



An Introduction to the Book of Genesis

Author, Title, and Date

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. Numbers 33:2 and Deuteronomy 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, as indicated by the words of Jesus: <<***If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me***>> (John 5:46). This understanding of the Pentateuch’s origin was the view of Jews and Christians from pre-Christian times until the 19th Century.

However, this traditional view came to be rejected in the 19th and 20th Centuries by most critical scholars, who believed that Genesis and the other books had been composed over a long period of time and reached their final form in the 5th Century BC. In recent decades, however, scholars have become increasingly uncertain about these ideas. It has been recognised that the arguments for the late composition of the Pentateuch out of a variety of sources are flimsy and far from being cast-iron proofs. This is not to deny that the book of Genesis contains post-Mosaic elements, such as the place names Dan and ‘Ur of the Chaldeans’ (Genesis 14:14 and 15:7), or that the Hebrew of Genesis has been modernised somewhat, but this is to be expected in a sacred text preserved for the instruction of later generations. If they were to understand the text, place names and archaic language would have had to be revised.

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 (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 (17:8). And when the exiles started to return, they felt that those promises were being fulfilled (Nehemiah Chapter Nine). So it is possible that the stories were slightly updated as they were retold, but there is no evidence of substantial changes being made.

In fact, Genesis seems to reflect very well its origin in the Second Millennium BC; Moses lived in either the 1500s or 1300s. For example, the flood story finds its best parallels in the Atrahasis and Gilgamesh epics and in the Sumerian flood story, which were composed circa 1600BC, while the genealogies of Genesis Chapters Five and Eleven find a parallel in the Sumerian King List, dated about 1900BC. As far as the patriarchal stories are concerned, many features show that they are at home in the early Second Millennium. Their names are typical of that period, and many family customs correspond to what is known from that era. The rise of Joseph to be vizier or chief adviser of Egypt, although not mentioned in Egyptian texts, is quite feasible in the era of the Hyksos, i.e. the Semitic rulers of Egypt, in circa 1600BC. Whatever date is preferred for Moses and the composition of the Pentateuch, several centuries must have separated him from the patriarchs, during which the stories about them were presumably passed on by word of mouth, or perhaps by some kind of early written record that is now lost. In any case, these parallels confirm that the history recorded in Genesis is quite reliable.

Place in the Pentateuch

The first five books of the Bible are called Torah by the Jews, which means 'the Law,' and by Christians 'the Pentateuch' or 'the Five Books of Moses.' The overall theme of the Pentateuch is God's covenant with Israel through Moses, which established Israel as a theocracy, that is, a nation where God's directives rule the civil, social and religious spheres, for the sake of the whole world. In view of the authorship discussion above, it is reasonable to consider the first audience of the Pentateuch to be Israel in the wilderness, either the generation that left Egypt or their children.

Genesis, as the first volume of this first section of the Bible, orients the reader to the rest of the Pentateuch, and thus to the rest of the Bible. It explains in story form the nature and character of God, and the place of man in God's creation. It offers an analysis of sin and its consequences, and describes God's reaction to it, and thus shows why the true religion must be redemptive.

It records the call of Abraham, through whom all the nations of the world will be blessed, and traces the birth and careers of the forefathers of the nation of Israel, leading to Israel in Egypt. The fact that Yahweh is the universal Creator shows why Israel can have a message for all mankind. At the same time, Genesis sets out models of behaviour, both in its opening chapters and in the examples of the patriarchs' faithful obedience.

Genesis is therefore a book of instruction, and this is why Jews include it in the Law, for the Hebrew word Torah, usually translated 'the law,' has the broader sense of instruction. It can rightly be considered the 'First Book of Moses' because of its role as the prelude to the following four books, Exodus to Deuteronomy, which are structured around the life of Moses. Therefore, the first five books of the Bible are foundational to the rest, and Genesis is the foundation of the Pentateuch.

Arrangement of the Book

Genesis divides into two major sections:

1. The primeval history of the world before Abraham (Chapters 1-11).
2. The history of the patriarchs (Chapters 12-50). The proportions of the two sections are significant: essentially Chapters 1-11 are setting the stage for the main drama, namely, God's dealings with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and his sons – the subject of Chapters 12-50.

