

# AN INTRODUCTION TO GENESIS

## SERIES OVERVIEW

"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1)."

The book of Genesis bursts open with these now-legendary words. They immediately conjure thoughts, ideas, emotions, and even questions in many of us. The story of the Bible, and in essence, every single creature that has ever walked the face of the earth, begins here, with God. A single being, standing over a formless, empty, and void reality (Gen. 1:2). And into the darkness, he speaks: "Let there be" (Gen. 1:3). *Ex-Nihilo*: out of nothing, God speaks all of life into existence, creating order and beauty, giving meaning and purpose to life itself. And it was good (Gen. 1:31)! At the heart of this story is God's good purpose for his creation—to know and enjoy the very Creator of the cosmos. Made in the image of God (Gen. 1:27), humanity was blessed with the unique gift of living in relationship with and in representation of its Creator (Gen. 1:28-30).

Unfortunately, the story doesn't end there. Humanity's willful and rebellious disobedience thwarted this divine and good purpose (Gen. 3). And the consequences are devastating. Instead of life, there's death; instead of relationship, hostility; instead of blessing, curse; and instead of order, chaos. The evidence of this reality is all around us. It's inescapable. We experience it in the diagnosis of a terminal illness. We see it on the news in images of war, natural disasters, and countless injustices. We invite it into our homes as we foster children abandoned by their families. We grieve its sorrow as we bury a loved one into the depths of the earth. In one way or another, we all feel it deep down in our bones. Things are not the way God intended. We're seemingly so far from the good he declared in the beginning. And worst of all—we've been separated from the God we were created to know and enjoy.

But the story continues. Rather than disown humanity or isolate himself from creation, God makes a promise to restore all things back to their good and rightful purpose (Gen. 3:15). He chooses to work through their failings and imperfections by graciously binding himself in a promise-keeping and oath-bound affirmation to bless the cursed world (Gen. 12). Sin will not frustrate God's plans. Death will not have the final word. What the enemy meant for evil, God will use for good (Gen. 50:20). From Adam and Eve to Noah, Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph, each story in Genesis is a continuation of his redemptive plan to reconcile creation back to its intended purpose: *relationship* and *representation*. And this promise finds its ultimate culmination in the reconciling cross of Christ (Col. 1:19-20), restoring God's people to know him, love him, and represent him to the world he loves (1 Pet. 2:9-10).

While many Christians are familiar with the stories in Genesis, we too often read them in isolation, disregarding the larger narrative found throughout the book's entirety. In this series, God's Good

Purpose, we'll walk through each of the stories in Genesis and consider how they all come together to unveil God's redemptive plan to restore His good creation back to its designed purpose. We will often find ourselves in the circumstances and precarious positions of many characters in these stories. Flawed, broken, and sinful individuals in need of rescue but who somehow are never too far from the grace of God. Yes, we can attest with Scripture that in God, "all things work together for *good*, for those who are called according to his *purpose*" (Rom. 8:28). Join us as we marvel at God's Good Purpose found throughout the book of Genesis and in each of our personal lives.

## AUTHOR & DATE

While the authorship of Genesis came under scholastic scrutiny in the nineteenth and twentieth century, the historical and traditional view ascribes primary authorship to Moses (second millennium B.C.).<sup>1</sup> Today, critical scholars believe that Genesis was written over an extended period of time, reaching its final form in the fifth century (B.C.). No traditional scholar would argue that Genesis contains many post-Mosaic elements. However, the general consensus is that these occurrences are editorial revisions expected of any ancient text<sup>2</sup>. These changes help preserve the book's content for later generations and in no way disprove Mosaic authorship<sup>3</sup>. Genesis through Deuteronomy, when taken together as a unit, clearly portrays an editorial process that presents them as a cohesive set of books, with a singular contributor as its author but its content edited together in its final form. Perhaps it would be best to conclude that Moses authored "the essential shape of Genesis" while also admitting that he "did not author the extant text in our hands."<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps of most importance is the fact that Scripture itself attests that Moses wrote the book of Genesis. The Pentateuch refers to the first five books of the Bible and is attributed both in the Old and New Testament as being "the Five Books of Moses (Ex. 24:12, 34:27, Mark 12:26)."<sup>5</sup> Jesus himself, referring to the Pentateuch, claims that "Moses...wrote of me," adding that if "you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words (John 5:46-47)?" When Jesus appears to two of his disciples traveling to Emmaus, he begins to interpret the Scriptures as prophecies concerning himself, "beginning with Moses (Luke 24:27)," a clear allusion to the Pentateuch. There is no overwhelming reason to exclude Genesis from the Pentateuch or to move beyond the traditional historical view of

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<sup>1</sup> Ross, A. P. *Creation and blessing: a guide to the study and exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), pg. 24.

