

THE BOOK OF GENESIS – PART I – SECTION 2

OVERVIEW AND OUTLINE

I. The book of Genesis is a part of the Pentateuch, called the Torah by Jews. The Torah is traditionally ascribed to Moses. More recently, scholars have argued that it comes from a variety of sources and was written up to the sixth century B. C.

A. The Pentateuch is the first five books of the Bible, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. They describe the history of God's providence from Creation through the journey of the Chosen People from Egypt to the Promised Land and ends with the Chosen People about to enter this land.

- Called the Torah (Law) by the Jews, these books are to them the most important part of the word of God.

- The main theme of the Pentateuch is God calling a people for Himself, His establishment of a covenant with them, His holiness and His fidelity. The covenants go from the one with Adam, damaged in original sin, to the ones with Noah, Abraham, and Moses and the Chosen People at Sinai.

B. There is a longstanding tradition that the Pentateuch was written by Moses.

1. By its own account, Deuteronomy is the last words of Moses before the Chosen People entered the Promised Land, in which he recounts the history set forth in the other books.

2. The Pentateuch records Moses as recounting events and covenants in writing. See Ex. 17:14, 24:4-7, 24:27; Num. 33:2; Duet. 31:9, 24. Elsewhere, the Old Testament refers to Moses as the author of "the book of the law" or "the book of the covenant." See Joshua 1:7-8, 8:31-34, 23:6; Neh. 8:14; Dan. 9:11-13; Sir. 24:22.

3. The New Testament sometimes refers to the writings of Moses, which would presumably be the Torah. See, e.g., Matt. 19:7-8; Mark 7:10, 10:3-5; Luke 24:27; John 5:45-47; 7:19, 8:5; Acts 3:22, 26:22; Rom. 10:5. In Mark 12:19-26, Jesus also described Moses as the author of the "passage about the bush," i.e. God's appearance to Moses at the burning bush. The Torah was sometimes called "the books of Moses."

C. However, it has been argued from ancient times that later generations added to the Law of Moses to complete what we now call the Pentateuch. For example, St. Jerome believed that Ezra, a high priest after Israel's return from Exile in 530, added some detail to the Pentateuch.

D. In 1906, the Pontifical Biblical Commission, in its document "On the Mosaic Authorship of the Pentateuch" favored Mosaic authorship in general, but granted that there may well have been adaptations later. In a 1948 letter to Cardinal Suhard, the Archbishop of Paris, it cited that finding and added, "No one today doubts the existence of these sources or rejects a gradual increase of Mosaic laws due to the social and religious conditions of later times, a process manifest also in the historical narratives. However, even among non-Catholic exegetes very diverse opinions are held today concerning the character and the number of these documents, their names and dates. There are even authors in different countries, who for purely critical and historical reasons quite unconnected with any religious purpose resolutely reject the theories most in favor up to the present"

E. Many modern theories are based upon, or reactions to, a fourfold schema set forth by Julius Wellhausen in 1878. It states that the Pentateuch came from four sources.

1. The oldest source, the Yahwehist (J) source, so named because the source is described as calling God Yahweh (I am) most often, would have been from the 9th or 10th century B.C., when the kingdom was divided. The source calls people back to the personal covenant with God. This source (or perhaps better described as a strain) emphasizes the personal contact of God and used a great deal of anthropomorphism. The second creation account, and most of the first 11 chapters of Genesis, along with the call of Abraham would be from this source.

2. The Elohist (E) source, so named because the source is described as referred to God most often as Elohim (the Lord,) is described as coming from northern kingdom in the 8th or 9th centuries. It emphasizes God more at a distance, often speaking through dreams, such as that of Jacob and Joseph. It describes the majesty of God more, as with the call of Moses. It also warns very strongly against adopting foreign gods, which was a continual temptation especially of the northern kingdom. It emphasizes as well the unity of the people of Israel.