Genesis is about beginnings and generations. Starting with the divine ordering of creation, it follows for many generations a family line that takes the reader from Adam to Jacob and his sons. This family line forms the backbone of Genesis, links its disparate elements into a cohesive whole, and explains the distinctive literary features that set it apart from other OT narrative books.

One of the hallmarks of Genesis is the heading or title 'These are the generations or descendants of.' Each heading functions like a zoom lens by focusing attention on a smaller part of the total picture that has been shown in the preceding section, and the heading thus serves as an introduction to the following section. As Genesis describes how the earth's population increases over many generations, the reader's attention is constantly being directed toward one particular person in each generation and his descendants.

Literary Features

Genesis is a history book, with its history packaged in literary forms. Genesis 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 sympathise – 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 (Chapters 1-11), and the origins of the nation of Israel (Chapters 12-50).

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

1. 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.
2. Cultures celebrate heroes as a way of codifying their own ideals, values and virtues.
3. 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 centre 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 (Chapter Twenty Four).

Any of these events could have turned out differently, and then Isaac and Rebekah would never have married; perhaps, in view of 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.

Unifying literary motifs include:

1. The characterisation of God and the story of his dealings with people.
2. The sinfulness of the human race and individuals within it.
3. The story of the unfolding plan of God to redeem a people for himself despite human waywardness.

4. The hero story as the nearly constant genre.
5. Characters, characters, characters: as one reads Genesis, one is continually drawn into encounters with unforgettable characters and their stories, and lessons about wisdom and folly that can be learned from them.

The Generations of Genesis

Primeval History (1:1-11:26)

Introduction	Heading	Section introduced
2:4	These are the generations of the heavens and the earth	2:4-4:26
5:1	This is the list of the descendants of Adam	5:1-6:8
6:9	These are the descendants of Noah	6:9-9:29
10:1	These are the descendants of Noah's sons	10:1-11:9
11:10	These are the descendants of Shem	11:10-26

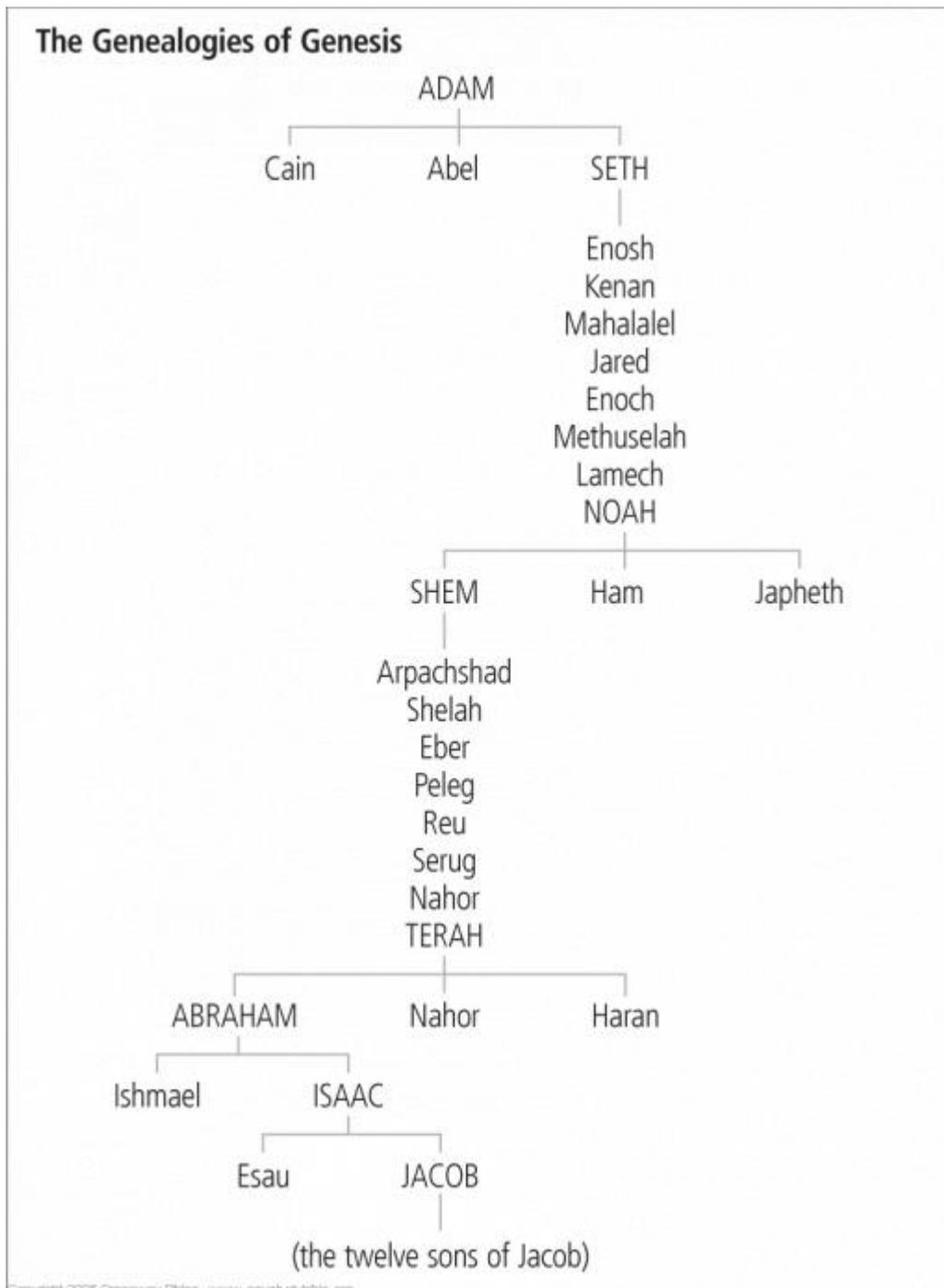
Patriarchal History (11:27-50:26)

