

Information about Genesis

The word genesis comes from a Greek word meaning “beginning” or literally the first three words found in the book in English “in the beginning”. Thus we are tipped off that this is a book about beginnings, and it moves from a universal view to a very specific one—the beginning of the world, the beginning of humans, and the beginning of the people of Israel that comes from a call to an individual, Abram which means “father” who becomes Abraham or “father of many”. Genesis is also a book of faith, which means that it is mainly concerned with who God is and how God has been involved in the lives of people from the beginning or the time of creation.

Why was Genesis written?

The earliest ancestors of the Israelites did not write down their family history, but they told stories. These stories were passed on for generations. Eventually, they were written down so that the people of Israel would have a record of how God created the world and how they became God’s people. The book describes how the first human beings broke the perfect relationship they had with God in the Garden of Eden. But God did not give up on human beings, and eventually chose Abram and Sarai (later called Abraham and Sarah) to leave their home in Northern Mesopotamia and go to Canaan, a land God promised to give to Abram and his descendants. God also promised Abram that his descendants would be a great people who would bring God’s blessings to all the other nations of the world. God’s covenant with Abraham is spelled out in Genesis 12:1-3. The covenant contains five to seven specific promises or blessings (can you find and name them?). The Abrahamic covenant is an unconditional covenant whereby God promises these blessings no matter what Abraham does. You can contrast covenant with Abraham with the conditional covenant with Adam in which Adam’s obedience determines whether he is blessed or punished by God.

Genesis includes a number of family lists (genealogies) to explain how the Israelite people are related to each other and to other peoples and nations in the ancient Near East, Middle East, and northeastern Africa.

What’s the story behind the scene?

According to tradition, Moses was considered the author and collector of the first five books of the Bible, including Genesis. It is difficult to say for certain when Moses lived, but the Bible (see 1 Kings 6:1) and other ancient documents seem to point to some time between 1400 and 1250 B.C. That would make Genesis over 3300 years old! However, in the past two centuries, some Bible scholars have suggested that Genesis actually reached its final form much later than the time of Moses, perhaps as late as the time of Israel’s exile in Babylon (587 to 538 B.C.). Scholars noted that the two descriptions of God’s creation of the earth differ slightly, and each uses a different name for God. They began to wonder if the book may be a collection of the writings of different authors, each having important stories and history to contribute to this “family album” of Israel’s earliest ancestors. But no matter who wrote the book, its main message is clear: The God of Abraham, Sarah, and their descendants (the people of Israel) is the creator of the world and acts in history to save all people.

How is Genesis constructed?

Genesis can be divided into two main parts: (1) Chapters 1-11 cover the creation of the world and the earliest human families, as well as the Great Flood and the creation of different languages. (2) Chapters 12-50 tell the story of the ancestors of the people of Israel, beginning with the adventures of Abraham and Sarah and ending with their grandson Jacob's family living in Egypt. A broad outline of the book follows these two main parts.

Outline of Genesis

The beginning of human history 1:1-11:25

God creates the universe and all living things 1:1-2:25

Sin in Eden 3:1-4:16

The first generations of human beings 4:17-5:32

Noah and his descendants 6:1-11:25

The beginning of God's people, Israel 11:26-50:26

Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac 11:26-23:20

Isaac and his family 24:1-28:9

Jacob and Esau and their families 28:10-36:43

The story of Jacob's son, Joseph 37:1-50:26

Suggestions for Further Reading:

There are a staggering number of commentaries on the book of GENESIS. The following are some that will be especially useful for personal study and teaching.

Brueggemann, Walter. *Genesis. Interpretation.* Atlanta: John Knox, 1982.

Fretheim, Terence. *Creation, Fall and Flood: Studies in Genesis 1-11.* Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1969.

Gowan, Donald. *From Eden to Babel: A Commentary on the Book of Genesis 1-11.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988.

Jeanson, Sharon. *The Women of Genesis.* Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990.

Rogerson, John. *Genesis 1-11. Old Testament Guides.* Sheffield, England: JOST, 1991.

Sarna, Nahum. *Genesis. JPS Torah Commentary.* Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972.