3. The Deuteronomist (D) source is said to come from the 7th or 8th century B.C. when the northern kingdom had been destroyed and the southern kingdom was being threatened. The focus, which is primarily in the Book of Deuteronomy, is on the importance of the law and the results of adhering to it or not. This source is often associated with Josiah, the just

and holy king of the southern kingdom who found a book of the law in the Temple. See 2 Kings 22:8ff.

4. The Priestly source (P) is said to have been written during or after the exile in 586-538 B.C. to bring people back to the importance of the worship of God, particularly reflected in Leviticus and the beginning of Numbers. This source is said to be the force behind the ordering of many accounts in the Torah into neat divisions (e.g., the seven days of creation, the six campsites leading up to Mount Sinai and the six leading from there to the Holy Land.) This source emphasizes renewal and the idea of covenants and blessings more (e.g., the idea of all nations being blessed through Abraham, see Gen. 12:2-3, or of Jacob's blessings for his sons, see Gen. 49.) This source is also said to be the one behind the emphasis on genealogies, for the renewal of the Chosen People after the exile, and especially of the worship, was based heavily on getting people back into their rightful families.

5. There are also views on the subsets of each source (e.g., P1, P2, etc.) These different sources can also be thought of as simply different strains of thought in the Pentateuch, regardless of when they were written. It is very possibly that Moses gave the people the basic law and accounts that would become the Pentateuch, but that they were refined over time, thus accounting for the different style in language and ordering.

6. This theory, called the four-source theory explains why there are very different styles and language in the Pentateuch and why the narrative seems to go back and forth between explanations. E.g., Compare Gen. 26:34, 28:9 and 36:2-3 (listing different wives for Esau); Gen. 27:28 and 37:36 (describing Medianites and then Ishmaelites as bringing Joseph to Egypt); Gen. 42:27-28, 42:35 (giving different accounts of when Joseph's brothers discovered that gold had been returned.) However, it has also been criticized on the grounds that: (1) there is no external evidence from ancient times of these sources composing part of the Pentateuch; (2) there is a coherent whole to the Pentateuch and apparent differences within the narratives can be explained by different perspectives more easily than radically different authors; and (3) that there is no language in the Pentateuch reflecting the time of the exile (i.e., Babylonian or Persian terms), as there is with later books, such as Judith and Daniel, which indicates that all of the Pentateuch was written before the Exile in 586 B.C. See, e.g., Gary Rendsburg, The Book of Genesis, Vol. I 95-97 (The Teaching Company, 2006). These four sources may be best seen as influences and emphases in the Pentateuch.

- F. All people are agreed that the Pentateuch in general and the Book of Genesis in particular was written before the neat distinctions between poetry and prose, and between literature and textual learning was established.
1. The notion of recording history as a separate subject began in the classical world with Herodotus (484-424 B.C.), a Greek historian who travelled around Greece and Asia Minor and is the first known scholar in the Western world to research sources thoroughly and put together a flowing historical narrative.
 2. Philosophy as a distinct subject began with the classic philosophers Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and the other schools of Greece, such as the Sophists in fifth century Greece. Before that time, there were pre-Socratic philosophies, but they were in the style of literature, rather than systematic reasoning.
 3. The Pentateuch thus takes a literary approach to both theological and philosophical matters. It presents real historical events, but often (especially in the first 11 chapters of Genesis) in literary format. Its history takes on a literary style that does not attempt to cover comprehensively all that we might now be interested in.

III. The Book of Genesis recounts in very short order the time up to the call of Abraham and then focuses on the history of the patriarchs as God called a family to be His own.

A. The first eleven chapters are a sort of prehistory of the Chosen People that sets forth the basic notion of creation as good, but fallen, and of humanity as often sinning, but also often striving, albeit in imperfect ways, to respond to God's love. These chapters were written in very mythological terms, but still recount real events (e.g., creation, the Fall, and probably the Great Flood, which seems to have been an event in prehistoric Mesopotamia.)

1. It has been debated from the beginning of the Church whether those chapters were meant to be more symbolic or describing history in a more literalistic fashion. For examples, St. Augustine (354-430) in his Confessions and Origen (185-254) in De Principis book IV, read them to be symbolic, with St. Augustine saying that they reflect the order in which creation was revealed to the angels, and Origen saying that they are a seven-fold reflection of the mystery of God. By contrast, St. Basil the Great (320-379) and St. Ephraim (306-373) thought that the days were meant as time periods. St.

