

BOOK OF GENESIS – INTRODUCTION

PRAYER

“Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone! ⁵Therefore, you shall love the LORD, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength. ⁶Take to heart these words which I enjoin on you today. ⁷Drill them into your children. Speak of them at home and abroad, whether you are busy or at rest.”

Deuteronomy 6.4-7

Traditionally, Moses has been considered the author of the book of Genesis, as well as the whole Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy). This view of Moses’ authorship is relatively new and is claimed explicitly in the Jewish Talmud, Baba Bathra: “*who wrote the Scripture? Moses wrote his own book and the portion of Balaam and Job. Joshua wrote the book which bears his name and the last 8 verses of Pentateuch. Samuel wrote the book which bears his name and the book of Judges and Ruth...*” This text is a part of an old tradition that may go back to the period 70BC-200AD, even though the final edition of the text is generally dated to 200-400CE.

Mosaic authorship in this form implies several problems that have to be answered by modern scholarship. Here we find several doublets (repetitions of the same information twice within a few verses), anachronisms (information and data not existing during the life of Moses) and the description of his death.

Looking more precisely at the book of Genesis, we can learn much from the way it is written. The first word of its Hebrew text is **בראשית** which means “in the beginning.” It is translated into Greek as **λίβρος γενέσεως** which means “book of the beginning / origin / source / race / creation.” From here, through Latin, comes the English title “Book of Genesis.”

Genesis means and speaks about origin and describes three kinds of origins: the origins of the world (Gn 1), the origins of the nations (Gn 2-11) and the origins of Israel (Gn 12-50).

The material is arranged in a very elaborate way, so that each new development in the history is introduced by the same phrase: **אלה תלדות** – “this is the history / record / descendants / origin of.” There are ten sections with this heading distributed in an irregular way: the first five sections are in Gn 1-11, while the other five are in Gn 12-50. Each of these 10 sections introduces a new stage in the text and a new step in the narration.

	1.1–2.3	Prologue	
1	2.4–4.26	Origin of heaven and earth	Such is the <u>story</u> of the heavens and the earth
2	5.1–6.8	Family history of Adam	This is the <u>record</u> of the descendants of Adam
3	6.9–9.29	Family history of Noah	These are the <u>descendants</u> of Noah
4	10.1–11.9	Family history of Noah’s sons	These are the <u>descendants</u> of Noah’s sons
5	11.10–26	Family history of Shem	This is the <u>record</u> of the descendants of Shem
6	11.27–25.11	Family history of Terah	This is the <u>record</u> of the descendants of Terah
7	25.12–18	Family history of Ishmael	These are the <u>descendants</u> of Abraham’s son Ishmael
8	25.19–35.29	Family history of Isaac	This is the family <u>history</u> of Isaac
9	36.1–37.1	Family history of Esau	These are the <u>descendants</u> of Esau
10	37.2–50.26	Family history of Jacob	This is the family <u>history</u> of Jacob

Despite this unifying element of introducing genealogies (origins/descendants), we can clearly recognize the different character of Gn 1-11 compared to Gn 12-50. While the former describes all mankind and offers a universal perspective (being related to oriental traditions about creation, flood, origin of arts, crafts and nations), the latter is more focused on Israel and national history.

The book of Genesis has to be seen in a larger context of the Pentateuch. The whole of Genesis offers a background for understanding the story of Exodus and Lawgiving at Sinai, while Gn 1-11 is a background for the stories of the patriarchs: their God is not a local deity but the Lord of the universe.

THE TEXT OF BOOK

Taking into account the NAB-translation or any other modern translation, we have to be aware of its origin. Modern translations are normally based on Masoretic Text (Hebrew). The Hebrew text can be reconstructed based on the evidence provided by the available manuscripts from different periods of the history. The first almost complete manuscript of the Hebrew Bible is the so-called Leningrad manuscript (B19a) from 1007AD. Besides that, there are many older manuscripts, quotations and different sources that allow us to trace fairly well the history of the text-transmission over the centuries. As an additional source, we also have the Samaritan Pentateuch and other ancient translations: Septuagint, Syriac Peshitta, Aramaic Targums, Latin Vulgate.

RECENT RESEARCH

A very important contribution to the modern research of Genesis and the whole Pentateuch has been provided by the German scholar J. Wellhausen in his works *Die Komposition des Hexateuchs* (1876–77) and *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels* (1878). Based on previous research and his own conclusions, he formulated a theory that the whole Pentateuch is composed of 4 distinct sources: J (10/9th century), E (9/8th century), D (7th century), P (6/5th century). These sources were successively amalgamated, resulting in the composition of the existing Pentateuch in about the 5th century BC. Genesis was compiled from three main sources: J (comprising about half of the material), E (about a third), and P (about a sixth).