<sup>2</sup> ESV Study Bible: English Standard Version, *Introduction to Genesis* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Waltke, B. K., & Fredricks, C. J., *Genesis: a commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), pp. 21-22.

<sup>5</sup> ESV Study Bible.

Mosaic authorship, for “Such a distinction would have occurred to none of the original readers of the Gospels.”<sup>6</sup>

In the introduction to his commentary on Genesis, Bruce Waltke gives several reasons for which we would logically conclude that Moses was its writer, including his “superb training, exceptional spiritual gifts and divine calling.”<sup>7</sup> Being the founder of Israel, Moses would be the person best positioned to “transpose its national repository of ancient traditions into a coherent history in order to define the nation and its mission.” He was also “highly educated in Pharaoh’s court,” having “unique access to the ancient Near Eastern myths that show close connections to Genesis,” as well as the law codes reflected throughout the Pentateuch. Finally, Waltke concludes that as “the greatest of Israel’s prophets,” Moses had “the ability to draw upon” God’s manifest presence in order to retell Israel’s history like no other individual possibly could.<sup>8</sup>

## PURPOSE & THEME

The English title of the first book in the Bible is derived from the Greek translation of the Pentateuch and simply means “origin.”<sup>9</sup> Similarly, the Hebrew title—“In the Beginning”—is taken directly from the first phrase in the book, a usual custom in ancient Near Eastern literature.<sup>10</sup> Taken together, these titles reflect a significant theme in Genesis: the beginning of human history, and more specifically, the history of God’s people, the Israelites. But the book is interested in more than simply recording mere beginnings for posterity’s sake or historical analysis, but rather, tracing the start of God’s redemptive plan to restore all of creation back to its intended purpose. This reality is intensified when we recognize that Genesis is more than just the first book of the Pentateuch, but that “Genesis provides the foundation on which the rest of the Bible stands.”<sup>11</sup>

While many Christians are familiar with the stories in Genesis, they are too often read in isolation, disregarding the larger narrative found throughout the book’s entirety. Furthermore, many fail to understand how it connects to the rest of Scripture, as the start of a divine story that extends from Genesis to Revelation. At the heart of this story is God’s good purpose for his creation—to know and enjoy the very creator of the cosmos. Made in the image of God, humanity is given the unique blessing of living in relationship with and in representation of its Creator. Unfortunately, this divine purpose was thwarted by humanity’s willful and rebellious disobedience. But here is where we find not only

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<sup>6</sup> Kidner, D. *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1967), Vol. 1, p. 18.

<sup>7</sup> Waltke, pg. 22.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> ESV Study Bible.

<sup>10</sup> Waltke, pg. 17.

<sup>11</sup> ESV Study Bible.

the significance of Genesis but the central thrust of Scripture. As Kenneth Matthews writes in his commentary on Genesis, “What we learn...is that the Lord is good and that human sin does not ultimately derail his beneficent plan for his good world.”<sup>12</sup>

God’s good purpose will be restored. Our sin will not thwart his plans. What the enemy meant for evil, God will use for good. But not only does Genesis express God’s intention to restore, redeem and reconcile the world to his good purpose, it explicitly defines how he will do so. God makes a promise in Genesis 3. A seed or offspring will come to reconcile all things. Rather than disown humanity or isolate himself from creation, he chooses to work through their failings and imperfections by graciously binding himself in a promise-keeping and oath-bound affirmation (Gen. 12). From Adam and Eve to Noah, Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph, each story is a continuation of his redemptive plan to reconcile creation back to its intended purpose: relationship and representation. And this promise finds its ultimate culmination in the reconciling cross of Christ (Col. 1:19-20), restoring God’s people to know him, love him, and represent him to the world he loves.

