

**Genesis: An Introduction**  
**October 4, 2020**

- 1) Genesis is not only the 1<sup>st</sup> book of the Hebrew Bible it is one of the most important. The scope of this work is massive, taking us from the creation of the world to the entrance of the chosen people into the land of Canaan. Alongside Exodus, Job, Psalms, Isaiah, and Jeremiah in its importance, Genesis not only deals with the primal issues of creation and the formation of the Jewish people, it also deals with a wide variety of modern issues.
  - a) Genesis provides a biblical cosmology, that is, here we are provided the story of the world's creation. This immediately raises questions of how the biblical model of the earth's origin squares with modern scientific thought. Archaeology, astronomy, geology, and biology have clearly determined the age of our world is millions of years older than the generations listed in the book of Genesis. Are the stories of this book trustworthy for us today?
  - b) Genesis provides us the creation story of humanity in the account of Adam and Eve. Their story tells us we can best understand humankind when we reflect on the nature of God in whose image we are made. We are told that the history of humanity was guided from the very 1<sup>st</sup> by the purposes of God. The story of Adam and Eve also speaks to the joys, struggles, and tragedies of the human family. Von Rad regards the Genesis writers as the Bible's greatest psychologists. What then is the relationship between biblical psychology and theology?
  - c) Genesis affirms the goodness of creation but also tells the story of sin where human freedom is distorted, and human nature is seen to harbor the possibilities of unspeakable horrors as well as glorious achievements. The saga of sin is seen in the story of Adam and Eve in the garden, then tragically displayed in the story of Cain and Abel. If Genesis is anything, it is a realistic depiction of human life. Is sin the story of a fallen creation in an originally perfect world or is sin the inevitable outcome of an imperfect creation? Where did this evil come from?
  - d) Genesis recounts stories of mistreatment of the vulnerable and disenfranchised, especially depicting the precarious nature of women in a

patriarchal culture. The stories of Sarah, Hagar, Rebecca, Rachel, and Tamar remind us of the historic struggle of the marginalized persevering in history. Does the power of God support the dominating forces of this world or does God's divine blessing rest upon the poor and disenfranchised?

- e) Woven throughout the stories of Genesis is the call of Abraham and his family as God begins to form a chosen people whose destiny is fulfilled through heroic perseverance while encountering every human tragedy imaginable: barrenness, murder, abuse, lying, hatred, etc. Is the story of the chosen people a story emphasizing their exclusive role in human history or is being chosen by God a more inclusive biblical theme? These are all questions that we will confront and discuss as we delve into the historic stories and the mythic sagas found in the pages of Genesis.

## 2) The Influence of Ancient Near East Culture

- a) The cultures and religions of the ancient Near East (Sumerian, Akkadian, Babylonian, and Egyptian) produced their own stories of creation, floods, re-creation, and numerous gods in conflict prior to creation. They also provided a wealth of wisdom literature, proverbs, and ethical manuals. All these sources contributed the background of the Hebrew writers. Sibley Towner sums up this process when he writes, "Ancient Israel did not emerge out of nothing. Far from starting from scratch, its storytellers, theologians, and writers – inspired in their work, we believe, by God – found much of this rich lore useful.... They kicked all the gods out except one, and concerned themselves only with lining out the beginnings of the I-Thou relationship that exists between God and God's human creatures." The influence of many cultures is woven into the fabric of Genesis.
- b) The parallels between the text of Genesis and other ancient Near East texts is undeniable and can be seen especially in Genesis 1-9, 31, 39, and 41. For example, the Gilgamesh epic of the Akkadian people obviously influenced the flood story of Genesis 6-9.

### 3) The Literary Sources Behind the Composition of Genesis

- a) Though Moses is seen traditionally as the author of the book of Genesis, multiple writers, editors, and schools of thought participated in the composition of this book. Von Rad states, “Many ages, many persons, many traditions and theologies, have constructed this massive work.” These varied sources can be identified by their specialized vocabulary, such as their names for God. It is also possible to identify the historical context of the authors and their unique theological emphasis.
- b) The traditional 4 source “documentary hypothesis” has come under attack by some modern scholars who question its dating and its usefulness, but it remains a useful tool for understanding the text of Genesis. The 4 sources are identified by the letters: J, E, D, P, derived from the German spelling for each school of writers or editors. The most obvious place to see the difference in the sources is to look at the 2 different creation stories in Genesis 1-4. Here is a description of the 4 sources (If you learn these 4 initials you can impress any 1<sup>st</sup> year Bible student):
  - i) J – Using Yahweh as their name for God, this group of authors worked in the 10<sup>th</sup> century BC and were centered in Jerusalem during the time of the united monarchy. Yahweh is generally translated as Lord. Their creation story can be seen in Genesis 2:4b-4:26 and their flood story in Genesis 6:5-8; 7:1-23; 8:2-13,20-22; and 9:18-27. Von Rad expresses admiration for the Yahwehist school saying their “artistic mastery is one of the greatest accomplishments of all times in the history of thought.” He also sees in the J narrative the boldest use of anthropomorphisms where God walks in the garden, closes the door to the ark, and descends to inspect the tower of Babel.
  - ii) E – Using Elohim as their name for God, this group of authors worked in the 9<sup>th</sup> century BC and were centered in the northern kingdom of Israel. Their story of the sacrifice of Isaac can be seen in Genesis 22:1-24 and their story of Jacob preparing to meet Esau is seen in Genesis 32:13b-21. The Eloist passages are more popularly written incorporating folk traditions with less modification and never attaining the splendor and brilliance of the J tradition. Their stories begin with Abraham and lack

any primeval history. The immediacy of God's presence with humanity is more limited here as prophets come to play a more central role.

- iii) D – The Deuteronomists worked in the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC in Jerusalem just prior to the fall to Babylon. They have minimal influence on the book of Genesis but play a prominent role in other of the 1<sup>st</sup> 6 books in the Hebrew canon.
- iv) P – The Priestly writers worked in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC during the Babylonian exile and shortly thereafter. This group provided the final narrative framework of the Pentateuch (the 1<sup>st</sup> 5 books of the Bible). Their creation story is seen in Genesis 1:1-2:4a and their flood story is seen in Genesis 6:9-22; 7:11-24; 8:1-5,13-19 and 9:1-17. The Priestly narrative is distinctive and can be recognized by its peculiar form and content. It really is a priestly document filled with doctrine. The language is lacking in artistry with a minimum of vivid narration. Von Rad concludes, “The figures of the Priestly account are in this respect completely colorless and shadowy. The whole interest is focused exclusively on what comes from God, his words, judgments, commands, and regulations.... It presents history, not of men, but of divine regulations on earth.”

#### 4) Structure of Genesis

- a) Walter Brueggemann organizes his commentary around two calls issued by God. “The 2 calls together affirm that God has formed the world to be his world and a special community to be his witness. It is the same God who calls the world and who calls the special community. Both creations, world and community of faith, spring ‘fresh from the word’.” Brueggemann sees the divine call as the organizing principle in understanding and interpreting the book of Genesis. The call tells us of the character of God as one who calls. The call also tells us the vocation of both creation and Israel as ones who have been called into being and ones who must answer.
- b) Genesis 1-11 tells the story of how God calls the world into being while Genesis 12-50 tells the story of God calling a special people. Brueggemann divides the plan of Genesis into 4 specific sections:

- i) 1:1-11:29 – The Sovereign Call of God in Creation.
- ii) 11:30-25:18 – The Embraced Call of God to Abraham.
- iii) 25:19-36:43 – The Conflicted Call of God to Jacob.
- iv) 37:1-50:26 – The Hidden Call of God to Joseph.