GENESIS

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The Book of Genesis, just as its name indicates ("genesis" means beginning), tells of the beginning of the world and the beginning of God’s actions among human beings.

Genesis has two main sections. Chapters 1-11 present a primeval history. These chapters contain two creation stories; the narrative of Adam and Eve with the fall; the murder of Abel by his brother Cain, with the increase of sin and evil in the world; there follows the judgment of the Flood, survived by pious Noah and his family; then the Tower of Babel; with several genealogies scattered throughout.

Chapters 12-50 tell of the ancestors of Israel. Abraham and Sarah appear first, coming to Canaan from Mesopotamia; then Isaac and Rebekah; next are Jacob, Rachel, Leah, and the twelve sons of Jacob, who are the forebears of the twelve tribes of Israel; finally there is an extended narrative concerning Joseph, the chief member of Jacob’s family. Genesis ends with the Israelites in Egypt, thus preparing for the decisive events recorded in the Book of Exodus.
Genesis is the initial book of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament), most of which, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, deals with the life and career of Moses. The Pentateuch itself is an introduction to Israel’s story from the entrance into the Land of Canaan under Joshua to the Babylonian Exile in 586 (Joshua-II Kings). Thus Genesis introduces a crucial period of the history of ancient Israel.

Three questions present themselves for understanding the Book of Genesis:
1) The Literary question;
2) The Historical question;
3) The Theological question.

THE LITERARY QUESTION

A tradition as old as the New Testament views Moses as the author of the Pentateuch, including, of course, Genesis. This is not the claim of the Pentateuch itself and is no longer the view of the majority of Old Testament scholars. Although the life and ministry of Moses may represent the ultimate spring from which the Pentateuchal stream flows,
there are enough doublets, inconsistencies, differences in literary styles, vocabularies, and theological emphases, as well as other literary problems to make it clear that we are dealing with more than one author in the Book of Genesis. A careful comparison of the creation accounts in Genesis 1-2:4a and 2:4b-25, as one illustration, reveals enough differences to clearly suggest two different literary sources. Further analysis of the rest of Genesis (along with the rest of the Pentateuch) points to a multiplicity of sources. During most of the twentieth century there has been a broad scholarly consensus that the Pentateuch is comprised of four literary sources: the Jahwist epic—J (written in Jerusalem under Solomon, ca. 950 B.C.), the Elohist epic—E (written in the northern kingdom of Israel, ca. 850 B.C.), Deuteronomy—D (with northern roots, but edited in Jerusalem, ca. 650 B.C.), and the Priestly Code—P (written in Babylonian Exile, ca. 450 B.C.). In recent years this hypothesis has been challenged by a number of scholars, but no alternative view has achieved anything like a consensus. Thus it may still be the
most plausible theory advanced to date concerning the literary composition of the Pentateuch, and thus Genesis.

The process of composing the Pentateuch should not be viewed as the dry work of isolated scholars, but rather as a dynamic literary movement through the history of ancient Israel from the 17th century B.C. (perhaps the time of Abraham) to the 5th century B.C. The three writings in Genesis, J, E, P (the Deuteronomistic source does not appear in Genesis), were comprised of earlier, mostly oral sources to give expression to the faith of the ancient Hebrews in three different historical periods. The dates 950, 850, 450, therefore, can be viewed as representing stages in this process. The process was going on in the periods before 950 until the final edition of the Pentateuch in 450. The literature was being influenced and developed by historical and religious events and people of every age throughout. God was acting and interacting with this special people to achieve his purposes among them, and their literature bore witness to this activity.
THE HISTORICAL QUESTION

A second question: What kind of history lies behind the Book of Genesis?

Chapters 1-11 (J, P) do not contain history in the usual meaning of the word. They are primarily myths borrowed from Israel’s neighbors. The account of creation in Genesis 1, for example, contains a number of points of affinity with a much older creation myth like that of the Babylonian Enuma elish. And the flood story in chapters 6-9 is very similar to a flood story in the Babylonian narrative The Gilgamesh epic. When Israel did appropriate such myths, however, she removed their polytheistic and other crass elements and adapted them to her monotheistic faith. The inspired writers of Genesis, therefore, brought a number of mythological traditions together to form a “primeval history,” thus providing the theological context for the actual history of the Hebrews beginning with the call of Abraham.

