



INTRODUCTION TO GENESIS

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Genesis has been a focus of great interest and great controversy among Christians as well as among Jews and Muslims for many years. Bible scholars have said that the New Testament is built on the Old Testament and the Old Testament is built on the book of Genesis. Mankind's sin is a major theme in the book, along with how God makes covenants with people to give hope to mankind. Genesis also explains how sin came into the human experience and gives the first hint of God's plan to send a Savior to redeem fallen man (Gen. 3:15). Genesis illustrates how the infinite-personal Creator-God relates to fallen man, especially to those who were his chosen representatives in the world. He is supremely both Judge and Provider. He is sovereign over the direction of history. Genesis shows God acting as Judge of all unbelieving men but also shows that He relates in a very personal way to those who believe Him. This study guide will focus primarily on origins related issues, but will attempt to understand Genesis considering all its context. There are many "firsts" in the book of Genesis; thus it establishes the basis for many important teachings in the rest of the Bible. Genesis begins with the Creation account itself, which shows that the God of the Bible is the true God of all people and that he has provided all that we have. This is emphasized in the following passage from the Old Testament:

**¹⁸ For this is what the LORD says--
he who created the heavens,
he is God;
he who fashioned and made the earth,
he founded it;
he did not create it to be empty,
but formed it to be inhabited
he says:
I am the LORD,
and there is no other.
¹⁹ I have not spoken in secret,
from somewhere in a land of darkness;
I have not said to Jacob's descendants,
Seek me in vain.
I, the LORD, speak the truth;
I declare what is right.**

Isaiah 45:18-19, NIV

In the time when Moses first wrote down the Torah, the “Law of Moses,” there were many idolatrous beliefs in the world. Moses was brought up in the educational system of the Egyptians (Acts 7:22), who had an animistic form of religion. The plagues of Egypt were carefully designed by God to be a systematic refutation of the false religious ideas of the Egyptians. The Egyptians, as well as some other peoples in the ancient world, worshiped the Sun, a god they called Amen Ra (Ra pronounced “ray”). Genesis refutes this sort of belief by virtue of the fact that from the first day until the fourth day of the Creation week there was no Sun. Exactly what the light was like on those days we don’t know except that it must have come from a particular point so as to provide a day/night cycle for Earth, but God did not need an object like the Sun in order to provide light. God established himself in Genesis as THE source of every good thing. Nature displays the glory of God as it gives tangible illustrations of His greatness, intelligence, power, and goodness. Yet, Genesis 1 shows that God is separate from the universe he made, because he existed before it, “In the beginning God....” God’s world (general revelation) does agree with God’s revealed word (special revelation), provided both the natural data and the scriptural data are interpreted correctly. This shows the objective truth of the Bible. When the Bible speaks of God as Creator, it often emphasizes that the God of the Bible is the only god and so we must revere and worship only Him. In Genesis God is constantly “introducing” himself and showing to certain individuals the essentials about His own nature and character. For Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob God clarifies who he is and how he will make special covenants and provisions for them.



**¹⁰ But the LORD is the true God;
he is the living God, the eternal King.
When he is angry, the earth trembles;
the nations cannot endure his wrath.
¹¹ Tell them this: These gods, who did not make
the heavens and the earth, will perish from the
earth and from under the heavens.
¹² But God made the earth by his power;
he founded the world by his wisdom
and stretched out the heavens by his
understanding.**

Jeremiah 10:10-12, NIV



Genesis not only addresses who God is as Creator of all people, but also shows how God chose to work by calling out from among the world’s people Abraham; and he made a covenant that would be for all Abraham’s descendants. Thus the origin of the Hebrew people is a significant theme in Genesis. But this theme is developed in a very

interesting way. The large scale structure of Genesis has three major judgement events, the expulsion from the Garden of Eden and the Tree of Life, the Global Flood, and the dispersal of mankind from Babel. Genesis alternates its focus throughout from focusing on the world or a region of nations to focusing on a certain family. This alternating focus from global to family shows God's sovereignty and authority on both levels and shows how God relates to both fallen unbelievers and fallen believers. In the sections with a global focus, God judges in a way that affects all people from that point in history forward. Following each judgement there is a section which focuses on a certain family, showing how those who believed God went on with their lives in spite of the judgement. Abraham and his descendants would become a nation that would be God's chosen representatives in a fallen world. Genesis does not depict God's representatives as perfect people. Rather they were considered righteous because they believed what God told them (Genesis 15:6; Romans 3:28 - 5:2) and this is also how we receive righteousness today through faith in Christ.