These sources were distinguished on five main criteria: **different names of the deity** (J speaks of Yahweh - the LORD; E and P of Elohim - God); **duplicate narratives** (f. e. different accounts of creation, Gen 1 and 2; repetition within the flood story, Gen 6–9; doublets within the patriarchal narratives, cf. 12:10–20 with chap. 20); **different vocabulary** (J “cuts” covenants, P “establishes” covenants); **different styles** (J and E contain vivid narrative, P is repetitious and prefers genealogies); and finally **different theologies** (according to P, God is remote and transcendent; in J and E, God is close and speaks directly to people).

This view was very widely accepted from about 1878 to 1970 and is still used as a working hypothesis, even though it has only a few followers in its original form.

GENESIS 6-9 (THE FLOOD STORY)

In the example of the flood story we will show how we can presume the existence of multiple sources. Much of the information is repeated twice in the flood story within a few verses. We can assume that one author would consider superfluous the same information repeated twice and thus we can conclude that the final editor was trying to compile two distinctive sources together, including all of their information, resulting even in repetitiveness of the final version. The table below identifies the repetition within the Flood story narrative:

Wickedness of people	6.5	6.11-12
Decision to destroy the earth	6.7	6.13
Announcement of the flood	7.4	6.17
Command to build the ark	7.1	6.18
Summon to bring the animals in	7.2	6.19-20
In order to save them	7.3	6.19
Boarding of the ark with the animals	7.7-9	7.13-16
Beginning of the flood	7.10	7.11
Ark on the waters	7.17	7.18
Destruction of all the living	7.22-23	7.20-21
Cessation of the flood	8.2b	8.2a
Waters go down	8.3a	8.3b-5
Summon to leave the ark	8.6-12	8.15-17
Promise not to repeat the flood	8.20-22	9.18-17

NEW LITERARY CRITICISM

More recently, instead of examining the singular sources, new literary criticism attempts to stress unity and the result of the whole redaction process. That is why it focuses much more on the present final form of the text. It tries to understand how the final editor viewed his material and why he arranged it in the way he did. The new criticism aims to understand texts synchronically, that is, as coherent pieces of work written at a particular time, while the older source criticism tended to think diachronically, that is, asking how and when a work came into existence, what its sources were, and so on.

SOURCE CRITICISM

Even focusing on the final version of the material we have and use, we must not overlook the fact that Gn 1–11 is full of parallels with Near East traditions. Genesis is reflecting these oriental ideas both positively and negatively. For this reason, the question about the origin of its material is more than justified.

One of the possible candidates of source material to examine would be the Acadian **Atrahasis epos** from the early second millennium (1800BC), which shows many similarities with the basic plot of Gen 1–11. The Atrahasis epos describes the creation of mankind, then various divine judgments on him, culminating in the flood which destroys all but Atrahasis (the main character whose name means “very wise”) and his family, who escape in a boat. As in Genesis they offer a sacrifice on leaving the ark. Clearly the Atrahasis epic shows that creation and flood were already part of a coherent story of world origins before Genesis was composed.

Despite these similarities, there are also significant differences and theological messages. According to the Babylonian version, the gods, after creating the world, are upset because people are too numerous, noisy and annoying. They decide to destroy them and the only one to escape is the main character, who was worshiping one particular god who had not agreed with the flood. The flood turns out to be a disaster when the gods start losing control over it. Finally they are glad when everything calms down. Enlil—the main god—is surprised and upset upon discovering that the main character has been saved in the boat.

In summary we can say that Gen 1–11 uses and modifies stories well diffused throughout the ancient world, giving them its own theological message. On the other hand, the patriarchal stories (12-50), with their focus on the origins of the nations, may be presumed to have been passed down mostly within the Israelite tribes.

DATE OF THE MATERIAL AND DATE OF COMPOSITION

After having observed the similarity with several other forms of the world-origin narrations, another question concerns the period in which these materials became familiar to the people who handed them down through narrations to the author(s) of Genesis.

A very likely candidate would be the Amarna period (c. 1400BC). Under the reign of the Pharaoh Akhenaten, there was a considerable period of peace, and both cultural and commercial exchange throughout the whole Fertile Crescent. During this period, Mesopotamian culture was widely diffused in the West, as it is attested to by the discovery of a fragment of the Gilgamesh epic at Megiddo and a piece of the Babylonian flood story at Ras Shamra (Ugarit)

This considerable period of peace came to an abrupt end after the invasions of the sea-peoples in the West and the Arameans in the East which broke up this international cultural interchange. Therefore it seems unlikely that the Hebrews would have absorbed Mesopotamian ideas after this upheaval.