Introduction	General heading	Section introduced
11:27	Now these are the descendants of Terah	11:27-25:11
25:12	These are the descendants of Ishmael	25:12-18
25:19	These are the descendants of Isaac	25:19-35:29
36:1, 36:9	These are the descendants of Esau	36:1-37:1
37:2	This is the story of the family of Jacob	37:2-50:26

Another important feature of Genesis is its particular interest in genealogies. Although these can be off-putting for modern readers, lacking the dramatic tension of the narrative episodes, they contribute in a special way to the structure of Genesis, as well as to its sense of history; see Genesis and History.

Different types of genealogy are used: linear and segmented. Genesis has two linear genealogies that cover ten generations, naming only one ancestor in each generation. These play an important role in linking major narrative sections. The period of Adam and Eve is linked to Noah by the genealogy in Chapter Five. A similar genealogy in 11:10-26 connects Noah's son Shem with Abraham. While the linear genealogies are integral to the central family line, Genesis has a number of segmented genealogies that perform a subsidiary function within the book. Giving limited information about characters of secondary interest, the segmented genealogies provide branched family trees that usually cover only a few generations; see 10:1-32, 25:12-18, 36:1-8 and 36:9-43. Whereas the linear genealogies take readers swiftly from A to B as part of a longer journey, the segmented genealogies are cul-de-sacs; refer to the diagram below.

The Genealogies of Genesis



Theme

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 (Chapter Eleven). The call of Abraham, through whom all the nations would be blessed, gives hope that God's purpose will eventually be realised through Abraham's descendants (Chapter Forty Nine).

Key Themes

<u>Theme</u>	<u>References</u>
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.	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 wilful disobedience radically affects human nature and the harmonious order of creation.	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.	3:15; 4:25; 5:2; 6:8-9; 11:10-26; 12:1-3; 17:4-6; 22:16-18; 26:3-4; 26:24; 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.	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 centres on pain in bearing children (3:16), women play an essential role in continuing the unique family line; with God's help even barrenness is overcome.	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. Although Genesis highlights the reality of family strife, the members of the family line have the potential to be agents of reconciliation.	4:1-16; 13:5-8; 13:8-11; 25:22-23, 25:29-34; 27:41-45; 33:1-11; 37:2-35; 45:1-28; 50:15-21.
7. Whereas exile from Eden and dispersion throughout the earth are used by God to punish the wicked, the promise of land is a sign of divine favour.	3:22-24; 4:12-16; 11:9; 12:1-2; 12:7; 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, he still desires that the earth should be populated by persons who are righteous.	1:28; 6:7; 6:11-12; 8:17; 9:1; 9:7; 15:1-5; 17:2; 18:17-33; 22:17; 26:4; 28:3; 35:11; 48:4.