Genesis touches on the origins of many different peoples that are mentioned later in the Old Testament. In the later chapters (36 - 50) Genesis alternates its focus from the ungodly descendants of Abraham through Esau, to the godly line in the descendants of Jacob. It is as if Genesis adjusts its "field of view" in a manner like using a zoom lens on a camera. In some sections, it zooms out to take a wide field of view that addresses all people, such as in Genesis 1 and the Flood account. In other sections it zooms in to focus on what God did in the lives of certain people.

Archeology has confirmed the historical accuracy of Genesis in a number of ways. Cities from the time of Abraham, writing from ancient times, and cultural practices which show up in Genesis are very much in agreement with Archeological research. At the same time, there are still some unanswered questions about the places, events, and the cultural background of what Genesis describes. Genesis, however, should be viewed as historically accurate, though it is not meant to be a complete history of ancient times. It is written as an epic historical narrative, which has multiple "main characters."

Genesis shows how families grew into nations. It is interesting to see the connections between individuals mentioned in Genesis who became nations of peoples mentioned later in the Old Testament. You can also trace how one person's disobedience to God, such as Cain or Noah's son Ham for instance apparently had far reaching effects that led to wicked nations of peoples God would later judge severely. When the Israelites conquered the land of Canaan, this was working out the curse pronounced on Ham's son Canaan in Genesis 9 and prophetic statements God made to Abraham in Genesis 15:13-16. In Genesis you can also see how certain individuals among the descendants of Abraham had very important positive influence on a multi-national scale, such as Joseph. God graciously provided not only for Jacob's entire family but also for many other people in the ancient world who came to Egypt to get food during a great famine. Genesis gives a unique perspective on how God sovereignly uses individuals to affect history.

Genesis covers thousands of years of Earth's early history. We must remember that the writer, Moses, was educated as an Egyptian and this would have included their polytheistic animistic religious concepts. Also, the various other peoples of the time encountered by the Israelites were steeped in idolatry. Genesis and Exodus are very complementary to each other as Bible books. Exodus begins the story of the Hebrew

people essentially where Genesis leaves off. Genesis and Exodus may be written with a related purpose in mind. Together they give the account of how the Hebrew people became a nation and how God directed and called them to follow him under the Levitical sacrificial priestly system. They both show how the true God is unlike the false gods of the time, as well as how God wanted to be personally involved in the lives of his chosen people as their first priority. God would not tolerate being one god among many, as all the other peoples of the time believed, but he insisted on exclusive worship of himself and obedience to his commands. Both books reveal God's nature and character in leading people out of idolatry to the one true God, the infinite-personal Creator-God. This God is not just the god of certain people, he is the judge of all people but he relates to those who believe Him in a very personal way. God thus provides for his people through judgement and in spite of judgement. Adam and Eve, Noah, and Noah's sons all had to live with the various consequences of God's judgement but God still provided a way for them through the judgements and he blessed them in certain ways in spite of the judgements. The banishment from the Garden of Eden, the global Flood, and the confusion of the languages are all major judgement events in Genesis that those who believed in him had to live through or live with. But in Genesis we see the beginnings of God's redemptive plan for history. In Genesis, the character of Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph provide many lessons to the Jews on the character God wanted them to have. Before God gave the Jews stipulations about law for them as a nation, he taught them about character from the lives of men of faith outlined in Genesis. Exodus continues this emphasis on character in its detailed look at the character of Moses. Exodus also shows God to be Judge of the unbelieving nation of Egypt and shows how God was beginning to deal with the Israelites as a nation.

Genesis does not just present God as the God of the Jews but as the God of all people who has chosen out a people for himself and called them to serve Him in the world. God's sweeping redemptive plan was to bless the whole world through the descendants of Abraham (Gen. 12). God did not want the Jews to forget their origins as human beings or their origin a people. They would be God's chosen people, but they were to be his chosen people in order to represent Him to the unbelieving world. They were not representing him to the world because they were better, but just because of God's sovereign choice. The entire book of Genesis covers many years of history, from Creation to the end of the life of Joseph. Genesis shows through its accounts on the lives of Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph that God is faithful to his covenants over many generations. Genesis sets the stage for God to call out a people as His own from among the nations. Genesis ends with Abraham's descendants having become a nation in size, though they were slaves at that point and were not organized as a nation. Exodus addresses more about how the Lord organized them into a theocratic nation (though without a land at that point) and deals with God's requirements for the Jews, his call on them as a people.

