

Introduction to GENESIS

Background and Setting

The initial setting for Genesis is eternity past. God, by willful act and divine Word, spoke all creation into existence and furnished it, and then He breathed life into a lump of dirt that He fashioned in His image to become Adam. God made mankind the crowning point of His creation, His companions who would enjoy fellowship with Him and bring glory to His name.

Genesis has three distinct, sequential geographical settings: (1) Mesopotamia in chapters 1–11; (2) the Promised Land in chapters 12–36; and (3) Egypt in chapters 37–50. The time frames of these three segments are, respectively: (1) Creation to around 2090 B.C.; (2) 2090–1897 B.C.; and (3) 1897–1804 B.C. Genesis covers more time than the other books of the Bible combined.

While it is difficult to pinpoint the exact time at which this book was written, Israel first heard Genesis sometime before crossing the Jordan River and entering the Promised Land (around 1405 B.C.).

Historical and Theological Themes

In this book of beginnings, God gave Israel a revelation of Himself and a worldview that sharply contrasted that of the surrounding nations. He made no attempt to defend His existence or to present a systematic discussion of His person and works. Rather, Israel's God clearly distinguished Himself from the alleged gods of the nations. Numerous theological foundations are revealed in Genesis, including God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, man, sin, redemption, covenant, promise, Satan and angels, kingdom, revelation, Israel, judgment, and blessing.

Genesis 1–11 (primeval history) reveals the origins of the universe—the beginnings of time and space and many “firsts” in human experience, such as marriage, family, the Fall, sin, redemption, judgment, and nations. Genesis 12–50 (patriarchal history) explains how Israel came into existence as a family whose ancestry could be traced to Eber (hence the name “Hebrews”; Gen. 10:24–25) and even more remotely to Shem, the son of Noah (hence the name “Semites”; Gen. 10:21). Through the book of Genesis, God's people could understand not only their ancestry and family history, but also the origins of their institutions, customs, languages, and different cultures, as well as basic human experiences such as sin and death.

Because Israel was preparing to enter Canaan and dispossess its inhabitants of their homes and properties, God revealed the Canaanites' background. In addition, Israel needed to understand the basis of the war they were about to declare in light of the immorality of killing, consistent with the other four books that Moses was writing (Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). Ultimately, the Jewish nation would understand a selected portion of world history and the inaugural background of their nation. This would provide the basis for their new beginnings under Joshua's leadership in the land that had been promised to their forefather Abraham.

Genesis 12:1–3 established a primary focus on God’s promises to Abraham. This narrowed the Israelites’ view from the entire world in Genesis 1–11 to one small nation, Israel, through whom God would progressively accomplish His redemptive plan. This underscored Israel’s mission to be “a light to the Gentiles” (Isa. 42:6). God had promised land, descendants (“seed”), and blessing. This threefold promise became the basis of the covenant with Abraham (Gen. 15:1–20). The rest of Scripture bears out the fulfillment of these promises.

On a larger scale, Genesis 1–11 sets forth a singular message about the character and works of God. In the sequence of accounts that compose this section of Scripture, a pattern emerges that reveals God’s abundant grace in His response to the willful disobedience of mankind. Without exception, in each account man showed greater sinful rebellion. But also without exception, God increased the manifestation of His grace. In biblical words, the more sin abounded, the more God’s grace abounded (Rom. 5:20).

One final theme of both theological and historical significance sets Genesis apart from other books of Scripture. This first book of Scripture corresponds closely with the final book. In the book of Revelation, the paradise that was lost in Genesis is regained. The apostle John clearly presented the events recorded in his book as future resolutions to the problems that began as a result of the curse in Genesis 3. His focus is on the effects of the Fall in the undoing of creation and on the way in which God will rid His creation of the curse’s effect. In John’s own words, “And there shall be no more curse” (Rev. 22:3). Not surprisingly, in the yet-future time described in the final chapter of God’s Word, believers will find themselves back in the Garden of Eden, the eternal paradise of God, eating from the tree of life (Rev. 22:1–14). At that time, they will partake, wearing robes washed in the blood of the Lamb (Rev. 22:14).

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