History of Salvation Summary

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 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' (6:9) who found favour 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 (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 (25:29-34), Jacob deceptively gets from Isaac the firstborn blessing (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 (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 (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 (Psalm 78:67-72). Eventually, the divine promises linked to the family line in Genesis come to fulfilment in Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God who becomes by adoption 'the son of David, the son of Abraham' (Matthew 1:1, Acts 3:25-26 and

Galatians 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 (Genesis 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 (Exodus 19:6). Unfortunately, they never fully realise 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: **<<But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light>>** (1 Peter 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 Chapters 21-22 has close affinities with Genesis Chapters 1-2.

Genesis and History

Clearly all the events in Genesis long predate the time of Moses – this is so with the patriarchs (Chapters 12-50), and much more so with the primeval period (Chapters 1-11). Further, there are important parallels between Chapters 1-11 and stories of ancient times from Mesopotamia, e.g. creation and flood. Since these stories are generally called myths, some suggest that this is the right category for the stories in Chapters 1-11. Some even argue that the stories of the patriarchs are

legends, with only a loose connection to actual people and events. In order to sort through these issues, the first question is whether Genesis claims to record history.

In order to address this issue, it is crucial to have a good, clear and precise definition of history. In ordinary language, the word simply refers to an account of events that the author believes to have happened; in and of itself, the label history makes no comment about whether the account is complete, unbiased, free from divine activity, in strict chronological sequence, or with or without figurative and imaginative, sometimes called mythological, elements.

With this definition, it is easy to see that Genesis aims to record actual events rather than mythical events. The book explains to its Jewish audience how their ancestors came to be in Egypt; the genealogies connect Jacob and his children with the ancient generations, going back to Adam and Eve, the original pair of humans. Further, the book is narrative prose, whose main function in the Bible is to recount history. The creation account, 1:1-2:3, is stylistically different from the rest of the book; it is exalted prose, and its historicity is assumed elsewhere in the Bible, e.g. Psalm 136:4-9.

The similarities of Genesis Chapters 1-11 to the Mesopotamian stories actually support the conclusion that these chapters intend to record history. The Mesopotamian stories clearly aim to celebrate actual historical events, but they do so in mythological terms. The Genesis stories are fundamentally different, however, in that they recount the activities of the one true God. Genesis, like the Mesopotamian stories, provides the opening act of a grand narrative that conveys a particular worldview. In order to provide the necessary grounding for this worldview, the author needed to use real events, albeit theologically interpreted. In this way Genesis aims to provide a true record of these events, in harmony with the biblical worldview. That worldview includes the notions that Yahweh, the deity of Israel, is the universal Creator of heaven and earth, who made mankind to know and love him; that all mankind fell through the disobedience of Adam and Eve; and that God chose Israel to be the vehicle by which all mankind would receive the blessing of knowing the true God. Clearly, that worldview requires the events of Genesis to be historical.

At the same time, it is not possible to answer all questions arising from Genesis. For example, faithful interpreters of the book disagree on just how long Adam lived before Abraham, or even how long the creation period lasted; see Genesis and Science. There is not enough material here for a complete life of Abraham. Even the name of the pharaoh that Joseph served is not mentioned. It is possible through archæological research to locate some of the Genesis events in ancient Near Eastern history, at least in order to offer a plausible scenario for them. However, it remains true that Moses has not sought to provide a comprehensive retelling of ancient days; his purpose lay elsewhere.