Four Curses of Mankind

It may be that the books of Genesis and Exodus should properly be studied together as a set. Considering the two books together, there are four curses God carries out on mankind. These curses are important to understand and are relevant to questions people wonder about, even today. These cursings, were always accompanied by God covenanting with a representative to provide some means of redemption. The First Curse is the banishment of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. This took man one step from perfect fellowship with God. Adam and Eve could no longer walk with God in the Garden and they now had to work more for their food. Moreover, they could no longer live forever because they were blocked from eating from the Tree of Life. Sin also began to affect their relationships. God promised to Adam and Eve that the “seed of the woman” would come who would crush Satan’s head (Gen. 3:15). The Second Curse on mankind is the global Flood. At the time of the Flood, God covenanted with Noah to provide a way of escape to mankind through the Flood. The Ark would have easily had some extra room for more people than just Noah’s family, but God only allowed Noah to take his wife, his three sons, and their wives (Gen. 6:18). God’s promise to never send another global flood as a judgement was also part of the covenant with Noah, this promise was to all mankind and all life on Earth.

God’s Third Cursing of mankind came after the Flood at the time of the Tower of Babel. The people of Babel may have been deliberately resisting God’s command to Noah to fill and populate the Earth (see Genesis 9). Instead they wanted to build one powerful unified people. It seems they wanted a powerful empire for themselves rather than becoming pioneers of new territories. God supernaturally intervenes by changing people’s languages. The purpose of this was to break people up into multiple cultures and nations and force them to spread out across the Earth. So, no longer could the world be made up of just one “united” people. Thus, the confusing of their languages represents a judgement on a kind of organized sin. This took mankind another step further from God since it made communication more difficult and it probably led to a variety of confused distortions of mankind’s origins since there would now be many different cultures. We’ve seen evidence of this in the many ancient traditions from around the world which are similar to the Genesis accounts of Creation and the Flood. These traditions and legends are distortions of the original truths. Thus, this judgement very likely led to a greater degree of ignorance of the truth about God. This ignorance may itself be, to some degree, an aspect of God’s judgement.

The Fourth Cursing of mankind is seen in the book of Exodus. God led the Israelites out of Egypt through many great miracles and demonstrations of his power. After this, the Lord spoke audibly in the hearing of all the people as He delivered to them all the Ten Commandments. The Israelites saw the thunder and all that took place and they were terrified of God. Then in Exodus 20:19 we have a very significant response from the people. They told Moses they wanted him to speak God’s words to them, they did not want God to speak to them directly any more, because they were afraid they would die from it. This may have been an unreasonable reaction in a sense, but God did precisely what they asked for. The Israelites were at that point God’s representatives in the world. So, after the Israelites asked God to not speak audibly that day, God apparently never spoke

audibly again until the time of Christ! This is why God does not speak audibly to people today. Wouldn't it be easier sometimes if He did? It's not that God cannot speak audibly, it's that when he tried to, his people did not like it but feared it too much and reacted against it. So, this cursing is God no longer speaking audibly to mankind. Since God would no longer speak audibly to all the people, he only spoke to Moses and certain individuals who were prophets and priests from that time on. God also began revealing Scripture to Moses, and that would become God's primary means of communication to mankind. This is one reason why studying the Scriptures is so important for us today. It is also why prayer is primarily one-way communication. God's people rejected direct communication with God in principle.

Genesis is important for understanding God's covenants with mankind. These covenants give insight to God's plan for history. In Genesis 1 and 2 we have the Adamic or Edenic Covenant regarding the garden and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The time from Adam to Noah could be said to be governed by a covenant, though little is known about it. It is implied in the account of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4; God had certain expectations for how they were to come to him. The sacrifice of an animal by Abel hints at something similar to the more elaborate sacrificial system to come later in the time of Moses. Then in Genesis 6 and 8 God made a covenant with Noah at the time of the Flood. Beginning in Genesis 12 God makes a covenant with Abraham that carries through to his descendants and even to all generations of the descendants of Isaac, who was the "child of promise." See Romans 4:16-25 and Hebrews 11:8-19 regarding Abraham. Stephan's speech in Acts 7:2-36 also has an excellent summary of events described in Genesis and an introduction to Moses.