The traditions in chapters 12-50 (J, E, P) are different from those in chapters 1-11, since they may well preserve authentic historical memories of some of Israel’s
earliest ancestral families who emerged before the 13th century when Moses apparently lived. These stories have been transmitted and shaped over a number of centuries until they were finally written down in the J, E and P sources and have been influenced by later historical situations. For example, the twelve sons of Jacob seem to stand for the twelve tribes of Israel who were established in the Holy Land only after Moses. This means that some later tribal activities have been read back into the ancestral period.

On the other hand, it is entirely possible that Abraham, Sarah and other ancestors were in fact real human beings who lived in the times before Moses (i.e., in the Middle Bronze Age, 2000-1500 B.C.). At least some of them seem to have migrated from Mesopotamia into the Land of Canaan—Abraham and his family perhaps from Ur and Jacob and his family from Haran (Syria). They were organized as families and clans, but were not a united people, as began to be the case at Sinai under Moses.

As to the religion of the ancestors, it is unlikely that they worshiped God by the
proper name Yahweh. The name Yahweh apparently first became known to the ancient Hebrews in the time of Moses (Exodus 3-6) and was associated particularly with the exodus event and the covenant at Sinai. In their worship they used some form of El or Elohim, the more general name for God. Each patriarch seems to have had a decisive experience of God and received a promise appropriate to the semi-nomadic way of life he and his clan followed. For example, the promise of land may originally have been associated with Abraham (Genesis 12) and the promise of the divine presence with Jacob (chapter 28). The religious experiences of the patriarchs prepared for the fuller revelation of God with the exodus and Sinai events in the time of Moses.

The figure of Joseph in the latter part of Genesis could certainly preserve the memory of an actual historical Hebrew who rose to prominence in the Egyptian court. But in these traditions Joseph also stands for the important Hebrew tribe later called Joseph, comprised of the clans of Manasseh and Ephraim. This was probably the key group to experience
the exodus and the Sinai revelation under Moses.

**THE THEOLOGICAL QUESTION**

Genesis is rich in theological meaning.

**The Primeval History**

For example, the Primeval History in chapters 1-11, taken as a whole, sets the stage, not only for the rest of the Old Testament but, in Christian interpretation, for the New Testament as well.

These chapters tell of the creation of the world in its various stages, with the making of human life ("adam, man, mankind, humankind) in the image of God (1:27) as the creative climax. Human beings are thus at the very apex of creaturely reality, more valuable than any other creature, responsible under God for the welfare of the world.

But human beings (now Adam and Eve in chapters 2 and 3), are dissatisfied with the terms of their existence, i.e., obedience to God, symbolized by the tree of knowledge of good and evil, which they are forbidden to eat. They want to be more
than human beings. They want to be like God, placing themselves at the center of the universe, making their own standards of good and evil. This desire leads to sin—the fall—or perhaps better, “rebellion” against God, symbolized by the eating of the forbidden fruit in the garden. Thus they are estranged from God, symbolized by the expulsion from the garden. They are separated from God, who is holy, righteous and compassionate.

The fall results not only in estrangement from God, but also the breakthrough of evil into human history. Chapters 4-11 go on to paint a frightening picture of the awful consequences of sin and evil in human life. Cain kills Abel, his own brother; estrangement of brother from brother (chapter 4). Things then become not better, but progressively worse until we are told: “And the Lord saw that the wickedness of people was great upon the earth and that every imagination of the thoughts of their heart was only evil continually.” (6:5). So God brings a devastating flood as a judgment upon a sinful and unrighteous humanity (chapters 6-9). Yet this does not solve the problem.
Civilization develops, with science and technology—tools are invented, musical instruments made, cities built. Science and technology advance. But moral progress does not occur. People become more learned and the same time much more subtle in expressing the evil within them. Finally, not crass immorality, sins of the flesh, but Luciferian pride—hubris; that is the worst expression of sin (the Tower of Babel chapter 11). People use their science and technology in an act of defiance against God. They have had enough of God’s ways; they determine to build a temple-tower and a secular city, storm the gates of heaven and force God to conform to human ways. But the project fails. As a result people are not only more tragically alienated from God with the Fall, but also nation is alienated from nation. Language had originally been a good gift of God, the means by which people could communicate with one another, and thus neighbor could be related to neighbor, nation to nation. But now people speak different languages. Communication is difficult. Human community is broken.

