

**Getting Started with Genesis**  
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**Introduction to TANAK and Torah**

The Old Testament, as it is commonly referred to in the Christian community, is a collection of canonical texts that were revealed to the Jewish people. Among Jews, the Old Testament is often called the TANAK, a name which defines the texts in relation to their genres rather than defining them in relation to the New Testament. The term TANAK refers to the three parts of the Hebrew Bible: the *Torah* (“law,” Gen – Deut), the *Nebi'im* (“prophets”; former prophets, Joshua-2 Kings; later prophets, Isaiah-Malachi), and the *Ketubim* (“writings,” Psalms, Prov et al.).

The Torah is also referred to as the Pentateuch (Greek for “five books;” Gen-Deut). The title *Torah* is the Hebrew word meaning “teaching” or “instruction,” and as such, these books provide a record of God’s initial contact with humankind, including his specific promises to the Hebrew people leading up to the covenant relationship that he established with them at Sinai.

Jews and Christians throughout history have believed that Moses wrote the Torah sometime between 1400 and 1200 BC. In addition to the fact that much of the material in Exodus through Deuteronomy relates directly to Moses’ life, the text itself refers to Moses in connection to both the oral reception of revelation (Exod 3:4,14f; 6:27; 14:25; Lev 1:1; 13:1; 27:1; Deut 5:4ff; etc.) and the actual writing of the books (Exod 17:14; 24:4, 7; 34:27; Lev 4:1, Num 33:2; Deut 31:9, 19, 22, 24, etc.). Rabbinic material, the ancient Jewish historian Josephus, and Jesus (John 1:17) accept Mosaic authorship of the Torah.

This traditional view of authorship came into question during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Julius Wellhausen suggested that the Pentateuch, instead of being a unified collection of documents written by Moses, was instead an edited collection of four separate source documents. Wellhausen’s documentary hypothesis, also known as the JEDP<sup>1</sup> theory, suggested that the books of the Pentateuch were written between 850 and 400 BC from four separate sources and later collected and edited into the present Torah. The debate over the authorship of the Pentateuch continues to this day.

**Introduction to Genesis**

Genesis is a book of beginnings. Its original Hebrew title, *B<sup>e</sup>reshit*, translated “in the beginning,” is the opening word of the book, of the Torah, and of the entire Bible. The name “Genesis,” Greek for “beginning” or “origin,” came into use ca. 250-100 BC when the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek, a translation that became known as the Septuagint,<sup>2</sup> often referred to as the LXX. The material in Genesis provides a foundation for God’s subsequent revelation to humankind, so a good understanding of the themes, issues, and significance of this

book of beginnings will be an important resource for anyone seeking to come to a greater understanding of God and of the biblical text.

### **The Book of Genesis**

Genesis, the first book of the Torah, is made up of both narrative and poetic material. The first 11 chapters provide a universal history of human civilization before narrowing the focus in chapter twelve to Abraham and his descendants, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph.

Structurally, Genesis seems to be broken down into ten sections punctuated by the word *toledot*<sup>3</sup> (“the account of” e.g. Gen 2:4). In this literary structure, each list of generations divides the narrative and provides a transition into the next section.

### ***Content***

#### ***Chapters 1-11: Universal History***

Genesis opens with God’s creation, forming and filling of the universe in the seven days of creation, culminating with the creation of humankind. This creation account emphasizes God’s unique and all-powerful nature in the face of the polytheism prevalent in other ancient near eastern cultures. Adam and Eve, created in the image of God (the *imago Dei*), live and work in the Garden of Eden, partaking freely from the Tree of Life (ch. 2). However, the serpent deceives them into disobeying God’s instruction not to eat the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. As a result of their disobedience, Adam and Eve are dismissed from the garden paradise of Eden, and curses are leveled on the serpent, the woman, and the man (ch. 3). Spiraling down from the fall of humankind to Cain killing his brother Abel (ch. 4), then to the flood and Noah’s deliverance on the ark (chs. 6-9) and the scrambling of languages at the tower of Babel (ch. 11), the first chapters of Genesis are universal in scope.

