

# The Book of Genesis

## Background

The Book of Genesis, as its title suggests, is an account of beginnings or origins. The Book of Genesis stretches from Creation to the beginnings of emergent Israel's four-century exile in Egypt. The Book of Genesis has its own internal structure somewhat blurred by the later imposition of chapters and verses on the original text. The book is divided into ten unequal sections marked off by the "title," or formulaic expression, "this is the record of the descendants of" (2:4, 5:1, 6:9, 10:1, 11:10, 11:27, 25:12, 25:19, 36:1, 37:2), usually followed by selected stories about the particular family so named in the title. For example, following the expression, "this is the record of the descendants of Terah" in Genesis 11:27, selected stories are told mainly about only one of Terah's three sons, Abraham. Using these ten titles as a guide to the overall structure of the Book of Genesis suggests Genesis chapters 2 through 50 be subdivided into two sections, chapters 2:4—11:26 and chapters 11:27—50:26, each with three narratives and two genealogies. Genesis 1:1—2:3, the first story of Creation, stands noticeably outside the book's ten-fold structure, serving as the introduction to the whole book.

## Introduction to God's Creative Goodness

As the introduction to the whole Book of Genesis, the first story of Creation (1:1—2:3) emphasizes the overall goodness and blessing inherent in God's creative acts. Nothing, absolutely nothing, that unfolds in subsequent chapters of Genesis about the devolution of order, the sinful decisions of humanity, the slipping toward chaos resulting in the Flood, or human arrogance in building a tower to the sky, should serve to detract from the basic goodness of Creation. The material world, even a later fallen world much in need of divine saving intervention, never erases the structural goodness and blessing in Creation. God is first and foremost a God of blessing and grace. Jesus would later suggest as much when he said God "makes his sun rise on the bad and the good and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust" (Matthew 5:45).

When one considers the ancient Babylonian parallels to Genesis, chapter 1, in which the sun, moon, and stars are squabbling deities and ordinary humans serve as cogs in the wheel of life or worse—disposable refuse—certainly an origin story describing creation as a generous blessing bestowed on ordinary human beings created in the image of the one and only God stands in sharp contrast. Not surprisingly, the slaves and abolitionists of the late nineteenth century saw the political dimension of Genesis. They appealed to Genesis, chapter 1, especially those verses declaring all humans to be created in God's image, to argue for their own emancipation from a master-slave economy. Where in the Babylonian origin stories, humans were meant to serve the gods 24-7, a literature arguing for a six-day work week because the Creator needed a day of rest, and required those created in his image to also take a Sabbath rest, would have been revolutionary literature indeed. In the context of the Babylonian empire or any empire, where the gods might repeatedly issue pogroms to kill humans en masse, whether on a whim or for overcrowding, the Genesis Creation with its mandate to be fruitful and multiply and to have dominion over the earth (1:28) would have sounded quite extraordinary. And, it was, and remains so.



## Generations of Wrong Choices, Blessings, and Promises

**Originating sins.** Given that humanity, as described in the first Creation account, has been created in the image of God, it would seem natural enough for humans to be empowered with the freedom of choice. Indeed, the second Creation story (2:4–25) reveals the real consequences attached to the privilege of freely choosing for or against God’s will. Adam and Eve, the symbolic representatives of all humans, make wrong choices by eating the forbidden fruit. Their action destroys all their relationships: with self, with God, with each other, and with the nonhuman world and the earth. In shame (3:7), they hide from God (3:8), blame each other (3:12–13), become enemies with the serpent (3:15), and eventually are forced to work the land “by the sweat” of their brow (3:19). The subsequent expulsion from the Garden of Eden (3:23) of Adam and Eve sets in motion what appears to be the unraveling of the created order itself, climaxing in the chaos of the flood (chapters 6–9).

Saint Augustine, reading these origin stories through the lenses of Saint Paul’s writings in the New Testament, would later develop the doctrine of original sin. It is important to remember, however, that although the doctrinal language of “original sin” and the Fall are closely associated with these initiating choices of Adam and Eve, the first time in the Bible where the language of the Scriptures most closely parallels the language of the doctrine of original sin does not appear until Genesis 6:5: “The LORD saw how great was man’s wickedness on earth, and how no desire that his heart conceived was ever anything but evil.” In the story, as told by the narrator, the individual choices of Adam and Eve affected them personally. It would take another ten generations, according to the internal chronological framework of the storyteller, before the cumulative choices of humanity begin to reveal the systemic results described in terms anywhere close to approaching the language of the doctrine of “original sin” as first used by Saint Augustine. Therefore, it may be best to speak of the choices of Adam and Eve as “originating sins” and leave the doctrinal language to describe the systemic nature of cumulative wrong choices.