Questions about Genesis 1:1-11:25

1. Why do you think the first three chapters of Genesis were written? What beliefs or perspectives are being passed on?
2. How does the Bible's description of creation fit with modern theories about how the world began? Do you see any conflicts between the two? Why or why not?
3. From the story in chapter 3, what would you say "sin" is? What effects of human sin do you see in the world today? What has been tried to rid the world of sin?
4. How would you answer Cain's question in 4:9?
5. The first eleven chapters of Genesis include a number of family lists (genealogies). Why do you think these lists are included?
6. Can you locate God's covenant with Adam, Noah and Abraham (12:1-3)? Is each conditional or unconditional? How does each speak to us about God's covenant with us in and through Jesus Christ?
7. Why did God send a flood to destroy the earth and its people? (6:4-7,11-13) Why was Noah chosen to build the boat? What promise did God make to Noah after the floodwaters went down? (8:21; 9:9-11) What do you make of the existence of a flood story in the writings of a number of ancient peoples?
8. Why did the people try to build the tower at Babel? (11:1-4) How did God respond to the tower building? Why? If God created human beings "to be like himself" (1:27), what was wrong with building a tower that got the people "closer" to God in the heavens?
9. What is your overall impression of the first eleven chapters of Genesis? How would you describe the purpose of Genesis so far?

Questions about Genesis 11:26—23:20

1. What are the three main promises God made to Abraham and his descendants? (12:1-3; 15:5-7; 17:1-8) What were Abraham and his descendants expected to do in order to hold up their part of the agreement with God? (17:9-14)
2. Who were Ishmael and Isaac? (16:1-16; 21:9-21) Why do you think Isaac was given a name similar to the word for laughter? (18:10-15; 21:1-7) Why is Isaac sometimes called "the child of the promise"?
3. How did God test Abraham? How did he hold up to the test, and what happened as a result of Abraham's actions? (22:1-18) What might it be like to face such a test? What tests has God directed at you personally?
4. Why do you think the writer chose to focus on the story of Abraham right after finishing the accounts of the creation and the destruction of the flood?
5. See Romans 4:1-25; Hebrews 11:11-18; James 2:20-23. How do these New Testament writers interpret Abraham's actions?

Questions about Genesis 24:1-36:43

1. According to Abraham's servant, why was the servant successful in finding a wife for Isaac? (Gen 24, esp. 24:42-48) What can we learn about faith from the story?
2. From the time they were in their mother's womb, Isaac's sons, Esau and Jacob, were rivals. What were the main reasons for this rivalry? (25:19-34) What role did Rebekah play in their rivalry? (27:1-41) Name instances where this rivalry was played out.
3. Why couldn't Isaac take back the blessing of the first-born that he mistakenly gave to Jacob? (27:30-33) In your opinion, do spoken promises have such power today? Why or why not?
4. What promise did Jacob receive at Bethel while he was dreaming? (28:10-15; see also 35:9-15) What did Jacob promise God in return? (28:20-22)
5. Who was Laban and how did he trick Jacob? (29:1-30) How did Jacob trick Laban in return? (30:25-43)
6. Jacob's name was changed to what? Where did this happen? (32:22-30; 35:9-11) Why is this important for the history of God's people, the descendants of Abraham?
7. Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: "God's purposes are carried out by people who sometimes act in sneaky and dishonorable ways." Explain, using examples from Genesis.
8. These chapters show us much about personal, family, social, business, and religious life at the time of Abraham and Isaac. What strikes you as most different from our own life and culture? Do you think people lived "closer" to God then? Explain.

Questions about Genesis 37:1-50:26

1. Who was Joseph and what were his dreams? (37:19) How did Joseph's brothers react to his dreams? Why? What did they do to Joseph? (37:10-34) What do you think of people who say that God spoke to them through dreams or visions?
2. What responsibilities did Potiphar give to Joseph at first? Why? (39:1-6) How did Joseph end up in jail, and how did this bad situation turn out for the best for Joseph? (39:7-41:57)
3. How was Joseph able to interpret the true meaning of dreams? (40:8; 41:15,16,28, 37-39)
4. What brought Joseph's brothers to Egypt? Describe their first meeting. What did Joseph tell them to do? (42:1-24)
5. When Joseph finally revealed who he was to his brothers, how did he explain their earlier evil action against him? (45:4-8; 50:20) How do you explain the wrong things you do in life?
6. Compare Jacob's blessing of Joseph's sons, Manasseh and Ephraim (48:1-19) to Isaac's earlier blessing of Jacob and his brother Esau (27:1-40). How were the situations similar? Explain how Joseph's sons each became an ancestor of one of the twelve tribes of Israel, when Jacob (Israel) already had twelve sons of his own.
7. Compare Genesis 50:20 to Romans 8:28. How does God bring good results out of bad situations? What examples can you think of?
8. What is the overall message of the story of Joseph in the Bible?