

# Introduction to Genesis

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## *Lesson 1*

The book of Genesis contains materials that are foundational for Jewish and Christian theology, and is almost certainly the most consulted book of the Old Testament in the contemporary world.<sup>1</sup> It is also a book that is very often drawn into controversy when science and the creation account of Genesis are set in conflict against one another. Certainly it must be conceded that when Genesis was composed it was never intended to be a scientific account of creation, such matters were certainly not disputes that were of concern for the original audience. The original intent of the composition was to provide an alternative view of creation to those held by the cultures that were in proximity to the newly formed nation of Israel (i.e. Canaan, Mesopotamia, and Egypt) as they tried to

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<sup>1</sup> R. W. L. Moberly, *The Theology of the Book of Genesis*, in the Old Testament Theology series (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. xix.

comprehend the nature of the God who was leading them to a land that was to be theirs because of a promise.

It needs to be remembered that Israel had been living in the land of Egypt for 430 years at the time of the Exodus. Just think about that for a moment, that is almost twice as long as the United States has been a nation. Their view of the world had to be effected by the culture that surrounded them for such a long period. Israel had none of the Scripture before the Exodus, I am sure they had stories of God that were passed down to them but nothing like the information that we have available to us today. One of the major tasks that would need to be done for them would be to correct the wrong theology that had surrounded them on a daily basis in Egypt and infiltrated their thought processes. They were people just like we are today and we are all effected by the culture that surrounds us.

In the Egyptian concept of creation, it was at one time thought that there were many competing accounts of creation. Today, the consensus is that the main 3 systems of creation that emerged are simply variants of a fairly

uniform single concept of the creation of the universe. This concept proposed that at the occasion of the creation all existence was derived from a single original source. That single source was perceived to be the oneness of the creator that was divided into multiple life forms throughout the cosmos.<sup>2</sup>

Before creation, there was a state of non-existence that was characterized by a total darkness and unlimited waters. From this state of darkness and waters, emerged a creator who established the universe, while not at the same time obliterating completely the state of chaotic non-existence. This state of non-existence remained outside the boundaries of the created world, but at times intruded into the created world order in the form of sleep, and death, which represented a temporary return to the uncreated cosmos. Death itself was not able to extinguish existence permanently and through proper burial procedures

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<sup>2</sup> Rosalie David, *Religion and Magic in Ancient Egypt* (London: Penguin Books, 2002), p. 81.

attainment of a better life could be attained in the next world.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the fact that there is not a single definitive creation text, the most important creation myth (the Heliopolitan Cosmogony) emphasizes the role of Atum. This text claims that it is from him that the whole universe was created. The created universe floated in the midst of the vast ocean of motionless water, which was the source of the water in the created world. The creation myths reflect the belief that the universe did not consist of physical components but was composed of a variety of individual deities who had distinctive personalities and wills. Therefore, the sky was a goddess, while her consort, Geb, formed the earth.<sup>4</sup> The sun and the moon, which were both gods played an enormous part in the cosmogony of Egypt.

Though it is true that Genesis shares many theological presuppositions with others in the ancient world, most of the stories of Genesis are an alternative viewpoint that

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<sup>3</sup> Rosalie David, *Religion and Magic in Ancient Egypt* (London: Penguin Books, 2002), pp. 81-82.

<sup>4</sup> Rosalie David, *Religion and Magic in Ancient Egypt* (London: Penguin Books, 2002), pp. 82-83.

challenges ancient assumptions about the nature of God, the world and mankind. The sheer volume of material in chapters 12 – 50, which deals with the Patriarchs, demonstrates that it is with the Patriarchs that primary interest rests and not with the primeval creation account. Genesis provides the background, the introduction, for the Exodus story. The focus of these texts is always toward the redemption of Israel.<sup>5</sup> Some have seen the primeval creation account as perhaps also indicative of the ideal to which God will restore all things as part of His redemptive action. According to Waltke, “Every political and/or religious community must have a memory of its history that defines and distinguishes it.”<sup>6</sup>

The Genesis account never intended to prove the existence of God, for the original audience they had to but look up and see God in a pillar of Cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. They needed no proof of the existence of God,

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<sup>5</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, in the Word Biblical Commentary Series, vol. 1 (Waco, TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1987), p. xlv.

<sup>6</sup> Bruce K. Waltke, with Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), p. 22.

they saw him and they heard his voice from the mountain,  
they walked through the Red Sea and saw the powerful  
hand of God destroy the greatest army of the ancient world  
effortlessly.

