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A STUDY OF THE WHOLE BIBLE

THE BOOK OF GENESIS

INTRODUCTION

The English title “Genesis” comes from the Greek translation of the Pentateuch and means “origin,” a very apt title because Genesis is all about origins—of the world, of the human race, of sin, and of the Jewish people. The Hebrew title is translated “In the Beginning,” using the first phrase in the book.

Traditionally Genesis, like the rest of the Pentateuch, has been ascribed to Moses. The other books of the Pentateuch relate Moses’ life and his role in bringing Israel to the borders of Canaan, and parts of these books are expressly said to have been written by Moses (e.g., Num. 33:2; Deut. 31:24). Genesis is clearly an introduction to the books that follow, so it is natural to suppose that if Moses was responsible for their composition, he must also have been the author of Genesis (cf. John 5:46). This understanding of the Pentateuch’s origin was the view of Jews and Christians from pre-Christian times until the nineteenth century.

Throughout the OT period, the stories of Genesis would have been a great encouragement to faith. Readers must envisage these stories being read to the people at the great festivals in Jerusalem, or recited by visiting Levites in the villages throughout the land. Hearing them, the people of David’s time could rejoice that the promises to Abraham about inheriting the land from the border of Egypt to the Euphrates River (Gen. 15:18) had more or less been fulfilled in their day. On the other hand, in exile in Babylon, the Jews could have drawn comfort from the fact that the land of Canaan was promised to them forever (Gen. 17:8). And when the exiles started to return, they felt that those promises were being fulfilled (Nehemiah 9). So it is possible that the stories were slightly updated as they were retold, but there is no evidence of substantial changes being made.

GENRE

As already mentioned, Genesis is a history book, with its history packaged in literary forms. It is an anthology of diverse forms. It is more highly unified than most anthologies, however, because all of the material falls into the overall genre of historical narrative. But in turn, the history is not packaged as it is in the history books with which modern readers are familiar. Instead, the book of Genesis is primarily a collection of what may be called hero stories—episodic tales focused on a central character with whom the reader is to sympathize—with interspersed genealogies. The first three chapters belong to a genre known as the story of origins. Genesis also has affinities with the epic genre because the story is one of universal history (chs. 1-11) and the origins of the nation of Israel (chs. 12-50).

A literary approach to the book of Genesis requires that the reader think correctly about the currently recognized concept of a literary “hero.” This approach has three crucial principles:

- Real life provides the materials for a hero, but the image of the hero is always achieved by a selection and distillation of items drawn from a larger body of information about a person.
- Cultures celebrate heroes as a way of codifying their own ideals, values, and virtues.
- Literary heroes are representative of the culture producing them and, in some ways, of people universally.

The heroes in these stories are not always “heroic”: they are simply the human center of attention in the story; their actions are brave or cowardly or noble or base, or (more often) a complex mixture of all these characteristics. As the narrative proceeds, the reader should be struck with the contingencies—that is, the episodes could have turned out differently, perhaps even should have turned out differently. God’s providential care for his people uses their imperfections to achieve his purposes for them. The original audience would then see their own situations as permeated with God’s purpose, and would thus learn to embrace their lives as a gift from God, to be lived as he directs. An example is the servant’s finding Rebekah to be Isaac’s wife (ch. 24). Any of these events could have turned out differently, and then Isaac and Rebekah would never have married—perhaps, in view of Genesis 24:3-8, Isaac would not have married at all, and then where would the promises to Abraham be? But God kept his promise (one is not obligated to think that everything the servant did was right), and the first readers could learn to see themselves under God’s care as the result of reflection on what took place. The modern Christian reader is likewise the heir and beneficiary of this story.

THEMES

The theme of Genesis is creation, sin, and re-creation. It tells how God created the world as very good, but that it was destroyed in the flood as a result of man’s disobedience. The new world after the flood was also spoiled by human sin (ch. 11). The call of Abraham, through whom all the nations would be blessed, gives hope that God’s purpose will eventually be realized through Abraham’s descendants (ch. 49).

1. The Lord God, being both transcendent and immanent, having created the earth to be his dwelling place, commissions human beings as his priestly vice-regents or representatives so that they might fill the earth and caringly govern the other creatures (Gen. 1:1-2:25).
2. Abandoning their priestly and royal duties, the human couple rebel against God and betray him by acting on the serpent’s suggestions; their willful disobedience radically affects human nature and the harmonious order of creation (Gen. 3:1-24; 6:5-6).

3. God graciously announces that the woman's offspring will redeem humanity from the serpent's tyranny. Genesis then traces a unique family line, highlighting how its members enjoy a special relationship with God and are a source of blessing to a world that lies under the curse of God (Gen. 3:15; 4:25; 5:2; 6:8-9; 11:10-26; 12:1-3; 17:4-6; 22:16-18; 26:3-4, 24; 27:27-29; 28:14; 30:27-30; 39:5; 49:22-26).