Thus the myths in chapters 1-11 have
been arranged to depict the human situation from a theological perspective: (a) With the fall rebellion and estrangement from God; (b) With the Tower of Babel estrangement of people from people, nation from nation.

God’s answer to the human problem is the call of Abram:

Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation and bless you, and make your name great so that you will be a blessing. Him who blesses you I will bless and him who curses you I will curse. And by you all the families of the earth will be blessed. (Genesis 12:1-13)

That marks the beginning of the Holy History of the Hebrews recorded in the Old Testament.

For Christians that Holy History reached a climax with the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The essential message of the New Testament is that in Christ the God of Abraham acted in such a way as to reveal his love, not only for Israel, but for the whole world, thus bringing a blessing to all the families of the
earth. This blessing offered a way of reconciliation between, brother and brother, people and people, nation and nation. In addition, it meant the overcoming of sin, evil, and even death.

A number of other traditions in Genesis contain insightful theological meaning. We note only three.

The Sacrifice of Isaac

A very poignant and provocative narrative is the story of the Sacrifice of Isaac in chapter 22 (E). One purpose of the story was to show that human sacrifice is unacceptable to God, although it was widely practiced in other religions of the ancient Near East. Another more symbolic meaning was to make the point that God alone is absolute, and not the people of God, who are proleptically contained in the person of Isaac. In releasing his claim on his son, Abraham makes it clear that God’s future dealings in the world are not dependent on any one people, not even the patriarch’s promised descendants through Isaac; rather his people are completely dependent on God.
Jacob at Bethel

In the story of Jacob’s vision of the ladder ascending to heaven at Bethel (chapter 28:10, 11) the theme of God’s promise of his presence occurs twice (vv 15, 20): “I will be with you.” This is a theme that appears frequently elsewhere in the Old Testament and for Christians reaches a climax in Matthew 28:20 with the promise of the risen Lord: “... lo I am with you always, to the close of the age.”

The Joseph Narrative

The Joseph narrative (chapters 37, 39-50) is the result of the skillful weaving together of J and E (with a little P) into an almost seamless writing, as event follows event in a logical order of cause and effect. Joseph is sold into slavery by his jealous brothers and ends up in Egypt. There, after a time in prison, through his wisdom and skill at interpreting dreams, he rises to a position next to Pharaoh himself. During a famine, which he had predicted, Joseph moves his entire family, including his father Jacob, to Egypt. After the death of their father, the brothers are especially
fearful that Joseph will exact revenge for the evil they had done to him. But Joseph says to them: "Fear not, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones." (50:19-21)

The divine activity testified in Joseph’s statement is rather different from God’s dramatic and miraculous ways in the ancestral stories, where, for example, he abruptly and unexpectedly calls to Abram to send him on his journey (12:1-3), or in the Book of Exodus where he suddenly appears to speak to Moses out of the burning bush (Exodus 3). Here, the story is saying, from the time of his betrayal by his brothers, in a quiet, unobtrusive, hidden, mysterious manner, God has been involved in the life of Joseph to accomplish his purposes. "God meant it for good." Only in retrospect, by faith, could God’s ways be understood. For many believers today God’s quiet, unobtrusive, mysterious ways are just as important, if not more so, than the fewer more dramatic
spiritual experiences that may or may not come.

One final point. The Holy History beginning with Abraham does not end with Genesis, but continues to the Book of Exodus and the decisive revelation in the time of Moses.

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