## **Authorship**

As with every book of the Bible there have been those who have disputed the traditional view of authorship for Genesis, but as with many of these attempts, their arguments have proven to be extraordinarily tedious and most often unhelpful at actually elucidating the text. For the sake of brevity, it would be fruitful to leave issues of authorship in abeyance, for more detail on the authorship discussion; reference can be made to more detailed sources for this debate.<sup>7</sup> Another note in this aspect of the discussion is as Moberly notes that “... traditional ascriptions of authorship do not (and indeed probably were not originally intended to) function as guides to composition ...” in the manner that we think of authorship

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<sup>7</sup> Bruce K. Waltke, with Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis A Commentary*, pp. 21-29. Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, in the JPS Torah Commentary series (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), pp. xi-xvi.

in the modern world.<sup>8</sup> Their ideas of authorship and authority varied considerably from ours, but it should be clearly noted the preponderance of historical evidence connects Genesis to Moses. It should also be noted that the author clearly makes the case that he relied upon other materials in his composition of the Genesis account (i.e. Gen. 5:1 as is reminiscent of the mention of “The Book of the Wars of the Lord,” Num. 21:14 or “the book of Jashar,” Josh. 10:13; 2 Sam. 1:18).

### **Date**

Again, as with most issues regarding the Book of Genesis the date of the composition is no less controversial and fraught with complexity. Such issues as knowing the time of the Exodus, and the time of Moses, complicate concerns that are brought into this discussion. This is even before we get into such questions as authorship and the issues of editors and editions. It should be noted that the current edition of Genesis, extant in our modern translations of the Bible, comes from Codex Leningradensis

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<sup>8</sup> R. W. L. Moberly, *The Theology of the Book of Genesis*, p. 34.

that dates from 1008 A. D. There are 24 manuscripts of Genesis that were found at Qumran and though they are relatively fragmentary in nature, preserving only thirty-two chapters among their crumbs some of these fragments can be dated as early as the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C. These fragments do reveal a text that is generally very close to the traditional Hebrew text of Genesis and yet predates it by more than a thousand years.<sup>9</sup>

This evidence gives us a date of no later than the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C. for the text of Genesis, which is very ancient with regard to actual manuscript evidence. As far as the actual date of composition, a short answer is that a case can be made for dating Genesis based on a number of factors to at least the tenth century B.C., and possibly as early as the thirteenth century B.C.<sup>10</sup>

## **Purpose**

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<sup>9</sup> Martin Abegg, Jr., Peter Flint and Eugene Ulrich, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Bible* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), p. 3-4.

<sup>10</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, in the Word Biblical Commentary Series, vol. 1, pp. xlii-xlv.



The book of Genesis was written as a theological treatise. This is its primary interest, and it certainly was never intended as a book that would answer any and all questions regarding how, or even why, God created the universe. Genesis has been used and abused in a vast array of ways. Often times, people feel that if Genesis does not answer a particular question regarding creation or the nature of the universe then the very integrity of the book itself is somehow threatened. Nothing could be further from the truth.

First, if God did tell us how He created the universe we would not be capable of understanding it and almost certainly the ancients would not have preserved something that they considered to be incomprehensible. Another issue with this type of reasoning is with the level of arrogance that suggests that our current level of understanding somehow has reached the level of comprehending the mind of the creator of the universe. There was no intention, on the part of either God, or Moses, to tell us how God created the universe, or to give us a timeline for dating either the

earth, or humanity. These are all interesting questions for us as human beings; the problem is that the author of Genesis has not provided us with the answers to these questions.

The original intent of the work was to introduce the God of the Exodus to His people so that they could understand who He was, and to begin to convey an understanding of His nature. It was never intended to prove His existence; they saw that on a daily basis in the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night (Ex. 13:21). “To find the right question to ask, and the right way of asking it, is of fundamental importance within theology as within science.”<sup>11</sup> Genesis does not strive to prove the existence of God to those who doubt, but to help those who believe in His existence, and even saw the presence of God, to comprehend who He was and His true nature. We must not forget that Genesis was originally composed for the people of the Exodus, those that crossed out of Egypt into the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land.

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<sup>11</sup> R. W. L. Moberly, *The Theology of the Book of Genesis*, p. 62.

Moberly says, "... any mature understanding of the world as God's world – any affirmation of the enduring truth and value of Genesis 1 – must embrace complexity and conflict, whose only good resolution will lie in hard-won existential ability to live with deeper trust in God whose ways are mysterious, in the proper theological sense of that term."<sup>12</sup>

## Synopsis

The intent of the author of Genesis was to convey to Israel, the Israel of the Exodus, the nature of the God who had led them from slavery and whom they saw every day in the pillar of cloud and at night in the pillar of fire. This is a God who cares for them and strives to dwell in their midst. This is a

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<sup>12</sup> R. W. L. Moberly, *The Theology of the Book of Genesis*, p. 69. For and understanding of Moberly's understanding of the term, "mystery" here is a brief explanation on page 64:

*Yet the proper theological sense of mystery is to express an inherently deep reality, the grasp and understanding of which intrinsically becomes ever more demanding the more fully one engages with it – in the convenient tag, "the more you know, the more you know you don't know." God is not demystified by accurate knowledge: quite the opposite; and to appeal to God as the cause of the world is not to offer the kind of cause for which scientists look. One might put it by saying that in place of explanation, which scientists properly provide, theology is concerned with understanding, a way of thinking, and relatedly living, that is always open to further developing and deepening.*

book about the nature of God and His desires and dreams for  
His creation.