



Genesis 1:3

GENESIS

Background File

Moses has traditionally been considered the author of Genesis, which is part of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible. For about five hundred years, since the Reformation, the question of who wrote Genesis has been seen to be more complex. Genesis is now usually understood to have been written and compiled over the course of more than five centuries, being completed shortly after the Babylonian exile (587-538 B.C.E.), when many of the Jewish people returned to their homeland of Judah and rebuilt Jerusalem and the temple.

What's the Story?

The book of Genesis is divided into two primary sections: Genesis 1-11 portrays the beginnings of the world, including creation, the fall into sin, and the flood and its aftermath. Genesis 12-50 tells the story of Israel's ancestors and is especially concerned to speak of God's promises to this family. The book may be outlined as follows:

The Primeval Story (Gen 1:1–11:26). God, with the help of various agents, creates the world. Human sin intrudes on the creation, with social and cosmic effects. God promises a new world order.

The Story of Abraham and Sarah (Gen 11:27–25:18). God calls Abraham and makes promises to him and his descendants through both Hagar and Sarah, though it is only through his son Isaac that the covenant is established.

The Story of Jacob, Leah, and Rachel (Gen 25:19–36:43). God renews the promises to Jacob/Israel, whose twelve sons become the tribes of Israel.

The Story of Jacob's Sons, Especially Joseph (Gen 37:1–50:26). The development of Jacob's family is seen mainly through the prism of the story of Joseph.

The scholarly effort to reconstruct the history that lies behind the book of Genesis has had mixed results, because the materials have been edited over many centuries and because these chapters are more story than historical account. Especially regarding Genesis 1-11, we cannot determine its

specific historical background with any confidence. As for Genesis 12–50, it is reasonable to claim that the stories carry authentic memories of Israel’s ancient history prior to the Exodus from Egypt (about 2000–1500 B.C.E.). Yet, because these stories come from so long ago, it is difficult to verify the extent to which the stories of the women and men of Genesis reflect actual historical figures and events.

What’s the Message?

Genesis is the first “chapter” of the Bible. Like the first chapter of any book, the placement of Genesis at the beginning is important for understanding both Genesis and the Bible as a whole.

The Bible begins, not with the chosen people (Israel), but with the entire creation. It provides the reader with a universal frame of reference. Through it we can interpret everything that follows. God’s purposes—at work among the people of Israel and in Jesus Christ—have to do with all of God’s good creation. “For God so loved the world . . .” (see John 3:16).

Genesis continues with a sad story that has tragic effects. God created a good world with no sin and evil. Human beings did not trust God, and this sin disrupted the life of God’s good world. Relationships at every level fell apart: between human beings and God, among human beings, and between human beings and other creatures, including land and animals. Sin and evil are now powerful forces at work in the life of the world. Even so, God continues to shower blessings at every turn.

Genesis continues with a divine strategy to save a world broken by sin and evil. To this end, God chooses the family of Abraham and Sarah. Their task is stated clearly in Genesis 12:3: “in you all the families of the earth [listed in Gen 10] shall be blessed.” God chooses one family as a means to save all families. Initially, God makes an exclusive move (choosing one family) to achieve an inclusive end: salvation of the entire creation, both human and nonhuman.

Genesis focuses on God’s promises. After the flood God promises never to judge the world like this again. This promise is the foundation for God’s later promises to the chosen family: blessing, descendants, a great name and nation, and a land to call their own. These promises, repeated throughout Genesis, begin to be fulfilled in this family’s growth.

Genesis focuses on families. This interest in family life begins with Cain and Abel but centers on the families of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Leah/Rachel, and their children. But these stories do not present families in ideal terms. The chosen family is dysfunctional! Yet God chooses to work in and through them, with all their flaws and weaknesses, on behalf of God’s purposes for the world. Readers from every generation can recognize themselves in these families.

Genesis has an interest in the outsider, on families not chosen. Genesis often portrays the chosen family in relationships with outsiders (Egyptians, Canaanites, Philistines, Aramaeans), especially in view of its call to be a blessing to all families. Sometimes the chosen fulfill their responsibilities in exceptional ways; at other times they alienate the outsider and frustrate God’s purposes. These stories help readers think carefully about how they are relating to the outsiders in our communities.