**The fall to violence.** Significantly, the most serious consequences of the Fall are not simply personal, such as labor pains for the woman, harsh labor for the man, expulsion from Eden for both, though these are serious enough. Ironically, not even death in the case of Adam and Eve, who lived very long lives, is the severest consequence of the Fall. The first death explicitly described in the Scriptures after the Fall is not a natural death at all. It is murder! Here the spiritual death introduced into the story by the disobedience of their parents has as its most tangible outcome brother killing brother. The spiritual and physical are not separate realities for the Hebrew mind.

When Cain kills his brother Abel (4:1–16), the systemic “fall to violence” that curses humanity most, then and now, is explicitly revealed. Cain now fears a sevenfold vengeance for his deed, while five generations later, Lamech fears a seventyfold increase in vengeance for killing a man who merely wounded him (4:24). Five more generations pass and by the time of Noah, the biblical language is explicit enough, the Lord determines to send the Flood because the violence has become systemic, “the earth was corrupt and full of lawlessness [violence in Hebrew]” (6:11, 13). The story of the Flood is the reversal of the story of Creation. It is a return to the formless, primordial, violent, chaos before Creation.

In the Babylonian origin stories, the earth was formed out of the murdered body of Tiamat, the goddess of watery chaos, who was killed in battle. By contrast, the biblical Creation story tells of God creating an ordered world of peace out of chaos. God established and preserved the world, not as an act of war, but with an utterance, a life-giving, creative word. Clearly, the biblical story of the earth descending into the chaos of violence from its origins in the shalom-filled garden, suggests that one of the primary affects of sin, if not the primary affect, is violence and warfare. By rooting its critique of violence and warfare in the Creation stories themselves, the Book of Genesis criticized not only Babylon’s violent



culture, but also Israel's own past that had sought to establish its own national existence on similar ancient near eastern city-state politics (Deuteronomy 17:14, 1 Samuel 8:5,20) only to find themselves once again in exile.

**The Creation blessing renewed.** Not all is bleak in the unfolding story of Genesis. After the Flood, God reiterates the creation blessing to Noah and his family to “be fertile and multiply and fill the earth” (9:1). Genesis, chapter 10, seems to illustrate the fulfillment of this blessing with its list of nations spread abroad over all the earth “according to their clans and languages, by their lands and nations” (10:5,20,31, cf. 10:32). In view of the obvious blessing suggested by the multiple languages and cultures already spread abroad on the earth in Genesis, chapter 10, the claim that the whole earth had one language in the Tower of Babel story of Genesis, chapter 11, must be seen as a localized description of the perceived self-understanding of the city-state of Babel itself. The story illustrates on a large scale, the hubris first revealed in the first humans in the garden when they were tempted to “be like gods” (3:5).

Babylon, like all superpowers, tried to create a monolingual, monocultural ethos that tends to exclude “outsiders.” Many years later, the Jewish exiles and others living on the fringes of Babylon would be cases in point. The story of ancient Babel (read Babylon) is an attempt to critique Babylon or any empire and remind the Jewish minority of God's true intentions for the world. Trying to build a ziggurat, a ritual mountain (pyramid-like structure), to the gods was an arrogant attempt to “be like gods,” the temptation of all superpowers. In response, the Lord comes down and confuses the language and spreads the people abroad over the face of the earth. That is, God compels the people of Babel to join the rest of the world in the blessing described in Genesis, chapter 10, of a multicultural, multilingual, multinational world as the true sign of God's intent for God's Creation. Of course, from the perspective of the empire, this would have been experienced as judgment.