Some scholars posit close contacts and takeover of the traditions during the Babylonian exile (6th cent.), but the shortage of time (50 years) and the opposition to Babylonian culture would disprove this claim. I personally don't agree totally with these arguments and would give much more weight to the exile-period.

After discussing the traditions and materials used, the final writing (redaction) of all the materials occurred around 450BC and produced the form of the Pentateuch we now have.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The simplest structure of the book is already familiar. It is divided as follows:

Gn 1-11	Prehistory of the World
Gn 12-50	Stories of the Patriarchs

STORIES OF THE PATRIARCHS

In Genesis, it is usually referred to three Old Testament Patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Chapters 12–50 of Genesis contain 3 long connected cycles of narrative which cover the lives of the patriarchs and their families:

11:27–25:11	the story of Abraham
25:19–35:29	the story of Jacob
37:1–50:26	the story of Joseph

Inserted into these stories are materials and information about other family members (Lot, Ishmael, Isaac, Esau, Joseph's sons...)

Genealogically, the narratives are connected by Abraham as the father of Isaac, Jacob as the son of Isaac, and Joseph as Isaac's grandson. But there are many parallels between the plots of each group of stories, and these tend to highlight the similarities between the careers of the leading patriarchs and, more loosely, the subsequent history of Israel. Comparing the narrations we discover that many similar points and patterns are repeated:

1. All these heroes leave their home-land (12.1; 28.2; 37.28)
2. All quarrel with their brothers (13.7; 27.41, 37.4)
3. Three go down to Egypt, one to Gerar, i.e., toward Egypt (12.10; 26.1; 37.28; 46.6)
4. Two patriarchal wives are seduced or nearly so; an Egyptian wife attempts to seduce Joseph (12.14–16; 20.1–14; 26.1; 39.6–18)
5. Their wives are barren and quarrel (in Abraham's and Jacob's cases) (16.1–6; 29.31–30.8)

6. The younger sons are divinely favored (also Joseph's sons) (17.18–19; 25.23; 48.14; 49.8–12, 22–26)
7. Brides met at well (24.15; 29.9)
8. Promises of children, land, divine blessing (e.g., 12.1–3, 26.2–5; 28.13–14)
9. Gentiles acknowledge God's blessing on the patriarchs (21.21–22; 26.28–29, 41.39–40)
10. Burial in cave of Machpelah (23.1–20; 25.9; 35.27–29; 49.29–32)

These parallels between the patriarchs seem to be rather more than coincidence and we can see the intention of the author/final redactor. Some of the points go back to strong family traditions (burial in family tomb), while others are more artificial (meeting one's bride at a well...) to highlight the analogy with the experiences of different generations. The stories should not be interpreted in isolation. They were written to shed mutual light on each other; each cycle of stories must be read in the light of the others and each episode ought to be compared with other similar episodes. There is also present the theological principle of typology: men acting in a similar fashion in similar situations and the *constancy of God's character* are reflected: God always punishes sin and always keeps his promises. The accounts of his dealings with one generation resemble in some degree his dealings with those of the next.

The stories generally aim toward the same theme of promises, descendants, land, and divine blessing. At the same time, the patriarchs use different means to obtain these ends.

ABRAHAM'S STORY

Examining the Abraham story – we can see that it falls into clearly defined episodes:

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|----------|-----------------------------------|
| 11.27–32 | Genealogical introduction |
| 12.1–9 | Call of Abram and first journey |
| 12.10–20 | In Egypt |
| 13.1–18 | Abram and Lot separate |
| 14.1–24 | Abram rescues Lot |
| 15.1–21 | Covenant with Abram |
| 16.1–16 | Covenant of circumcision |
| 17.1–27 | Divine visitation |
| 18.1–15 | Abraham's intercession for Sodom |
| 18.16–33 | Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah |
| 19.1–29 | Lot's daughters' incest |
| 19.30–38 | Abraham and Abimelech |
| 20.1–18 | Isaac born; Ishmael leaves |
| 21.1–21 | Birth of Ishmael |
| 21.22–34 | Covenant with Abimelech |
| 22.1–19 | Testing of Abraham |
| 22.20–24 | Genealogy of Nahor |
| 23.1–20 | Purchase of burial ground |
| 24.1–67 | Betrothal of Rebekah |
| 25.1–11 | Conclusion |

Even though these themes may have once been independent of each other and later brought together, the **present form** must occupy our attention first. All earlier forms of the narrative are reconstructions only.

