



# Genesis

## GENESIS

### ORIENTING DATA FOR GENESIS

- **Content:** the story of the creation, of human disobedience and its tragic consequences, and of God's choosing Abraham and his offspring—the beginning of the story of redemption
- **Historical coverage:** from creation to the death of Joseph in Egypt (ca. 1600 B.C.?)
- **Emphases:** God as the Creator of all that is; God's creation of human beings in his image; the nature and consequences of human disobedience; the beginning of the divine covenants; God's choice of a people through whom he will bless the nations

### OVERVIEW OF GENESIS

For modern readers Genesis might appear to be a strange book, beginning as it does with God and creation, and ending with Joseph in a coffin in Egypt! But that strangeness is evidence that even though it has integrity as a book in its own right (careful structure and organization), it is at the same time intended to set the whole biblical story in motion. Indeed, its opening word (*Beresith* = "in [the] beginning") both serves as its title and is suggestive as to what the book is about. Thus it tells of the beginning of God's story—creation, human disobedience, and divine redemption—while it also begins the Pentateuch, the story of God's choosing and making a covenant with a people through whom he would bless all peoples (Gen 12:2–3).

The narrative of Genesis itself comes in two basic parts: a "prehistory" (chs. 1–11), the stories of creation, human origins, the fall of humanity, and the relentless progress of evil—all against the backdrop of God's enduring patience and love—and the story of the beginning of redemption through Abraham and his seed (chs. 12–50), with focus on

the stories of Abraham (11:27–25:11), Jacob (25:12–37:1), and Joseph (chs. 37–50). These stories are structured in part around a phrase that occurs ten times: "This is the account [genealogy/family history] of," a term which can refer both to "genealogies" proper (as with Shem, Ishmael, and Esau) and to "family stories." You will see that the major stories of Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph in each case come under the family story of the father (Terah, Isaac, and Jacob).

The overall narrative of Genesis thus begins immediately after the prologue (1:1–2:3) with the first human family in the Garden of Eden and works successively from Adam's family through Noah and Shem to Terah and Abraham and finally through Isaac to Jacob (Israel) and thus to Joseph. At the same time, the family lines of the rejected sons (Cain, Ishmael, Esau) are also given so that the "chosen seed" and the "rejected brother" are set off in contrast (the one has a story, the other only a genealogy). Finally, watch for one further framing device that holds the major part of the book together: God's use of Noah to preserve human life during the great deluge (chs. 6–9) and of Joseph to preserve human life during the great drought (chs. 37–50).

### SPECIFIC ADVICE FOR READING GENESIS

As you read this first book in the Bible, besides being aware of how the narrative unfolds according to the family stories, also be watching for both the major plot and several subplots that help to shape the larger family story, the story of the people of God.

The *major plot* has to do with God's intervening in the history of human fallenness by choosing ("electing") a man and his family. For even though the families of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are the major players, you are never allowed to forget that God is the ultimate Protagonist—as is true in all the biblical narratives. Above all else, it is his story. God speaks and thereby creates the world and a people. It becomes their story (and ours) only as God has brought this family into being and made promises to them and covenanted with them to be their God. So keep looking for the way the major plot unfolds and for how the primary players become part of God's ultimate narrative.

At the same time, keep your eyes open for several subplots that are crucial to the larger story of the Old Testament people of God—and in some cases of the people constituted by the *new* covenant as well. Six of these are worthy of special attention.

The first of these—crucial to the whole biblical story—is the occurrence of the first two covenants between God and his people. The first covenant is with all of humankind through Noah and his sons, promising that God will never again cut off life from the earth (9:8–17). The second covenant is with Abraham, promising two things especially—the gift of “seed” who will become a great nation to bless the nations, and the gift of land (12:2–7; 15:1–21; cf. 17:3–8, where the covenant is ratified by the identifying mark of circumcision). The second covenant is repeated to Isaac (26:3–5) and Jacob (28:13–15) and in turn serves as the basis for the next two Old Testament covenants: the gift of law (Exod 20–24) and the gift of kingship (2 Sam 7).