The Origin of Genesis as a Document

Some comments are perhaps in order regarding the issue of the origin of Genesis. This has been controversial among Bible scholars for years. Many pastors and seminary professors today have accepted the so-called JEPD Documentary Hypothesis. The letters JEPD stand for the following. "J" is for Jehovah (or Yahweh), "E" is for Elohim, "P" is for Priestly, and "D" is for Deuteronomic. These are said to be referring to different source documents for not only Genesis but also the books of Exodus through Deuteronomy. The JEPD hypothesis from higher criticism rejects the possibility that Genesis was actually all written down by Moses without error. Instead, it says that the stories in Genesis were passed down orally for many years and then only in about 800 B.C. was it finally written down into a combined document that we call Genesis. This hypothesis as originally put forward also challenged the possibility of Moses being able to write at all. However archeology has confirmed many places and cultural details from the time of Abraham and there is no doubt that writing existed before the time of Moses, so certainly Moses could have written Genesis. Christians who believe in Biblical inerrancy should reject the JEPD hypothesis.

Another alternative to the JEPD Hypothesis is the Tablet Theory. The Tablet Theory says that there were clay tablets from some of the original patriarchs such as Adam, Noah, Abraham, Jacob, etc. that were passed down, each containing some of the information in Genesis. Then Moses, working under inspiration, compiled information from

these tablets and incorporated their information into Genesis. In a number of places in Genesis there is a phrase such as “This is the book of the generations of . . .”, or “This is the account of . . .” These phrases are called “colophon phrases” or “toledot phrases.” The term “colophon” refers to a Babylonian written form that is similar to what is found in Genesis. “Toledot” is a transliteration of the Hebrew word used in Genesis for “generation of” or “account of.” Scholars of the Tablet viewpoint suggest that these phrases follow a practice of ancient times (on Babylonian clay tablets) in that they put the author or eyewitness to the events just described at the end of a segment describing the events. Other Bible scholars have argued that the toledots in Genesis are not like their Babylonian counterpart and thus they must point to information following them. There are problems with simply suggesting the toledots in Genesis are like Babylonian colophons. For instance, if the toledots occur at the end of a section, then the last thirteen chapters of Genesis seem to be completely missing a toledot. These phrases also refer to a family history or genealogy in some cases. The following verses contain these toledot phrases:

Genesis 2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10; 11:27; 25:12; 25:19; 36:1; and 37:2

It appears that in the cases of verses 6:9, 11:10, 11:27, 25:12, 25:19, 36:1, and 37:2 the toledot phrase must reference information that comes after rather than before it. The toledot in 10:1 could conceivably go either way, but the structure of the other sections on either side of it may imply that it also references material after it. The case of 5:1 could also go either way. Verse 2:4 appears to point to information before it since it refers to creation. I would tend to see 5:1 as pointing forward. This would imply that the toledot in 2:4 is different from the others. It would also imply that chapters two through four do not seem to have a toledot. The toledots are not used in exactly the same way throughout Genesis. In any case, these toledot phrases could hint of some kind of source documents but they do not always correspond to major literary transitions in the way Genesis is written. I do not think the toledots should be taken as an overly rigid indication of structure. In at least some cases, the toledots may represent “hinge” verses, or transitions between sections. In chapters 25 and 36 and 37, two toledots are near each other, corresponding to two sons in both cases. The true significance of the toledots in Genesis may be something unknown to us. Though some commentators tend to orient their understanding of the structure of Genesis around the toledots, I see them as an indicator of structure only on a minor level. The three major judgements and the alternating pattern of global-family focus seems to be a more significant indicator of the large scale structure of Genesis. This is an example showing that God’s word is intelligently written. Other books of the Bible have different types of literary structure since they were written for different purposes.

It is also significant to notice how time passes through Genesis. Generally, there will be a section where time passes slowly and certain events or individuals are focused on in some detail. Then there will be a section which sweeps through long periods of years and many generations, then Genesis slows down to focus on another person or event in detail again. There are also places where Genesis seems to back up in time to give information in a kind of parallel chronological sense. This is the case in Genesis 11 where we have the Tower of Babel incident. Since it begins at the point where all the

people of the world spoke the same language, it must be meant to be parallel in time with Genesis 10 and the lifetimes of the sons of Noah.

Regarding the Tablet hypothesis, Moses did not really *need* to have any tablets handed down to him at all, though it seems likely that he did. Genesis was written down inerrantly because of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit through Moses, not because Moses had good human sources for his information. Still, Moses may have combined information from a variety of individuals who were eyewitnesses, in a manner not too unlike Luke in the New Testament. Of course, Moses lived long after Adam, Noah, Abraham and the other individuals mentioned in Genesis. So, the connection with “eyewitness accounts” would be much more indirect for Genesis than for the books of Luke and Acts in the New Testament, since any early accounts would had to have been passed down through a number of generations. We may never have complete answers on some aspects of how Genesis came to us, but its authenticity, historicity, and authority as of divine origin need not and should not be questioned.