

**Genesis Primer**  
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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”, “teaching,” or “instruction”), the *Nebi'im* (“prophets”), and the *Ketubim* (“writings”).

The Torah, made up of the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, is also often referred to as the Pentateuch. The title *Torah* is 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.

Jews and Christians throughout history have believed that Moses wrote the Torah sometime between 1400 and 1200 BCE. 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 (Ex. 3:4,14f; 6:27; 14:25; Lv. 1:1; 13:1; 27:1; Dt. 5:4ff; etc.) and the actual writing of the books (Ex. 17:14; 24:4, 7; 34:27; Lv. 4:1; Nm. 33:2; Dt. 31:9, 19, 22, 24, etc.). Rabbinic material, the ancient Jewish historian Josephus, and Jesus (Jn. 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 theory, suggested that the books of the Pentateuch were written between 850 and 400 BCE from four separate sources and later collected into the present Torah. The debate over 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 BCE when the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek, a translation that became known as the Septuagint, 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 descendents, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph.

Structurally, Genesis seems to be broken down into 10 sections punctuated by the word *toledot* (the account of”). 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*

The book opens with God's creation of the universe, 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. 1-2). 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). Moving from the fall of humankind to the flood and Noah's deliverance on the ark (chs. 6-9) to 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**) and the flood (the **Gilgamesh Epic**) 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 immoral 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 descendents. God promises Abraham that he will be the father of a great nation (12:2) which will possess the land of Canaan (12:7) and 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 (ch. 15-16, 21), his interceding for his nephew, Lot (ch. 18), and his demonstration of faith through his willingness to sacrifice his only 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 a blind elderly Isaac into giving Jacob Esau's blessing (ch. 27) before fleeing to Haran for 20 years. In Haran, Jacob, his wives Leah and Rachel, and his two concubines give birth to the fathers of the 12 tribes of Israel, and upon Jacob's return to the promised land, his name is changed from Jacob (meaning "heel-grabber"/ "deceiver") to Israel (meaning "struggles with God") (ch. 32). Jacob's son Joseph is the focus for much of the remainder of Genesis, struggling through slavery and time in prison as a result of his brothers' jealousy, yet winding up second in command over all of Egypt and organizing the storage and rationing of food during a severe famine (ch. 37-41). When the book of Genesis ends, Joseph's brothers and their descendents have settled in Egypt, from where their story is continued in the book of Exodus.

### *Key Theological Themes*


The material found in Genesis provides a foundation for the remainder of the 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.


### *Monotheism*

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**,  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*

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**  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, God manifests his character and his ultimate plan for humankind that will be revealed throughout history. This same covenant between God and the patriarchs is affirmed 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—as well as the foundation for the prophets' critique of Israel's unfaithfulness—during the monarchical period and 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? (ch. 1)

- 2) How do we understand sin? What does the presence of sin indicate about the need for redemption? What role do curses play in the Bible? (ch. 3)
- 3) Was the flood universal or local? (ch. 6-8)
- 4) Is homosexuality a sin? (ch. 18)
- 5) 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)
- 6) Does the fact that Jacob had more than one wife mean that the Bible condones polygamy? (ch. 29)
- 7) 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?

### **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.