Examined carefully, we can see there are several unifying elements within the story relating it to the other patriarchs. The partial fulfillment of the promises made to the patriarchs is realized

slowly but constantly. By the time of his death, Abraham has acquired only a small plot of land as a burial ground in Canaan, and only one of his children, Isaac, counts towards the numberless company of descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven that Abraham had been promised. The promise of a son is central to the Abraham story and what appears on first sight to be a collection of rather heterogeneous stories is in fact a well-constructed narrative.

HISTORICAL SETTING OF THE PATRIARCHS

Another question is the determination of the period when the patriarchs lived, or may have lived. **Classical chronology** of Genesis dates Abraham at about 2000BC, and his descendants in the following centuries. Between Joseph and the time of Moses, it places a long interlude of four centuries (Ex 12.40–41).

The problem is that the composition of Genesis occurred long after the events it intends to narrate. Considering the long gap of time (6-12 centuries) between Abraham and the composition of Genesis, are there any grounds for holding that Gen 12–50 describes historical events and people, or are its stories merely the creation of a gifted novelist?

While focusing on the final form of the text and considering mainly the narrator's art of writing, such historical questions must be considered.

A judgment of the **historical worth of the patriarchal narratives** must take into consideration four issues:

1. Character or genre of the narratives: are they trying to report events?
2. Transmission of the narratives: Is it possible that reports of patriarchal deeds could have been reliably transmitted to form the written sources of Genesis?
3. Identification of the patriarchal period: Can a patriarchal period be identified? Dates suggested for the patriarchal period vary from about 2200BC to 1200BC
4. Accounts of the patriarchs' lifestyles and customs: Do the accounts of their lifestyles and customs match what we know from external sources (archeology)?

1. The Genesis stories are essentially **stories about family life**: birth, rivalry between wives and siblings, marriage, and death are the dominant interests of these stories. This broad consensus about the character of the material in Gen 12–50 and comparative studies with other ancient works help to clarify the intentions of the author: he wants to narrate real stories about real people. The patriarch stories are intended as real family stories of historical people, even though not everything is historically accurate.

2. It has already been mentioned that before being written down, the stories circulated in oral form and thus were handed down for centuries. De Vaux¹ points to the **methods of Arab storytellers**: "Nomadic and semi-nomadic Arabs still narrate in their tents the traditions, genealogies and stories of their tribes or families. Both adults and children hear the same stories again and again and whenever the narrator omits or adds something, they correct him at once. Different versions of the same story are often found in different families. Everyone knows the history of his tribe or clan by heart." Such methods can bridge many centuries as attested to in several parallels (f. e. the orally transmitted reminiscences of the Taamira tribe from the Bethlehem area go back four centuries). In this way even complicated folk history may be passed down over many generations, so that the relatively simple outline of the Genesis story could have been preserved intact.

3. Various dates have been proposed for the patriarchal era. Most modern scholars have preferred to identify the patriarchal age either with the Middle Bronze Age I (2200–2000BC), or

¹ Roland de Vaux, *The Early History of Israel*, 182.

more preferably with the Middle Bronze Age II (2000–1700BC). This kind of identification is mainly based on the results of archeological research consulting several scientific disciplines.

4. The way Genesis depicts the patriarchal life-style is examined and compared with the information known from extrabiblical sources in the early second millennium.

I. Genesis places Abraham's origins in **Ur in southern Iraq**. Ur was a flourishing center of commerce long before 2000BC, but it is remarkable how many of the biblical names are found in southern Mesopotamia at this period, e.g., Serug (Abraham's great-grandfather), Nahor (Abraham's brother), Jacob-El (cf. Abraham's grandson). Several names seem to be connected with the worship of the moon, whose god and goddesses were patrons of Ur—they include Laban, Sarah, Milcah, and Terah. No one claims that any of the people named in the non-biblical texts should be identified with the biblical figures. The evidence simply shows that the patriarchal stories fit the environment in which they are set.

II. Abraham then moved to **Harran in northern Syria** (upper Mesopotamia), and it is to this region that he sent his servant to find a wife for Isaac and to which Jacob went for the same purpose. Once again, personal and place names found in this area echo those in Genesis (Ishmael, Isaac, and Jacob).

III. Another striking feature of the patriarchs is their **lifestyle**. They are not Bedouins who migrate across deserts on camels, nor are they traders on donkeys, although they own donkeys and keep to the trade routes. Rather, they are semi-nomadic, moving from place to place when the situation demands but also staying for longer periods in one place, making agreements with local townspeople. Their main occupation is keeping flocks and herds, but sometimes they sow and raise crops.