Several of the stories in the opening chapters of Genesis have parallels in other ancient Near Eastern cultures. Notably, Mesopotamian accounts of the creation (the Enuma Elish,<sup>4</sup> Atra-hasis<sup>5</sup>) and the flood (the Gilgamesh Epic<sup>6</sup>) contain striking parallels to the biblical accounts. However, the stories in Genesis are unique in that they describe an all-powerful, wise, moral God while the Mesopotamian accounts describe chaotic battles and licentious behavior on the part of numerous deities. Thus, while literary parallels do exist, the biblical accounts are unique in their understanding of God and his relation to humankind.

#### ***Chapters 12-50: The Patriarchal Narratives***

The second part of the book of Genesis shifts its focus away from humankind in general and focuses specifically on Abraham and his descendants. God promises Abraham three things in a covenant: 1) that his progeny would multiply so that he would become the father of a great nation (12:2); 2) his descendants would possess the land of Canaan (12:7); and, 3) that through him,

all of humankind will be blessed (12:3). As Abraham's life unfolds, his dynamic relationship with God is displayed through his struggles for an heir in light of his wife Sarah's barrenness (chs. 15-16, 21), the birth of Ishmael by his handmaid Hagar (ch. 16), his interceding for his nephew, Lot, who narrowly escapes the destruction of Sodom (ch. 18), and his demonstration of faith through his willingness to sacrifice his special son, Isaac, at God's request (ch. 22).

The narrative continues with the story of Isaac and his wife, Rebekah, and their twin sons, Jacob and Esau. Although Jacob is the younger brother, God chooses Jacob over Esau before their birth (25:23). Jacob later buys the birthright from Esau (ch. 25) and tricks his blind elderly father, Isaac, into giving him the blessing intended for Esau (ch. 27). This results in Jacob fleeing Esau's vengeance to Bethel on his way to Haran the family's ancestral home. It is at Bethel that Jacob meets God for himself and dreams of a stairway to heaven often designated as Jacob's ladder (ch. 28). It is at Bethel that God reiterates the covenant to Jacob. Jacob then travels to Haran and stays there for 20 years. In Haran, Jacob works 7 years for his uncle Laban in order to secure the marriage to Laban's daughter Rachel. The trickster Jacob is tricked by Laban into marrying Leah before he is permitted to marry his beloved Rachel. Jacob, his wives Leah and Rachel, and his two concubines give birth to the fathers of the 12 tribes of Israel.

As Jacob returns to the promised land, he wrestles with God at Peniel ("face of God"). He is crippled in the divine encounter and terrified at the prospect of meeting his brother Esau after 20 years of separation. His name is changed from Jacob (meaning "heel-grabber"/"deceiver") to Israel (meaning "struggles with God," ch. 32). Rachel, after having Joseph, Jacob's favored son, dies giving birth to Benjamin just outside Bethlehem.

Jacob's favored son Joseph is the focus for much of the remainder of Genesis. He struggles having been sold into slavery by his own brothers. He is later thrown into prison as a result of resisting the advances of Potiphar's wife (ch. 39) yet the Lord was with him. After interpreting the Pharaoh's dreams he winds up second in command over all of Egypt as the one organizing the storage and rationing of food during a severe 7 year famine (chs. 37-41).

The aged Jacob comes to Egypt to be received by Joseph. Jacob pronounces a prophetic blessing on his 12 sons representing the 12 tribes of Israel. Judah is specially designated as the one who would receive the royal scepter of kingship (ch. 49). When the book of Genesis ends, Joseph's brothers and their descendants have settled in Egypt. Jacob's body is transported back to the cave of Machpelah where his fathers had been buried near Hebron. Joseph is embalmed with the promise that when Israel leaves Egypt they will carry his bones out with them. Their story is continued in the book of Exodus when, 400 years later, the mighty hand of God would bring them out their slavery in Egypt under the leadership of Moses.