Thomas Aquinas considered both views and thought it unnecessary to decide between them. See Summa Theologica, Part I, question 74, articles 1-2.

2. These chapters have several sections, indicating God's goodness and desire to preserve the world, but human sinfulness marring his creation.
3. Chapters 1-2 describe creation as fundamentally good and ordered, and man and woman at the height. That creation is marred in the Fall, described in chapter 3.
4. Chapter 4 to chapter 6, verse 4 then play out the theme of the fall, with much corruption, but also goodness coming through at times, such as the rebirth of worship in chapter 4, verse 26 and Enoch who "walked with God and was no longer here" in chapter 5, verse 24.
5. Evil seems about to overcome good when God sends the flood, while saving Noah and his family. That central narrative continues from chapter 6 through chapter 8. God then establishes a covenant with Noah in chapter 9, but even here evil creeps in with Noah's drunkenness and the betrayal of Canaan.
6. Chapters 10 and 11 then describe the history from the Flood up to Abraham. Once again there is evil in the world, but God calls His people from it.

B. Starting in Chapter 11, Genesis then gets to the main theme, i.e. God's call to Abraham, who already was apparently seeking

God.

1. Scholars differ about what time in human history when this call occurred. If we take all of the dates in the Old Testament at face value, we arrive at a date of about 2000.

a. This surface level dating comes from the fact that 1 Kings records the Temple as being built 480 years after the Exodus began. With the Temple plainly built about 970 B.C., that would put the Exodus at about 1450 B.C. Several statements in the Bible also say that the time in Egypt was 400-450 years. See Gen. 15:13; Ex. 12:40; Acts 13:20. That would put the resettlement in Egypt described at the end of Genesis at about 1900, making the call of Abraham something close to 2000 B.C. For Isaac was born to Abraham about 25 years after the call, Jacob born to Isaac at about the age of 40, Joseph born to Jacob probably when Jacob was in his mid-30s and Joseph sold into slavery probably in his late teens. Thus, if we take the ages in Genesis as historical, Joseph's departure into Egypt was probably about 115 years after Abraham's first call, and the rest of Jacob's family following suit about 20 years later.

b. However, one or both of those times are often considered to be round numbers, and the actual call of Abraham later. In particular, the term 480 year can be read as 12 generations, for in Israeli thought the a generation was thought of as lasting about 40 years (the time of the wandering in the desert after leaving Egypt), even though as a practical matter generations usually consist of a much shorter period. If the Exodus is thought of as occurring about 1275 B.C., during the reign of Ramses II, which seems likely, and if the time in Egypt was 400-450 years, the call of Abraham would have been about 1800 B.C.

c. Some scholars consider the time in Egypt also to be much shorter than the full 400-450 years described in the Bible, and thus consider the call of Abraham to be more recent, as late as about 1400 B.C. See Rendsburg, The Book of Genesis 156-166. Other scholars have argued that the evidence of mass migration from Mesopotamia to Palestine was common from 2000 -1800, and it is likely that Abraham was a part of that migration. See Lawrence Boadt, Reading the Old Testament 135 (1984).

2. In any case, God called Abraham, along with the several hundred people in his clan, to what would become the Promised Land. He made Abraham promises in a covenant that would be established and expanded twice. The three

times when the covenant is sworn mark the framework of chapters 12-21.

1. In chapter 12, God first calls the 75 year old Abraham, who is married to Sarah, but childless. Having already led his father out of Ur, God calls for Abraham to go to the Promised Land with his clan and promises to make a great nation of Abraham, giving him a blessing through which all nations will be blessed.

- After some odd adventures in Egypt and then battles with the local kings, Abraham meets and honors the mysterious Melchizedek, priest king of Salem.

2. In chapter 15, God reaffirms the covenant with Abraham and promises him heirs in a mysterious night time ritual in which Abraham senses the power of God's presence.

