



Genesis

Genesis tells a number of stories of 'beginning'. Indeed the name Genesis means origin or source. The book begins by telling the story of the beginning of the world, before also telling the story of the beginning of the breakdown of relationship between God and humanity. From chapter 12 onwards Genesis tells another story of beginning: the start of a new relationship between God and a particular family – Abraham and Sarah and their descendants, ending then with Abraham and Sarah's great-grandson Joseph in Egypt.



How long will it take?

Reading time: about 3 ½ hours
Short of time? Just read Genesis 1-3; 6-9 (but miss out the lists of names); 12; 18; 25.21-34; 37; 42-45



Genre

Often called 'antiquarian history' – stories of the ancient past.



Anything tricky?

There are a number of issues you might find tricky.

Some of these include

- the question of the historicity of the creation and flood accounts
- the account of the births of Ishmael and Isaac and the subsequent conflict between their descendants.

You might also have questions about

- why a serpent could talk;
- who Cain and Abel married and
- who the Nephilim were (to name but a few).

Genesis throws up a number of complex questions about what history is; about what kinds of texts we think Genesis contains, not to mention the modern political implications of the rift between Ishmael and Isaac. You will need to come to your own opinion about how you read Genesis and what sense you make of it.



Inspiring quotes

¹ In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. ² The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. ³ And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.
 (Genesis 1.1-3)

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."
 (Genesis 1.26)

I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore.
 (Genesis 22.17)



About the Author

Traditionally Moses was regarded as the author of the first five books of the Bible (Genesis–Deuteronomy); known in Judaism as the Torah and in Christianity often as the Pentateuch (or five teachings).

Today many scholars would argue that Moses was not the author of the Pentateuch but that these five books grew up over a long period of time and were written down and edited from oral tradition.

Some of the features, particularly of the book of Genesis, which suggest that it emerged from a variety of different sources, are where stories are told more than once and where there is an uneven join (in other words you find yourself surprised by a change in subject). You might like to look out for these as you read and see what you think.



What kind of Book is it?

This is probably the most controversial question you can ask of Genesis. Some will argue Genesis is a scientific account; others that – parts of it at least – are poetic, imaginative reflections; others still that it is an etiology (i.e. a story told to explain the origins of things).

Genesis is often described as being ‘classic narrative’ in that it tells epic stories about its characters.



About the times

Genesis is set from the dawn of time onwards. The first 11 chapters tell the story of the origins of the world and are often called ‘primeval history’ (i.e. stories from the earliest ages).

From the time of Abraham (chapter 12 onwards), we enter more recognizable history – a history that we can try to date. There is much discussion about when to date Abraham but most scholars would suggest sometime around 1800bc (during the Middle Bronze Age, a few hundred years after the building of Stonehenge).

Other books set around this time

None really (with– Exodus follows it though!)



How is it structured?

- 1.1-11.26 From Creation to Babel
- 11.27-25.18 The Story of Abraham and Sarah
- 25.19-36.43 The Story of Jacob, Leah and Rachel
- 37.1-50.26 The Story of Jacob’s sons, including Joseph



Look out for...

Genesis tells a number of stories of beginnings: the beginning of the world and what happened after that (chapters 1-11), as well as the story of the beginning of God's people (12-50). The story of the beginnings of God's people begins as a family history in Genesis – the family history of Abraham and his descendants – and only later turns into the history of a whole people (in the book of Exodus). As you read notice the family history element. I often think Genesis 12-50 feels like a family photo album in which you have lots of snaps of some events and then large gaps before the next collection of snaps.

There are some huge theological ideas introduced in Genesis – as you read look out for blessing, covenant, election (i.e. God's choosing of a people), goodness and sinfulness, righteousness and faith... to name but a few.



What could this mean for me?

The story of Genesis is a story about relationship between God and humanity. As you read think about that relationship – what made it go wrong time and time again? How did God respond? Is there anything to learn from this about our relationship with God today?



Discussion group questions

- Were there any parts of the book that you particularly liked or which inspired you? (If you were to pick out a verse that inspired you which one would have chosen?)
- Were there any parts of the book that you disliked or which troubled you?
- What did you think the book was about? There are lots of characters in Genesis – were there any you related to more than the others? Why?
- Do you think that any character was depicted unfairly? For example, Jacob is made out to be unreliable and untrustworthy; whereas Joseph can apparently do no wrong. Did you agree with how these characters were portrayed?
- What is your view about the story of creation and the flood? If you were talking to a sceptical scientist, what would you say about how Genesis tells the story?
- The theme of blessing is often identified as important in the book of Genesis – did you notice anything about how it was used throughout the book?
- Did you read anything in the book that touched you, expanded your faith or made you think more deeply about your life and how you live it?



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