Genesis and Science

The relation of Genesis to science is primarily a question of how one reads the accounts of creation and fall (Chapters 1-3), and of the flood (Chapters 6-9). What kind of 'days' does Genesis Chapter One describe? How long ago is this supposed to have happened? Were all species created as they are now? Were Adam and Eve real people? Are all people descended from them? How much of the earth did Noah's flood cover? How much impact did it have on geological formations?

Faithful interpreters have offered arguments for taking the creation week of Genesis Chapter One as a regular week with ordinary days, the 'calendar day' reading; or as a sequence of geological ages, the 'day-age' reading; or as God's 'workdays,' analogous to a human workweek, the 'analogical days' view; or as a literary device to portray the creation week as if it were a workweek, but without concern for temporal sequence, the 'literary framework' view. Some have suggested that Genesis 1:2a, <<***the earth was a formless void***>>, describes a condition that resulted from Satan's primeval rebellion, which preceded the creation week, as described in the 'gap theory.' There have been other readings as well, but these five are the most common.

None of these views requires denying that Genesis Chapter One is historical, so long as the discussion in the section on Genesis and History is kept in mind. Each of these readings can be squared with other biblical passages that reflect on creation. The most important of these is Exodus 20:11a, <<***For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day***>>, since this passage echoes Genesis 1:1-2:3, the word 'day' here need mean only what it means in Genesis Chapter One. Therefore, it does not require an ordinary day interpretation, nor does it preclude an ordinary day interpretation. The arguments for and against these different views involve detailed treatment of the Hebrew, going far beyond the question of the meaning of 'day,' and assessing these arguments would go beyond the goal of this discussion.

A further question involves the genealogies: do they describe direct father-to-son descent, or do they allow for gaps? The Hebrew term 'father' can be used of a distant ancestor, and 'son' can refer to a distant descendant. Likewise, 'to father' can mean 'to become the ancestor of.' In other words, the conventions for Hebrew genealogies allow for gaps; genealogies are not given to indicate a length of time.

These issues become less pressing when it is recalled that no biblical passage ever actually purports to count up the length of the creation week, outside of Exodus 20:11, and that no biblical author adds up the life spans in the genealogies to compute absolute time.

Should Genesis Chapter One be called a 'scientific account'? Again, it is crucial to have a careful definition. Does Genesis Chapter One record a true account of the origin of the material universe? To that question, the answer must be yes. On the other hand, does Genesis Chapter One provide information in a way that corresponds to the purposes of modern science? To this question the answer is no. Consider some of the challenges. For example, the term 'kind' does not correspond to the notion of 'species'; it simply means 'category,' and could refer to a species, or a family, or an even more general taxonomic group. Indeed, the plants are put into two general categories, small seed-bearing plants and larger woody plants. The land animals are classified as domesticated stock animals or livestock; small things such as mice, lizards and spiders, i.e. creeping things; and larger game and predatory animals, 'the beasts of the earth.' Indeed, no species, other than man, gets its proper Hebrew name. Not even the sun and moon get their ordinary Hebrew names (1:16). The text says nothing about the process by which <<***the earth brought forth vegetation***>> (1:12), or by which the various kinds of animals appeared; although the fact that it was in response to God's command indicates that it was not due to any natural powers inherent in the material universe itself.

This account is well cast for its main purpose, which was to enable a community of nomadic shepherds in the Sinai desert to celebrate the boundless creative goodness of the Creator; it does not say why, e.g. a spider is different from a snake, nor does it comment on what genetic relationship there might be between various creatures. At the same time, when the passage is received according to its purpose, it shapes a worldview in which science is at home, probably the only worldview that really makes science possible. This is a concept of a world that a good and wise God made, perfectly suited for humans to enjoy and to rule. The things in the world have natures that people can know, at least in part. Human senses and intelligence are the right tools for discerning and saying true things about the world. The effects of sin, of course, can interfere with this process.

It is clear that Adam and Eve are presented as real people. Their role in the story, as the channel by which sin came into the world, implies that they are seen as the headwaters of the human race. The image of God distinguishes them from all the animals, and is a special bestowal of God, i.e. not a purely natural development. It is no wonder that all human beings share capacities for language, moral judgment, rationality and appreciation for beauty, unlike and beyond the powers observed in the animals; any science that ignores this fact does not faithfully describe reality. The biblical worldview leads one to expect as well that all humans now share a need for God and a bent toward sin, as well as a possibility for faith in the true God.