The second subplot is a bit subtle in Genesis itself, but is important to the later unfolding of the theme of *holy war* (see glossary) in the biblical story. It begins with God’s curse on the serpent, that God “will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring [seed] and hers” (3:14–15). The crucial term here is “offspring” (seed), picked up again in 12:7 with regard to the chosen people. This curse anticipates the holy-war motif that is accented in Exodus in particular (between Moses and Pharaoh, thus between God and the gods of Egypt; see Exod 15:1–18), is carried on further in the conquest of Canaan and its gods (which explains the curse of Canaan in Gen 9:25–27), and climaxes in the New Testament (in the story of Jesus Christ, and especially in the Revelation). Although in Genesis this motif does not take the form of holy war as such, you can nonetheless see it especially in the strife between brothers, between the ungodly and godly seed (Cain/Abel; Ishmael/Isaac; Esau/Jacob), where the elder persecutes the younger through whom God has chosen to work (see Gal 4:29).

God’s choice of the younger (or weaker, or most unlikely) to bear the righteous seed is a third subplot that begins in Genesis. Here it takes two forms in particular that are then repeated throughout the biblical story. First, God regularly bypasses the firstborn son in carrying out his purposes (a considerable breach of the cultural rules on the part of God): not Cain but Seth, not Ishmael but Isaac, not Esau but Jacob, not Reuben but Judah. Second, the godly seed is frequently born of an otherwise barren woman (Sarah, 18:11–12; Rebekah, 25:21; Rachel, 29:31). As you read through the whole biblical story, you will want to be on the lookout for this recurring motif (see, e.g., 1 Sam 1:1–2:11; Luke 1).

Related to this theme is the fact that the chosen ones are not chosen because of their own goodness; indeed, their flaws are faithfully narrated (Abraham in Gen 12:10–20; Isaac in 26:1–11; Jacob throughout [note how dysfunctional the family is in ch. 37]; Judah in 38:1–30). God does not choose them because of their inherent character; what makes them the godly seed is that in the end they trusted God and his promise that they would be his people—an exceedingly numerous people—and that they would inherit the land to which they first came as aliens.

A fourth subplot emerges later in the story, where Judah takes the leading role among the brothers in the long Joseph narrative (chs. 37–50). He emerges first in chapter 38, where his weaknesses and sinfulness are exposed. But his primary role begins in 43:8–9, where he guarantees the safety of his brother Benjamin, and it climaxes in his willingness to take the place of Benjamin in 44:18–34. All of this anticipates Jacob’s blessing in 49:8–12, that the “scepter will not depart from Judah” (pointing to the Davidic kingdom and, beyond that, to Jesus Christ).

A fifth subplot is found in the anticipation of the next “chapter” in the story—slavery in Egypt. Interest in Egypt begins with the genealogy of Ham (10:13–14; *Mizraim* is Hebrew for “Egypt”). The basic family narrative (Abraham to Joseph) begins with a famine that sends Abraham to Egypt (12:10–20) and concludes with another famine that causes Jacob and the entire family to settle in Egypt, whereas Isaac, while on his way toward Egypt during another famine, is expressly told *not* to go there (26:1–5).

Finally, the interest in detailing the origins of Israel’s near neighbors, who become thorns in their sides throughout the Old Testament story, forms a sixth subplot. Besides the major players, Egypt and Canaan (10:13–19), note, in turn, Moab and Ammon (19:30–38) and Edom (25:23; 27:39–40; 36:1–43), as well as the lesser role of Ishmael (39:1; cf. Ps 83:6).

## A WALK THROUGH GENESIS

### □ 1:1–2:3 Prologue

Although written as prose, there is also a clearly poetic dimension to this creational prologue. Part of the poetry is the careful structure of this first “week,” where day 1 corresponds to day 4, day 2 to day 5, and day 3