## LITERARY FEATURES

As is the case with any book in the Bible, classifying the type of literature found in Genesis is crucial to understanding its content and interpreting its message. While Genesis contains history, it would be inaccurate simply to identify it as a history book. On the one hand, it is concerned with providing the beginnings of human history and, more specifically, of God’s people, but it does so in a variety of literary forms.<sup>13</sup> One writer argues that its author set out to provide a book that was “historical, ideological, and aesthetic.”<sup>14</sup> At its core, Genesis is literature because “it communicates doctrine in an artful way,” using words “not as a stick but as a web” which the author uses to tell stories.<sup>15</sup> Because of this reality, the majority of scholars classify the overall genre of Genesis as historical narrative.<sup>16</sup> Taken together, each of its parts forms more than a collection of stories, but “a theological shaping of the reports and traditions for the instruction of Israel,”<sup>17</sup> and in turn, all of God’s people throughout time and history.

In particular, Genesis utilizes historical narrative by presenting what many classify as hero stories—“episodic tales focused on a central character with whom the reader is to sympathize.”<sup>18</sup> The author presents these historical stories to help its readers understand the relationship between God and his

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<sup>12</sup> Matthews, K. A. *Genesis 1-11:26* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), Vol. 1A, p. 60.

<sup>13</sup> ESV Study Bible.

<sup>14</sup> Meir Sternberg, quoted in Waltke, pg. 31.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> ESV Study Bible.

<sup>17</sup> Ross, pg. 34

<sup>18</sup> ESV Study Bible.

people. Told in an artful manner, “the heroes of faith emerge as literary icons inspiring the audience to emulate their faithful actions.”<sup>19</sup> The ESV introduction to Genesis reminds us that cultures often “celebrate heroes as a way of codifying their own ideals, values, and virtues,” and that “literary heroes are representative of the culture producing them.”<sup>20</sup> But we must also keep in mind that the “heroes” in these stories are not always heroic. Whether their actions are considered courageous or cowardly, they are simply “the human center of attention in the story.” The primary purpose of these stories is “God’s providential care for his people,” using their “imperfections to achieve his purposes for them.”<sup>21</sup> In the same way, readers today can view their own lives as “permeated with God’s purpose,” instructing them to “embrace their lives as a gift from God to be lived as he directs.”<sup>22</sup>

In the introduction to his commentary, Bruce Waltke commits an entire section on the poetics and narrative theology of Genesis. He describes narrative criticism as “the study of the techniques and devices an author uses to convey meaning in a text.”<sup>23</sup> Understanding the poetic features utilized in Genesis will help us “identify the narrator’s interpretive lens,” allowing us to “enter the narrator’s, and thereby God’s, world and life views.”<sup>24</sup> The following is a brief list of some of the poetic devices Waltke provides.<sup>25</sup> For more details and examples of how these devices are used throughout Genesis, please reference his commentary.

- **Key Word:** a word that is meaningfully repeated which provides focus, meaning, or emphasis in a text.
- **Refrain:** a repetition of a phrase or sentence which emphasizes a point or divides material.
- **Contrast and Comparison:** associating or juxtaposing things that are dissimilar or opposite or alike and similar, such as scenes or events.
- **Climax/Intensification:** texts commonly reflect escalating action, conveying a sense of movement from the lesser to the greater.
- **Patterns:** structural patterns such as alternating or symmetrical, concentric, and chiasmic patterns.
- **Janus:** a term applied to a literature unit that looks back and forth to unite the units before and after.
- **Foreshadowing:** the inclusion of material in one part of the narrative that serves primarily to prepare the reader for what is still to come.
- **Summarization:** a synopsis or abridgement of material that is treated more fully elsewhere.

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<sup>19</sup> Ross, pg. 32-33.

<sup>20</sup> ESV Study Bible.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Waltke, pg. 33.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., pg. 34-38.

- **Inclusio:** a repetition of features at the beginning and the end of a unit.
- **Intercalation:** the insertion of one literary unit into the midst of another.