One must take similar care in reading the flood story. The notes will discuss the extent to which Moses intended to describe the flood's coverage of the globe.

Certainly the description of the flood implies that it was widespread and catastrophic, but there are difficulties in making confident claims that the account is geared to answering the question of just how widespread. Thus, it would be incautious to attribute to the flood all the geological formations observed today – the strata, the fossils, the deformations, and so on. Geologists agree that catastrophic events, such as volcanic eruptions and large-scale floods, have had great impact on the landscape; it is questionable, though, whether these events can in fact achieve all that might be claimed for them. Again, such matters do not come within the author's own scope, which is to stress the interest that God has in all mankind.

Thus, even though it is wrong to use Genesis as if it were directly furnishing information in modern scientific form, it is nonetheless crucial to affirm its historical account and its God-centred worldview in order to provide a proper foundation for doing good science.

Reading Genesis in the 21st Century

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 channelled, 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

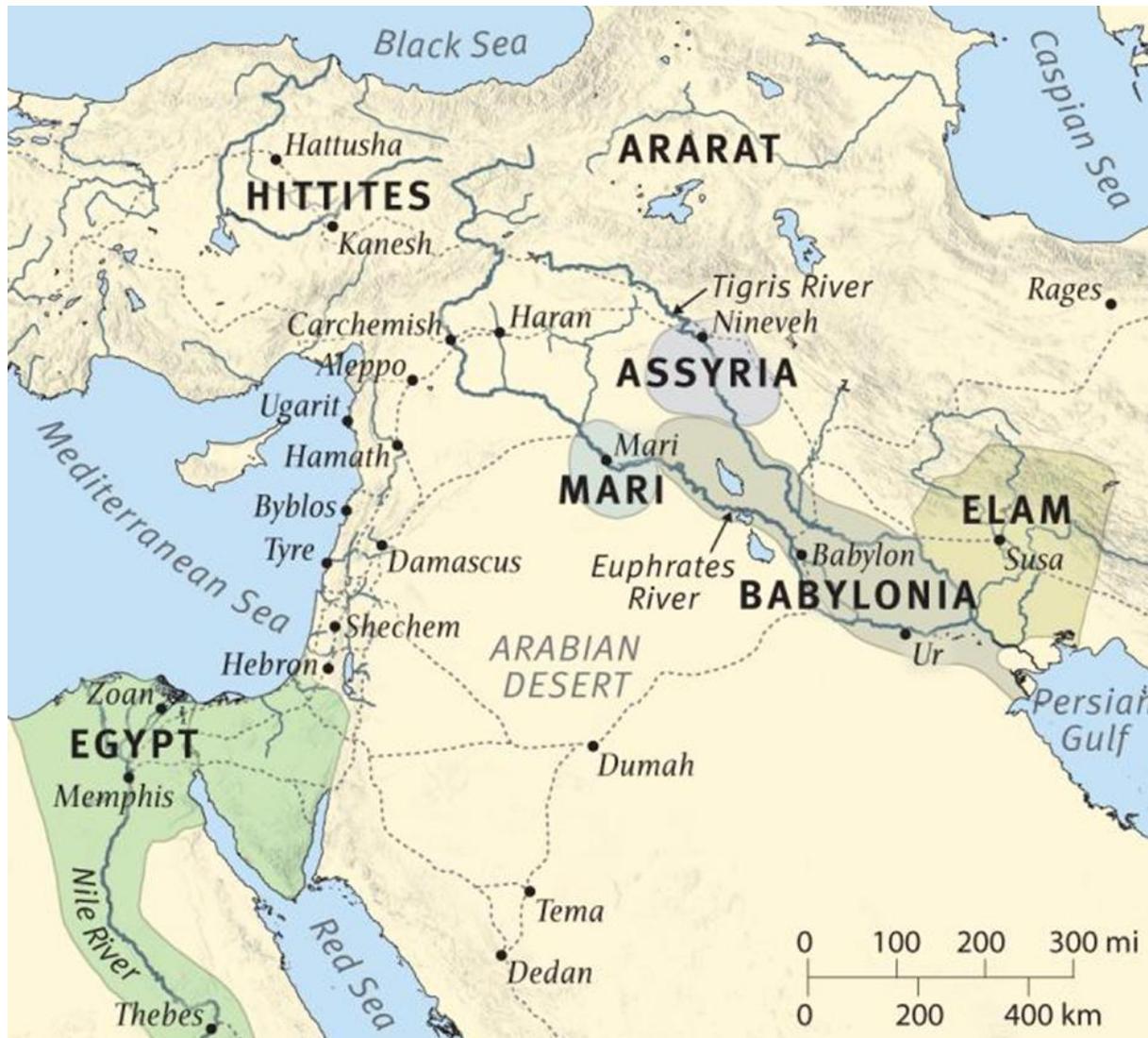
Chapters are meant to convey history, and that they present a worldview that gives science its proper home. At the same time, this is not the same as saying that they offer their message in a form that modern readers are accustomed to reading. To read Genesis well, it is helpful to have some understanding 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 Chapter One 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 conflict 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.