### ***Key Theological Themes***

The material found in Genesis provides a foundation for the remainder of the biblical history of redemption. Several important themes introduced in Genesis and developed throughout Scripture are worth noting, especially in light of contemporary debates related to care for the environment and the meaning of human life.

#### ***Anthropology***

The book of Genesis is the foundation for theological beliefs relating to the meaning of our purpose within God's created order. Our understanding of ourselves as beings created in the image of God (*imago Dei*; 1:26f) and charged with having dominion over God's creation (1:28) will greatly impact our views on many modern political, social, and ecological issues. The ability of human beings to make choices and then be responsible for the consequences begins with Adam and Eve's choice in the garden, continues with Abram's choices to leave Ur and offer up Isaac and concludes the book with the brothers having to face the malevolent choices they made against Joseph.

#### ***Theology***

Israel was unique among cultures in the ancient world due to the Israelite belief in one God. Indeed, the most important verse in Judaism known as the Shema,<sup>7</sup> Deuteronomy 6:4, affirms this oneness. The belief in one God is especially evident in the creation account as God is displayed creating everything, including the heavenly bodies which, in other ancient cultures, were considered to be deities themselves. Monotheism, the belief in one God, is a critical theological theme in Genesis.

#### ***Election and Choice***

God's choice of Abraham and his descendants to be set apart as a special people is known as election. However, election of one person may result in the rejection of another (for example, the story of Jacob and Esau: Gen. 25:23 and Mal. 1:2-3), making election a difficult theme to engage. The nation of Israel became the instrument through which God would reveal his word and bring salvation to humankind, not because Israel was any better than any other group of people, but because God chose to use Israel to accomplish his purposes. The idea of election should be held in a delicate balance with the human ability to make choices within a dynamic relationship with a loving God.

#### ***Covenant***

God's covenant<sup>8</sup> (Hebrew: *berith*) with Abraham (ch. 12, 15), reiterated to Isaac (ch. 26) and Jacob (ch. 28) in the Genesis narratives, becomes one of the most important themes throughout the Bible. Through this agreement, or promise, God manifests his character and his ultimate plan for humankind that will be

revealed throughout history. This covenant relationship between God and the patriarchs is focused on kingship during the time of King David and expanded upon in the New Covenant which was instituted by Jesus. The covenant becomes the basis for understanding Israel's history during the period of the monarchy. The prophets critique Israel's unfaithfulness by bringing the covenant lawsuit against Israel. It is a key theme throughout Scripture providing a context through which to interpret all of human history.

### **Questions Raised by Genesis**

The material of Genesis raises some important questions related to the way people think about God, themselves, and the world. Think about the following questions as you read Genesis:

- 1) How old is the earth? Can God create through processes? What is the relation of science to the Bible? What does it mean to be human (chs. 1-3)? How are we to understand human choice and consequences (ch. 3)?
- 2) How do we understand sin? What does the presence of sin indicate about the need for redemption? What role do the Edenic curses play in Eden and the rest of the Bible (ch. 3)?
- 3) Was the flood universal or local (chs. 6-8)?
- 4) Is it ethical that Abraham sleeps with Hagar having Ishmael (Gen 16)? How does one understand Abraham lying about Sarah saying she is his sister (Gen 12, 20)?
- 5) How is the Abrahamic covenant expressed and wrestled with in Genesis and the rest of the Bible?
- 6) What does the Bible say about homosexuality (ch. 18)? How does one understand Sodom?
- 7) How do we understand election and free will? If God chooses and rejects people, what kind of implications do our actions and choices have, both temporally and eternally (ch. 25)?
- 8) Does the fact that Jacob had more than one wife mean that the Bible condones polygamy (ch. 29)?
- 9) How do historical narratives shape our faith? What kinds of lessons can we draw from the stories of people in the Bible? What kinds of limitations do we face when reading historical narratives? How does one move from particular historical narratives to universal ethical norms?
- 10) How are Adam, Noah and Abraham viewed and understood in the rest of Scripture? How is patriarchal blessing of Gen 49 reflected in the futures of the 12 tribes (esp. Judah)?