4. As a result of the man's disobedience, his unique relationship with the ground degenerates, resulting in hard toil and even famine. While Genesis graphically illustrates the effects of this broken relationship, it also portrays the special family line as bringing relief from such hardship (Gen. 3:17-19; 5:29; 9:20; 26:12-33; 41:1-57; 47:13-26; 50:19-21).

5. While the woman's punishment centers on pain in bearing children (Gen. 3:16), women play an essential role in continuing the unique family line; with God's help even barrenness is overcome (Gen. 11:30; 21:1-7; 25:21; 29:31-30:24; 38:1-30).

6. The corruption of human nature causes families to be torn apart as brotherly affection is replaced by resentment and hatred (Gen. 4:1-16; 13:5-8; 25:22-23, 29-34; 27:41-45; 37:2-35). Although Genesis highlights the reality of family strife, the members of the family line have the potential to be agents of reconciliation (Gen. 13:8-11; 33:1-11; 45:1-28; 50:15-21).

7. Whereas exile from Eden and dispersion throughout the earth are used by God to punish the wicked (Gen. 3:22-24; 4:12-16; 11:9), the promise of land is a sign of divine favor (Gen. 12:1-2, 7; 13:14-17; 15:7-21; 26:2-3; 28:13-14; 50:24).

8. Although God is prepared to destroy almost the whole of humanity because of its corruption (Gen. 6:7, 11-12; 18:17-33), he still desires that the earth should be populated by persons who are righteous (Gen. 1:28; 8:17; 9:1, 7; 15:1-5; 17:2; 22:17; 26:4; 28:3; 35:11; 48:4).

HISTORY OF SALVATION

Modern readers are likely to be familiar with selected parts of Genesis. Most, however, struggle to comprehend how the disparate elements of the book combine to form a unified account. Consequently, individual episodes are often read in isolation, with an inadequate appreciation of how the larger literary context shapes the passage in question. Grasping the big picture of Genesis is very important.

Central to this picture is the family line that forms the backbone of the entire book. The importance of this lineage cannot be overstated, for beginning in Genesis 3:15 the offspring of the woman becomes the source of hope for the defeat of the serpent and the restoration of the earth and everything in it. In due course the woman's offspring is traced through Seth to Noah, a "righteous man" (Gen. 6:9) who found favor with God, so that God saved him and his family from being destroyed in the flood. From Noah the family line moves to Abraham, in whom all the families of the earth will be blessed (Gen. 12:1-3). When God establishes the covenant of circumcision with Abraham, the divine promise of blessing is linked to a future royal descendant traced through Abraham's son Isaac.

As Genesis proceeds, the promise of blessing becomes intimately connected with the firstborn son. Yet this coincides with an unusual motif within the book. The status of firstborn does not always go to the son born first. When twins are born to Isaac, a long struggle takes place between Esau and his younger brother Jacob. After Esau sells his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of stew (Gen. 25:29-34), Jacob deceptively gets from Isaac the firstborn blessing (Gen. 27:27-29). Expressed in terms that echo God's promise to Abraham, this blessing affirms Jacob as the one through whom the royal line will continue.

Joseph's promotion over Reuben to the status of firstborn, along with his dreams, initially indicates that the potential royal line will continue through him. Although he is sold into slavery by his brothers, his subsequent governorship of Egypt confirms that God is with him. Later, when the family is reunited and Jacob pronounces the blessing of the firstborn on Joseph's younger son, Ephraim, the future royal line is linked to the descendants of Ephraim (Gen. 48:13-19). Genesis, however, contains an interesting twist. In spite of Joseph's importance, his older brother Judah undergoes a remarkable transformation, and kingship is also associated with his descendants (Gen. 49:8-12).

Beyond Genesis, the line of Ephraim assumes leadership of Israel when Joshua leads the people into the land of Canaan. In the time of Samuel, however, the Ephraimites are rejected when God chooses David to establish the first dynasty in Israel (see Ps. 78:67-72). Eventually, the divine promises linked to the family line in Genesis come to fulfillment in Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God who becomes by adoption "the son of David, the son of Abraham" (Matt. 1:1; see Acts 3:25-26; Gal. 3:16). By looking forward to a special King who will mediate God's blessing to humanity, Genesis provides the foundation on which the rest of the Bible stands.

In saying that Genesis points forward to Jesus Christ, one must be careful because Genesis does not provide a full-grown Christology. What begins in Genesis as a divine promise of salvation linked to the woman's offspring is expanded throughout the rest of the OT. Nevertheless, the ideas that are introduced in Genesis are fully consistent with the final reality.