**Called to live by faith.** The call of Abram (12:1–3) to leave Babylon on a promise—the call to live by faith—sets the stage not only for the rest of Genesis but also for the Pentateuch, indeed for the whole of the Scriptures. Abram is promised many descendants, land, a lasting relationship with God, and that he will be a blessing to all the families of the earth. Genesis 11:27—25:18 addresses the question of whether there will even be an heir and who that will be. Are Abraham and Sarah, his wife, in their old age even able to bear children? What happens when Abraham attempts to aid God in creating an heir with his concubine, Hagar? When an heir is born to Abraham and Sarah, will Abraham trust God enough to sacrifice the promised heir, Isaac, on an altar? The overriding question is one of survival of the promise of a family and so, the destiny of a people. By the end of this section, Abraham rightfully deserves the title “father of faith.” Abraham's faith is not only lauded repeatedly in the New Testament (Romans 4:9,22; Galatians 3:6; James 2:23), but through his two sons, Isaac (by Sarah) and Ishmael (by Hagar), he becomes the legendary ancestor of the three great monotheistic religions, Judaism, and by extension, Christianity, and Islam. Isaac gets married assuring, for now, the promise of offspring. The only real estate Abraham will ever own in the Promised Land of Canaan is, ironically, a burial plot where he and Sarah are buried. He dies primarily as he lived, a landless immigrant living by faith in the promises of God.

Now that the drama of whether there would even be progeny born to Abraham and Sarah and whether he will survive has been decided, new questions arise that propel the story forward. Questions emerge that lead to institutional responses having to do with ownership, legal practices, ritual, and conflict resolution. What happens, for example, if more than one son is born to Isaac and Rebekah? Which child gets legally to claim the birthright, the mantle of blessing, the promises of God, then? And, so, with the opening chapters of Genesis 25:19—36:43 begins an intense rivalry between Jacob and Esau, twin sons born to Isaac and Rebekah. In a murderous rage reminiscent of Cain's hatred of Abel, Esau runs Jacob into Exile to Haran (Babylon) for stealing the birthright due, by custom, to the oldest son, which Esau can claim to be by mere minutes (25:25–26). In a trajectory that will be repeated throughout the rest of the



Scriptures, the tables of custom and expectation are turned upside down. In this case, Jacob, the youngest, receives the divine blessing, the new name Israel, and becomes the father of twelve, the future twelve tribes of Israel. Dinah, his only daughter, is brutally raped, in effect removing her from the story (chapter 34). Jacob, with his new name, Israel, finally returns from Exile in Haran (Babylon) to reconcile with his older brother Esau. In an act of brotherly solidarity, they bury their father Isaac in Hebron (Canaan).

With twelve brothers in the picture, the tensions mount, rivalries escalate, jealousies set in, and intrigue compels the story forward. Genesis 37:1—50:26, specifically, focuses on Joseph, the younger brother and favorite son of Jacob. The brothers connive to have Joseph sold into forced labor in Egypt and so the story of Joseph becomes the occasion to reflect on the most serious threat to the promises made to Abraham thus far, the exit or exile of the family of Abraham from Canaan to Egypt! Throughout the story, a shift occurs in how God is presented as well. Up to now, God appears, speaks, acts and intrudes into the lives of the ancestors in fairly dramatic ways. In the Joseph story God's role is more subtle, behind the scenes, known more to the reader than to Joseph. There are no dramatic interventions, no direct encounters with God by Joseph. It is only at the very end of the story, looking back, that Joseph is able to see clearly the hand of God in his own fate and the fate of his family. "Even though you meant harm to me," he says to his brothers, "God meant it for good, to achieve . . . the survival of many people" (Genesis 50:20; cf. 45:5–8). Hindsight is sometimes the only means by which people who live by faith ever know with certainty that God has been with them all along.

## Conclusion: Living In-Between

The story of Joseph situated as it is at the end of the Book of Genesis becomes a metaphor for how to live between great stories. What immediately follows in the Pentateuch is nearly a five-century gap in the story between the end of the Book of Genesis and the opening lines in the Book of Exodus. The story of Joseph reminds its readers and all future generations waiting for their liberations that, though God may seem to be hidden and silent, God is still with them no matter what. In the final verse of the Book of Genesis, Joseph may be dead, embalmed and buried outside the Promised Land. However, in his last living will he makes the Israelites promise to carry his bones home to that land of promise. When the time comes, hundreds of years later, they keep their promise.

And so, the story ends. But does it? Those who live "in-between" the great acts of history, those living in political exile in any empire, those in existential despair of whatever kind for however long, may now read Joseph's story as their own. They too await the story of their own exodus experience.

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