view, the so-called JEPD or documentary hypothesis, was popularized in the late 1800s by German biblical scholar, Julius Wellhausen, but it has fallen into disfavor among many current scholars.

This hypothesis discerns four “strands” or sources within the Torah: **Jahwist**,³ **Elohist**, **Priestly**, and **Deuteronomist**; only the first three apply to Genesis. Over a long period of time, these three traditions were woven together in the way they appear in the book of Genesis today by a later editor or the latest author, the Priestly writer. The Yahwist and the Elohist are regarded as the earliest authors, having written down Israel’s older traditions of its origins from the perspective of the Israelite monarchy. The Yahwist prefers to use the personal name of God: YHWH. The Elohist, in contrast, uses the common noun “God,” *elohim*. The Priestly writer is especially concerned with religious ritual and with chronological and genealogical detail.

¹ (Josh 8:35; 23:6; 1 Kgs 2:3; 8:9; 2 Kgs 14:6; 23:25; 2 Chr 23:18; 25:4; 30:16; 34:14; 35:12; Ezra 3:2; 6:18; Neh 8:1; 9:14; Dan 9:11, 13; Mal 4:4; Mk 12:19, 26; Lk 2:22; 20:28; 24:44; Jn 1:17, 45; 7:19; Acts 13:39; 15:21; 28:23; Rom 10:5; 1 Cor 9:9; Heb 10:28).

² Examples include the mention of “Dan” (14:14), a city that was not named until the days of the judges (Judg 18:29), and the use of a phrase that assumed the existence of Israelite kings (Gen 36:31).

³ The “J” makes a “Y” sound in German, so Yahwist is spelled Jahwist in German.

Dating

The traditional date of the Exodus from Egypt is the mid-fifteenth century B.C., about 480 years before Solomon began building the temple (1 Kgs 6:1). So Moses wrote Genesis after 1440 B.C., during the forty years in the wilderness. But there may have been minor editorial changes that took place during the Babylonian Exile that updated geographic names and inserted “current” historic details, such as political changes.

Purpose

Genesis is God’s answer to human curiosity about origins. Genesis is especially concerned with *creation*, *covenant* and *genealogy*. *Creation*. God is the sovereign Lord and Creator of all things. Humans are God’s unique creation, his special image-bearers, designed for intimate fellowship with God. But this fellowship was broken by sin, which did not originate with God. *Covenant*. Genesis is a narrative of relationships, and certainly relationships grounded in covenants with God. These covenants provide a unifying principle for understanding the whole of Scripture and define the relationship between God and man. *Genealogy*. Genesis traces our ancestral origins, allowing us to see God’s work and human development within specific human history, ultimately revealing Jesus as the pinnacle of salvation history.

Genesis lays the groundwork for everything else we read and experience in Scripture. We understand where we came from, how we got into our fallen state, and the beginnings of God’s gracious work on our behalf. Genesis unfolds God’s original purpose for humanity. Genesis provides the foundation from which we understand God’s covenant with Israel that was established with the giving of the Law. For the Israelite community, the stories of the origins of humanity, sin, and the covenant relationship with God helped them understand why God gave them the Law. Genesis furnishes an interpretive lens through which we can read the rest of Scripture (“the law of first mention”)⁴ and it gives us glimpses (types/shadows) into the Pre-existent Christ who will debut in the NT.⁵

Literary Form

Genesis is chiefly a narrative, but it also contains poetic and prophetic sections and historical genealogies, tying together creation and human experience/history in one continuum.

⁴ The very first time any important word is mentioned in the Bible, often Genesis, that word may serve as a “key” in understanding the word’s Biblical concept; it also provides a foundation for its fuller development in later parts of the Bible.

⁵ The preexistent Christ was involved in the creation. “God created everything through him, and nothing was created except through him” (John 1:3). Jesus’ ministry is anticipated in Gen 3:15, suggesting that the “offspring” of the woman who will bruise the serpent’s (Satan’s) head is Jesus Christ, the “child” of Abraham mentioned by Paul in Gal 3:16. Melchizedek is the mysterious king-priest of chapter 14. Since Jesus Christ is both King and High Priest, the letter to the Hebrews makes this appropriate identification (Heb 6:20). The greatest revelation of Christ in Genesis is found in God’s establishment of His covenant with Abraham in chapters 15 and 17. God made glorious promises to Abraham and Jesus fulfilled them.