- Not quite understanding God's commands, Abraham, at Sarah's recommendation, has a child Ishmael through his wife's maid Hagar.

3. In chapter 17, God reaffirms the covenant, adding the requirement of circumcision, and promising that the covenant would be fulfilled through Sarah's child.

- In chapter 18, Abraham greets three angels, who represent God and reaffirm the covenant.

- In chapters 18 and 19, God destroys Sodom and Gomorrah because of their sinfulness, sparing Lot and his daughters, who would become the founders of neighboring peoples.

- Chapter 20 gives a short conclusion with another neighboring people, led by a king called Abimelech, who is more just than Abraham thinks.

C. Starting in chapter 21, the emphasis begins to switch to Isaac, who is both the first fulfillment of God's promise and a test of Abraham's fidelity. The next five chapters describe the events surrounding him.

1. In chapter 21, Abraham and Sarah have their first son Isaac. The covenant is beginning to be fulfilled.
2. But then chapter 22 recounts the terrible test when God tells Abraham to offer Isaac as a sacrifice, but a sacrifice that is then forbidden.
3. After describing Sarah's burial in chapter 23, the text then switches to Isaac's adventures, which begin in chapter 24, with his courting of Rebekah. After a short discussion of other descendants of Abraham, the text then describes some of Isaac's adventures regarding dwelling in a foreign land because of a famine. There are remarkably similar to those of Abraham earlier, with either the same or a different king Abimelech.

D. From Isaac, the emphasis switches to Jacob, whom God has chosen to inherit the promises, in place of his strong, but rather impulsive and thoughtless brother Esau. As with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob is presented as perfect or superhuman, but rather as one who placed his faith in God and slowly grew into His promises.

1. The main theme of the crafty Jacob and physically strong but clueless Esau having been introduced in chapter 25, chapter 27 recounts Jacob obtaining through deceit the blessing due to the firstborn from Isaac.
2. Chapters 28-31 then recount Jacob's flight to the lands owned by his uncle Laban and his life there. There is a great deal of mutual deceit between them, but in the end Jacob marries two women, Leah and Rachel, and from them and their handmaids, has eleven of his twelve sons. These sons will found the tribes of Israel.
3. Chapters 32 and 33 then describe his reconciliation with Esau and the beginning of his return home. In this midst of this restoration, Jacob wrestles with an angel and receives the name Israel (one who contended with God.)
4. Chapters 34 and 35 then describe the remainder of Jacob's return home, with terrible tragedies, but a conclusion with the birth of Jacob's last son Benjamin and return to Isaac.

5. Chapter 36 is an interlude, describing the descendants of Esau.

E. Then, starting in chapter 37, the emphasis switches to God's providence working through the life of Joseph.

1. In chapter 37, Joseph's brothers sell him into slavery because of jealousy. One sees in this chapter and in chapter 38 the beginnings of the rise of Judah in prominence over Reuben, who is the first born, but weak.
2. In chapter 39, Joseph is tempted by the wife of his Egyptian master. He passes the test, but is falsely accused and imprisoned.
3. Chapters 40 and 41 describe Joseph's rise to prominence through his ability to interpret the dreams God sends.
4. In chapters 42-45, Joseph's brothers are forced to come to Egypt for food. They do not recognize Joseph, who is in charge of the distribution. Through a series of ruses, Joseph tests before finally revealing himself to the family. Judah takes on fully to role of leader among the other 11 brothers, and Joseph shows himself to be a magnificent ruler, prayerful, wise and forgiving.
5. In chapters 46 and 47, the family of Jacob settles in Egypt and prospers because of Joseph's protection.
6. In chapters 48 and 49, Jacob gives his final blessings, which are not always positive, but they foreshadow the future of Israel and hint at the Messiah.
7. Chapter 50 then concludes with a short summary of the events after the death of Jacob, with the situation for his house seemingly going well. The Book of Exodus will open later after the situation has very much reversed itself.
8. One very defensible scenario has these events occurring about 1700 B.C., although other views date it anywhere from 1900 B.C. to about 1350 B.C.