## HISTORICITY & SCIENCE

The clear parallels found between the opening chapters of Genesis and specific ancient Mesopotamian and Babylonian stories have led some to classify portions of Genesis as myth or mythic in origin.<sup>26</sup> Others even argue that the stories of the patriarchs are more legend than actual history, with “loose connections to actual people and events.”<sup>27</sup> The purpose of using mythology in Genesis, according to some proponents, is an attempt at “filling in a gap by relating the origins of things in symbolic form where the author lacked more precise, scientific knowledge.”<sup>28</sup> So, is Genesis, particularly chapters 1-11, history of myth, or a combination of both? Answering this question comprehensively is beyond the scope and purpose of this introduction. See Section 3—The Nature of Genesis—in *Creation and Blessing*, from Allen Ross for a more detailed answer.

Although the answer to this question is complex, it is clear that the author of Genesis set out to record actual historical events rather than mythical origins. Waltke summarizes some of the historical features of the author: “He validates his material as much as possible by locating his story in time and space (e.g., 2:10-14), tracing genealogies (e.g., 5:1-32), giving evidence of various sorts...(e.g., 11:19), and citing sources (5:1).”<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, as a historical narrative, Genesis employs *narrative prose* “whose main function in the Bible is to recount history.”<sup>30</sup> While the creation account indeed varies “stylistically” from the rest of the book, some referring to it as *exalted prose*, “its historicity is assumed elsewhere in the Bible.”<sup>31</sup> We conclude that Genesis is historical in nature, but that the author is “less interested in recording events for the sake of history than in using these events as vehicles for communicating the verities of biblical faith.”<sup>32</sup>

Another point of contention for some readers of Genesis is its relationship to modern science, particularly its account of creation in chapters 1-3. One cannot enter this conversation without first understanding that the creation account found in Genesis is not primarily concerned with the scientific details of how the world was created. Its main purpose is not scientific but theological. It is less concerned with answering how the world was created and instead seeks to identify who is its creator. As Derek Kidner notes in his commentary, “What is quite clear from these chapters is...that mankind is

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<sup>26</sup> Ross, pg. 64.

<sup>27</sup> ESV Study Bible.

<sup>28</sup> Carmino De Catanzaro, quoted in Ross, pg. 50.

<sup>29</sup> Waltke, pg. 29.

<sup>30</sup> ESV Study Bible.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ross, pg. 67.

a unity, created in God’s image, and fallen in Adam by the one act of disobedience.”<sup>33</sup> And yet the ESV Study Bible rightly warns us that although Genesis is not primarily scientific, “it is nonetheless crucial to affirm its historical account and its God-centered worldview in order to provide a proper foundation for doing good science.”<sup>34</sup>

Perhaps it’s best to simplify the argument as being between creationism and naturalism. Kenneth Matthews provides some helpful clarification and definitions. Creationism, he writes, “proposes that God is the ultimate cause for the universe and all its life-forms,” adding that “human life is not an accident of nature but the result of God’s creative activity.”<sup>35</sup> Conversely, naturalism “views the universe as an eternal, self-governed, self-generated universe,” which does not allow “for a transcendent Being to explain its origins or governance.”<sup>36</sup> Genesis is overwhelmingly clear: the universe is created and governed by a sovereign, all-powerful God, who rules and reigns over his creatures with love, care, and ultimate authority and dominion.

Among creationists, there is no disagreement on who created the world, but rather, answering the difficult questions of how and when?<sup>37</sup> It is important to note that there are several faithful interpretations, including the “calendar day” theory, which views the events in Genesis 1 as a regular week with ordinary days; the “day-age” theory, which considers the days as a sequence of geological ages; or even the “gap-theory” which describes the condition of Genesis 1:2 as an indeterminate duration of time before the rest of the creation events.<sup>38</sup> As the ESV Study Bible notes, “none of these views requires denying that Genesis 1 is historical,” but in their own way, each celebrates “the boundless creative goodness of the Creator.”<sup>39</sup> For an introductory summary of the various biblical interpretations of Genesis 1, reference the following *essay* from the *Gospel Coalition*.<sup>40</sup>

## STRUCTURE & OUTLINE

The book of Genesis is generally separated into two distinct sections: the primeval history in chapters 1-11 and the patriarchal history in chapters 12-50. These two sections are connected by what Tim Mackie from the *Bible Project* calls a “hinge” at the beginning of chapter 12. The call of Abram and the subsequent covenant God makes with him and his family form “a literary design that gives us a clue as to how to understand the message of the book as a whole, as well as how the entire story of the Bible

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<sup>33</sup> Kidner, Vol. 1, p. 33.