## Conclusion

Genesis is, indeed, a book of beginnings. A careful reading of Genesis can help us to better understand God's character through its witness to his creative power, his covenant faithfulness, and his diverse relationships with humankind.

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<sup>1</sup> **JEDP:** The JEDP theory suggests that the Pentateuch was not written by Moses but rather was composed by a series of editors. This theory argues that differences in writing styles, complexity, and vocabulary suggest a fragmented rather than a unified book. The "J" document refers to the selection of passages referring to God using the name Jehovah (dated ca. 850 BC), the "E" document refers to God using the name Elohim (dated ca. 750 BC), the "D" document refers to material attributed to the Deuteronomist writer (ca. 620 BC), and the "P" document refers to that attributed to the Priestly writer (ca. 450 BC).

<sup>2</sup> **Septuagint:** After Alexander the Great conquered the Mediterranean world in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, Greek became the lingua franca of that part of the world. The translation allegedly was completed by a team of 72 scholars who translated the Old Testament from Hebrew to Greek ca. 250-100 BC, and this translation became known as the Septuagint, or the LXX.

<sup>3</sup> **Toledot:** The ten *toledot* in Genesis are:

- 2:4—"This is the account of the heavens and the earth..."
- 5:1—"This is the written account of Adam's line..."
- 6:9—"This is the account of Noah..."
- 10:1—"This is the account of Shem, Ham and Japheth..."
- 11:10—"This is the account of Shem..."
- 11:27—"This is the account of Terah..."
- 25:19—"This is the account of Abraham's son Isaac..."
- 36:1—"This is the account of Esau..."
- 36:9—"This is the account of Esau..."
- 37:2—"This is the account of Jacob..."

<sup>4</sup> **Enuma Elish:** The Enuma Elish is a Mesopotamian creation account describing creation of the world coming about as a result of a conflict between two gods, Marduk and Tiamat, and the creation of humankind for the purpose of doing the work that the gods do not want to do themselves.

<sup>5</sup> **Atra-hasis:** Atra-hasis is an early Sumero-Babylonian creation-flood epic myth. The gods rebel after becoming frustrated with the work of digging canals, and a war of the deities ensues. The problem is resolved by creating humans to do the work of the gods. The story then moves to the major characters: Anu, god of heaven; Enlil, god of earth; Enki, god of the underworld; and Atra-hasis, a human king. Enlil, whose sleep has been disturbed by noisy humans, seeks to destroy humankind with a flood. Meanwhile, Enki warns Atra-hasis to build a boat in order to survive the calamity.

<sup>6</sup> **Gilgamesh Epic:** The Gilgamesh Epic is a Mesopotamian flood account in which Utnapishtim, tells the story of his survival of a global flood on a large boat along with his family and pairs of animals.

<sup>7</sup> **Shema:** Deuteronomy 6:4 "Hear O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one." This verse is known as the central affirmation of Judaism and establishes the basis for ethical monotheism.

<sup>8</sup> **Covenant:** A covenant (Hebrew: *berith*) is a binding agreement between two parties. The ancient Near Eastern covenants typically included: a preamble, historical prologue, covenant stipulations, blessings and curses, witnesses, and provisions for the deposit and reading of the covenant. This format parallels the Suzerainty covenants drawn up by the Hittites from 1450-1200 BC between the Hittite empire and vassal nations. Covenants between persons or nations of equal status, known as parity covenants, also existed, but these covenants were different in form and purpose.