The Near East at the Time of Genesis (circa 2000BC)

The book of Genesis describes events in the ancient Near East from the beginnings of civilisation to the relocation of Jacob's, i.e. Israel's, family in Egypt. The stories of Genesis are set among some of the oldest nations in the world, including Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia and Elam.



Outline

- I. Primeval History (1:1-11:26)
 - a. Six Days of Creation and the Sabbath (1:1-2:4a)
 - b. Earth's First People (2:4b-4:26)
 - i. Another Account of the Creation (2:4b-25)
 - ii. The First Sin and Its Punishment (3:1-24)
 - iii. Adam and Eve's Sons (4:1-26)
 1. Cain Murders Abel (4:1-16)

- 2. Beginnings of Civilisation (4:17-26)
 - c. Adam's Descendants (5:1-6:8)
 - i. Adam's Descendants to Noah and His Sons (5:1-32)
 - ii. The Wickedness of Humankind (6:1-8)
 - d. Noah's Descendants and the Flood (6:9-9:29)
 - i. Noah Pleases God (6:9-22)
 - ii. The Great Flood (7:1-24)
 - iii. The Flood Subsides (8:1-19)
 - iv. God's Promise to Noah (8:20-22)
 - v. The Covenant with Noah (9:1-17)
 - vi. Noah and His Sons (9:18-29)
 - e. The Descendants of Noah's Sons (10:1-11:9)
 - i. Nations Descended from Noah (10:1-32)
 - ii. The Tower of Babel (11:1-9)
 - f. Descendants of Shem (11:10-26)
- II. Patriarchal History (11:27-50:26)
 - a. Abraham (11:27-25:18)
 - i. Descendants of Terah (11:27-32)
 - ii. The Call of Abram (12:1-9)
 - iii. Abram and Sarai in Egypt (12:10-20)
 - iv. Abram and Lot Separate (13:1-18)
 - v. Lot's Captivity and Rescue (14:1-16)
 - vi. Abram Blessed by Melchizedek (14:17-24)
 - vii. God's Covenant with Abram (15:1-21)
 - viii. The Birth of Ishmael (16:1-16)
 - ix. The Sign of the Covenant (17:1-27)
 - x. The Destruction of Sodom (18:1-19:29)
 - 1. A Son Promised to Abraham and Sarah (18:1-15)
 - 2. Judgement Pronounced on Sodom (18:16-33)
 - 3. The Depravity of Sodom (19:1-11)
 - 4. Sodom and Gomorrah Destroyed (19:12-29)
 - xi. The Shameful Origin of Moab and Ammon (19:30-38)