<sup>34</sup> ESV Study Bible.

<sup>35</sup> Matthews, Vol. 1A, p. 102.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., Vol. 1A, pp. 106–107.

<sup>38</sup> ESV Study Bible.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid..

<sup>40</sup> <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/evangelical-interpretations-genesis-1-2/>

comes together.”<sup>41</sup> But within these two general sections, the structure of the book is further outlined by additional subheadings. As Allen Ross points out, “the major structural word of the book is *tôledôt*,”<sup>42</sup> which is expressed in the clause “*these are the generation of.*” Traditionally viewed as section headings, each *tôledôt* is named not after the central character in the narrative but the person of origin.<sup>43</sup> Kenneth Matthews adds that its occurrences potentially point to pre-Genesis sources (e.g. 5:1) while also providing “a clue for the significance of genealogy for the macrostructure of the book.”<sup>44</sup>

If we follow the *tôledôt* headings, they divide the book into the following sections:<sup>45</sup>

- Section I: Creation (1:1–2:3)
- Section II: The *Tôledôt* of the heavens and the earth (2:4–4:26)
- Section III: The *Tôledôt* of Adam (5:1–6:8)
- Section IV: The *Tôledôt* of Noah (6:9–9:29)
- Section V: The *Tôledôt* of Shem, Ham, and Japheth (10:1–11:9)
- Section VI: The *Tôledôt* of Shem (11:10–26)
- Section VII: The *Tôledôt* of Terah (11:27–25:11)
- Section VIII: The *Tôledôt* of Ishmael (25:12–18)
- Section IX: The *Tôledôt* of Isaac (25:19–35:29)
- Section X: The *Tôledôt* of Esau (36:1–8; 36:9–37:1)
- Section XI: The *Tôledôt* of Jacob (37:2–50:26)

Additionally, Derek Kidner provides a simplified and helpful outline in his commentary:<sup>46</sup>

- A. Primeval History (chapters 1–11)
  1. The story of creation (1:1–2:3)
  2. The probation and fall of man (2:4–3:24)
  3. Man under sin and death (4:1–6:8)
  4. The world under judgement (6:9–8:14)
  5. Renewal and re-peopling (8:15–10:32)
  6. End and beginning: Babel and Canaan (11:1–32)
  
- B. The Patriarchal History (chapters 12–50)
  1. Abram under call and promise (12–20)

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<sup>41</sup> <https://bibleproject.com/learn/genesis-1-11/>

<sup>42</sup> Ross, pg. 69.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., pg. 73.

<sup>44</sup> Matthews, Vol. 1A, p. 27.

<sup>45</sup> Ross, pg. 70.

<sup>46</sup> Kidner, Vol. 1, p. 45.



2. Isaac and further tests of faith (21–26)
3. Jacob and the emergence of Israel (27–36)
4. Joseph and the migration to Egypt (37–50)

## SERIES BREAKDOWN

- Week 1: In the Beginning (Ch. 1)
- Week 2: Man & Woman (Ch. 2)
- Week 3: The Fall (Ch. 3)
- Week 4: Two Brothers (Ch. 4)
- Week 5: An Ark (Ch. 6–9)
- Week 6: A Tower (Ch. 11)
- Week 7: A Call (Ch. 12)
- Week 8: A Nephew & A City (Ch. 13–14, 18–19)
- Week 9: A Priest (Ch. 14:17–24)
- Week 10: A Promise (Ch. 15)
- Week 11: A Maidservant (Ch. 16)
- Week 12: A Sign (Ch. 17)
- Week 13: Two Sons (Ch. 21)
- Week 14: A Sacrifice (Ch. 22)
- Week 15: A Daughter-In-Law (Ch. 24)
- Week 16: A Birthright & Blessing (Ch. 25–27)
- Week 17: A Dream (Ch. 28)
- Week 18: Two Wives (Ch. 29–31)
- Week 19: A Wrestling Match (Ch. 32)
- Week 20: A Brother for Sale (Ch. 37)
- Week 21: A Sticky Situation (Ch. 39)
- Week 22: Prison Dreams (Ch. 40–41)
- Week 23: Brothers in Egypt (Ch. 42–46)
- Week 24: God's Good Purpose (Ch. 50)