While the concept of the nations' being blessed through a future King is at the heart of Genesis, other related themes are also developed. One of the most important of these is the divine promise to Abraham that he will become a great nation (Gen. 12:2). Central to this are the twin concepts of land and descendants, both being essential components of nationhood.

This emphasis on a nation has to be understood in the light of God's purpose for the earth. It is to be his dwelling place, where he will live surrounded by a human population of royal priests. When Adam and Eve betray God, however, they forfeit their special status. Later, when God comes to dwell among the Israelites, they as a nation are given the opportunity to be a royal priesthood (Ex. 19:6). Unfortunately, they never fully realize all that God wants them to be. Yet even through failure, they provide an indication of how the earth should be under God's rule.

With the coming of Jesus Christ, the national theocracy of Israel is replaced by an international royal priesthood that includes Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles (1 Pet. 2:9). Although the church becomes the dwelling place of God on earth, evil still remains. Only after the return of Christ and

the final judgment will all things be restored and a new earth be created. At that time the new Jerusalem will mark the completion of the divine project that began in Genesis. John's vision of the new earth in Revelation 21–22 has close affinities with Genesis 1–2.

INTERPRETATION

The book of Genesis originated thousands of years ago—a fact easily forgotten when it is read in a modern English translation. It was composed in an age and culture far removed from the experiences of most modern readers. Due allowance must be made for this distance between text and reader. While modern English translations attempt to bridge this gap, it is not always possible to replicate the nuances and wordplays of the Hebrew original. Moreover, Genesis employs literary techniques not commonly used today. Woven into stories set in an ancient Near Eastern culture, these features present obstacles that can be overcome only through patient study of the text.

Interpreting Genesis is further complicated by the fact that it is also the inspired Word of God. This leads some readers to suppose that this infallible text will be omniscient, like its divine author. They then look for answers to questions that Genesis is not trying to answer. Yet like any other part of the Bible, Genesis is limited and selective in the information that it conveys; it does not tell readers everything that they could possibly want to know. Frequently, readers may ask questions, legitimate in themselves, that are not answered by the text. Genesis does not tell, for instance, how the serpent came to be God's enemy or where Cain found a wife. Such questions could be multiplied many times. Consequently, one's natural curiosity must be correctly channeled, for the inspired author of Genesis intentionally communicates only certain things. Yet the text does not cease to be the Word of God simply because it is limited in what it tells the reader; it need not be exhaustive in order to be true.

These observations regarding the limitations of Genesis as a literary text are especially important when one turns to its opening chapters. The sections on Genesis and History and Genesis and Science show why it is right to say that these chapters are meant to convey history, and that they present a worldview that gives science its proper home. At the same time, this is not the same as saying that they offer their message in a form that modern readers are accustomed to reading. To read Genesis well, it is helpful to have some understanding of ancient literary forms. Thus, it would be hasty to conclude that Genesis conflicts with a proper understanding of either science or historiography (whose standard conclusions at any given time are also liable to revision). Put simply, the author of Genesis writes to celebrate the fact that God made the world, not to explain the details of how he made it.

This difference in approach means that Genesis 1 does not address the mechanics of creation. Rather, it simply says that God brought the heavens and the earth into being by means of his spoken word ("And God said"); and it explains that God ordered the earth in terms of time and space, revealing that people were originally created by God and appointed by God to be his representatives on earth, to rule it for his glory and the benefit of all creation. To the extent that scientists deny that God is the Creator of all things, a fundamental conflict will exist between the foundation and conclusions of such scientific work and the Bible. At the same time, to the extent that the focus of science is on understanding and describing the world that God created, no con-

flict between the Bible and scientific work needs to exist. Understood in terms of what the author of Genesis seeks to communicate, science as well as the Bible have a valuable and legitimate place. But as divine revelation, Genesis provides knowledge that cannot be discovered by human investigation. Were it otherwise, there would be no need for Genesis to be a part of the Bible.

The modern reader receives Genesis best, then, when he or she cooperates with Moses' own purpose in writing the book. It is the front end of the grand narrative of creation, fall, and redemption—a narrative that has reached a glorious point in the resurrection of Jesus, the down payment of its even more glorious consummation. The story is of a good world made by a good God and man's role in that world, the story of how the stain of sin affects everything, the story of how God intends to reverse those effects. Thus, the life that one lives in the body, one's connection to all mankind, one's connection to and responsibility for the created world, one's dependence on God's grace—all are founded on the story that begins in Genesis. The Christian economy, like the covenant made at Sinai, involves a need for moral purity, lived in the body; physical ordinances by which God communicates his grace; a community to which the faithful are bound—all affirming God's original creation intent. Further, Genesis offers a paradigm for God's dealings with his creation, namely, the representative: Adam represented mankind and the world, and the consequences of his fall pass to all those whom he represented. This provides the framework for the Christian understanding of how Jesus does his representative work, which will have consequences both for the people he represents and for the rest of creation.