- xii. Abraham and Sarah at Gerar (20:1-18)
- xiii. The Birth of Isaac (21:1-7)
- xiv. Hagar and Ishmael Sent Away (21:8-21)
- xv. Abraham and Abimelech Make a Covenant (21:22-34)
- xvi. The Command to Sacrifice Isaac (22:1-19)
- xvii. The Children of Nahor (22:20-24)
- xviii. Sarah's Death and Burial (23:1-20)
- xix. The Marriage of Isaac and Rebekah (24:1-67)
- xx. Abraham Marries Keturah (25:1-6)
- xxi. The death of Abraham (25:7-11)
- xxii. Ishmael's Descendants (25:12-18)
- b. Isaac's Descendants (25:19-36:43)
 - i. The Birth and Youth of Esau and Jacob (25:19-28)
 - ii. Esau Sells His Birthright (25:29-34)
 - iii. Isaac and Abimelech (26:1-33)
 - iv. Esau's Hittite Wives (26:34-35)
 - v. Isaac Blesses Jacob (27:1-29)
 - vi. Esau's Lost Blessing (27:30-40)
 - vii. Jacob Escapes Esau's Fury (27:41-28:5)
 - viii. Esau Marries Ishmael's Daughter (28:6-9)
 - ix. Jacob's Dream at Bethel (28:10-22)
 - x. Jacob Meets Rachel (29:1-14)
 - xi. Jacob marries Leah and Rachel (29:15-30:24)
 - xii. Jacob Prepares to Return to Canaan (30:25-31:21)
 - 1. Jacob Prospers at Laban's Expense (30:25-43)
 - 2. Jacob Flees with Family and Flocks (31:1-21)
 - xiii. Laban Accuses Jacob in Gilead (31:22-32:2)
 - 1. Laban Overtakes Jacob (31:22-42)
 - 2. Laban and Jacob Make a Covenant (31:43-32:2)
 - xiv. Jacob Sends Presents to Appease Esau (32:3-21)
 - xv. Jacob Wrestles at Peniel (32:22-32)
 - xvi. Jacob and Esau Meet (33:1-17)

- xvii. Jacob Reaches Shechem (33:18-20)
- xviii. The Rape of Dinah (34:1-24)
- xix. Dinah's Brothers Avenge Their Sister (34:25-31)
- xx. Jacob's Onward Journey to Hebron (35:1-29)
 - 1. Jacob Returns to Bethel (35:1-15)
 - 2. The Birth of Benjamin and the Death of Rachel (35:16-26)
 - 3. The Death of Isaac (35:27-29)
- xxi. Esau's Descendants (36:1-14)
- xxii. Clans and Kings of Edom (36:15-43)
- c. Jacob's Descendants (37:1-50:26)
 - i. Joseph Goes Into Slavery (37:1-36)
 - 1. Joseph Dreams of Greatness (37:1-11)
 - 2. Joseph Is Sold by His Brothers (37:12-36)
 - ii. Judah and Tamar (38:1-30)
 - iii. Joseph and Potiphar's Wife (39:1-23)
 - iv. The Dreams of Two Prisoners (40:1-23)
 - v. Joseph Interprets Pharaoh's Dream (41:1-36)
 - vi. Joseph's Rise to Power (41:37-57)
 - vii. The Brothers' First Journey to Egypt (42:1-38)
 - 1. Joseph's Brothers Go to Egypt (42:1-25)
 - 2. Joseph's Brothers Return to Canaan (42:26-38)
 - viii. The Brothers Come Again, Bringing Benjamin (43:1-34)
 - ix. Benjamin is Accused of Stealing (44:1-34)
 - 1. Joseph Detains Benjamin (44:1-17)
 - 2. Judah Pleads for Benjamin's Release (44:18-34)
 - x. Joseph Reveals Himself to His Brothers (45:1-28)
 - xi. Jacob Brings His Whole Family to Egypt (46:1-27)
 - xii. Jacob Settles in Goshen (46:28-47:12)
 - xiii. The Famine in Egypt (47:13-26)
 - xiv. The Last Days of Jacob (47:27-31)
 - xv. Jacob Blesses Joseph's Sons (48:1-22)

- xvi. Jacob's Last Words to His Sons (49:1-28)
- xvii. Jacob's Death and Burial (49:29-50:14)
- xviii. Joseph Forgives His Brothers (50:15-21)
- xix. Joseph's Last Days and Death (50:22-26)