Such social groupings have doubtless existed throughout Middle Eastern history, but it is striking that the texts from Mari (clay-tablets from the city-archive, c. 1700BC), which lies between Ur and Harran, exemplify this type of existence. Not only does patriarchal society seem to be organized like Mari's, but many Mari terms (f. e. pasture land, inheritance, tribes, leaders) find parallels in the Bible. While it would be wrong to insist that these parallels demonstrate that the patriarchal age is contemporary with Mari, the differences between patriarchal society and that of the monarchy period in Israel suggest that Genesis contains historical reminiscences of earlier times.

IV. Finally, since **family issues** are so prominent in Genesis, it is natural that many customs in Genesis about adoption, marriage, inheritance, and burial have been compared with extrabiblical texts. These texts come from a wide range of periods and locations, and they shed much light on biblical practice; indeed, they show that the accounts in Genesis are true to life and reflect authentically the customs of the ancient Orient.

Comparative study may be done within the Old Testament itself, and this clearly shows that some of the practices apparently taken for granted by the patriarchs were forbidden by later law. For example, *Abraham married his half sister* (20.12), which is prohibited in Lev 18.9, 11; 20.17, and *Jacob married two sisters* (29.21–30), which is banned in Lev 18.18. *Judah and Simeon married Canaanites*, and *Joseph married an Egyptian*, whereas intermarriage with foreigners was later strictly condemned (Ex 34.16; Dt 7.3). Isaac and Jacob both change the order of seniority of their descendants in making their will (27; 48.13–20), something prohibited by Deut 21.15–17.

If the patriarchal stories were pure inventions of later writers, most likely the patriarchs wouldn't have been described as contradicting the law at so many points. These discrepancies between the behavior of the patriarchs and later legal norms clearly suggest that the traditions were old and were preserved despite the questionable moral standards of those whose lives were evoked.

A similar picture emerges in the study of **patriarchal religion**. At many points the beliefs and practices of the patriarchs seem to disagree with those established in the later books of the Pentateuch or the prophets. But once again this inconsistency between Genesis and the other books suggests that Genesis is based on traditions going back to much earlier times.

LECTIO DIVINA

Lectio Divina (LD), a method of reading and meditating on Scripture which was developed in the middle ages in monasteries, is made up of the following:

- lectio
- meditatio
- oratio
- contemplatio

Lectio consists of careful reading of the biblical text. The main concern is placed on its characteristic points, text-dynamics, structure, characters, their actions and temper, close and remote context and background of the text. The objective is to become familiar with the text and understand its objective value and message, i.e. what the text says, taken by itself. A good lectio presupposes certain exegetical skill. That's why I started with a more technical introduction today. Going forward, I will be more specific and focus concretely on one text, but still provide background information.

Meditatio is the second stage which tries to disclose the message of the text and answer the question, "How do I understand the text today?" or "How do I apply the text to my life today?" Here we try to formulate today's meaning of the text, transferring it to our individual situation in life. When the text is transferred, new emphases emerge. The content disclosed in this stage is the basis for prayer.

Oratio, The text invites us to spontaneous prayer. We start a dialogue with God or with Jesus Christ. Based on the text, we can give praise and thanks or present our petitions or questions. The result is our inner joy and consolation from the familiarity with the biblical positions and the gifts offered in the Word. Let us ask with confidence what the Word is offering to us...

Contemplatio is a very personal step and is God's gift. The preceding steps were lead by our activity and thinking, but also by His grace up to this point. Now it will be replaced by God's activity. In this moment we stand in front of the mystery from which the biblical text originates, in front of the mystery of God, who is love, in front of Christ Redeemer and the Spirit active in history. It is no longer me who is reading the text but through the text God's power is being disclosed to me, the redemption is revealed.

LD is meaningful when it results in an action. Therefore our meetings are with certain regularity and still there is a space to live the Word.

PRAYER

"Here, then, I have today set before you life and prosperity, death and doom. ¹⁶If you obey the commandments of the LORD, your God, which I enjoin on you today, loving him, and walking in his ways, and keeping his commandments, statutes and decrees, you will live and grow numerous, and the LORD, your God, will bless you in the land you are entering to occupy. ¹⁹I call heaven and earth today to witness against you, I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life, then, that you and your descendants may live, ²⁰by loving the LORD, your God, heeding his voice, and holding fast to him. For that will mean life for you, a long life for you to live on the land which the LORD swore he would give to your fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob."

Deuteronomy 30.15-16, 19-20