

The Message of Genesis

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The Book of Genesis was written by Moses after God through him brought the children of Israel out of captivity in Egypt. It tells the history of the world in chapters 1-11, and focuses in on the history of the Abrahamic peoples, in particularly the nation of Israel.

“Genesis” means “beginnings,” and that is precisely what the book describes from beginning to end. First presented is the creation account, the story of the beginning of the heavens, the earth, and all life. Humanity takes its place as the head of God’s creation only to fall into condemnation by being disobedient to their Creator. When people multiply and sin fills the whole earth, unrestrained, God chooses to bring unprecedented, catastrophic judgment, reducing earth’s population to just eight people.

Throughout the book, from the time that sin enters into the picture, God declares war on sin, and then he works behind the scenes as a master surgeon to gently but effectively purge his beloved humanity of this cancerous evil. After the flood, God begins with one man, Abraham, and promises that through his descendants all of the nations of the world will be blessed.

The narrative follows the passing of this covenant promise and blessing through Abraham to his son Isaac, then to his grandson Jacob, and finally to one of Jacob’s twelve sons, Joseph, who rescues the family, and also the whole world, from severe famine. The overarching message of Genesis is that the supreme God, Yahweh, who is the maker of all things and the author of all life, is the God who has chosen Abraham through whom he will create a special nation, Israel, and through them he will bring a blessing to all the people of the world.

The Beginning of Everything

One thing that the book of beginnings does not describe is the beginning of God. Unlike other ancient accounts of creation, Genesis does not attempt to provide an explanation for the origin of its Creator, nor does it do so for anything divine. Also unlike other accounts from antiquity, there is one singular God who creates everything alone. One such ancient epic, *Enuma Elish*, an ancient Babylonian creation myth, poses an explanation of the creation of the cosmos as a battle among the pantheon of gods as they struggle and conspire for positions of power. As a result of their warring, the heavens and earth, and eventually humanity are created. In contrast, the God of Genesis is alone in his creative work, and he calls all things into existence by the sound of his powerful word. He merely speaks and light replaces darkness, order replaces chaos, and living organisms fill the previously non-living void. Then, as a grand finale to his creative masterpiece, God creates humanity to bear his image and likeness upon the earth.

In chapter two, the narrative of Genesis slows down and zooms in on creation day six, at the point in which God creates humanity. Verse four begins the “*toledoth* of the heavens and the earth” (2:4), and then focuses in on the process by which God creates humanity. First, God forms a man, gives him life (v. 7), places him in a garden (v. 8), and then he commissions the man to designate names for all of the animals he has created (vv. 19-20). From this man will come all other human beings, including his wife. The man is named Adam, and his wife is later named Eve by Adam. So chapter two recounts the beginning of humanity with one man and one woman, the beginning of work (v. 15), and the beginning of marriage (v. 24). Yet, there is one more beginning described in chapter two, the beginning of law, the commandment of God, as Adam is instructed not to eat from one particular tree in the Garden of Eden (vv. 16-17). Then in chapters 3-6, the story of the beginning and spread of sin is told.

In chapters four through six, sin spreads to Adam and Eve’s children, and eventually to the whole world. The severity of sin is made abundantly clear by God banishing Adam and Eve from their garden home, takes away the Tree of Life, pronounces a curse upon the earth, and condemns humanity to death. Adam’s son Cain is warned by God to resist sin before he murders his brother Abel, choosing to ignore God’s warning. The gravity of sin is made most clear by the introduction of universal judgement in chapter six. At this point, sin has reached its boiling point, and the cup is filled and about to spill over. Having had enough of humanity’s wicked, violent ways God condemns all flesh to a watery grave in a worldwide flood. Only Noah and his seven family members, along with a pair of every kind of animal, are spared. Here is seen the origin, or beginning, of God’s judgements against sin, as well as the beginning of God’s rescue plan to save the crown of his creation from the infectious disease of sin.

After the flood subsides, the eight survivors begin humanity over again, this time with four man-woman pairs. The salvation of Noah and his family from the judgement God brings upon the earth is an assurance of God’s desire that humanity be blessed with success and prosperity. Upon exiting the ark, God promises to never again destroy the entire world by flood again. Thus, after the beginning of sin and judgement is seen the beginning rescue and covenant. Humanity begins, is born, again, and the blessing God pronounces at the culmination of his creative work is reiterated, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth” (9:1; cf. 1:28).

The Beginning of the Abrahamic Blessing

Originally, Genesis is divided up into ten accounts of *toledoths*, usually translated “generations.” The most important ones in the book are the *toledoth* of the heaven and the earth (2:4-4:26), the *toledoth* of Noah (6:9), the *toledoth* of Terah (11:27-25:11), the *toledoth* of Isaac (25:19-35:29), and the *toledoth* of Jacob (37:1-50:26). Not only are these the longest of the *toledoth*, but the blessing of God is clearly passed down through these individuals and the featured character in each one. Today, Genesis is divided into chapters, and observing this division, chapters 1-11 recount God’s workings with the whole of humanity from the creation to shortly after the flood at the Tower of Babel

incident. In chapters 12-50, God begins working through his own special people. More accurately, he is creating this special people by establishing his covenant with Abraham (17:1-2), promising to make Abraham into a great nation and that through his descendants all the nations of the earth will be blessed (12:1-3).

The Abrahamic covenant contains three specific aspects. The first is descendants. The Lord promises Abraham, who is elderly and childless, descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sands on the seashore (15:5; 22:17; cf. 13:16). The second is land. God promises to give the land to which he guided Abraham to sojourn to his descendants as an everlasting possession (13:14-15). This echoes and expands on the creation blessing “be fruitful and multiply” (descendants) and “fill the earth” (land). The third aspect is blessing. By offering Abraham such a great legacy with land and descendants in abundance, God is truly blessing Abraham. Additionally, God promises him, “I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse those who curse you” (12:3). Here God clearly offers his favor and protection to Abraham (cf. 15:1), but the promises proceed further when God commits to bless all the families and nations of the earth in Abraham through his descendants (12:3; 22:18).

The major feature of the Abrahamic covenant is the blessing to all nations. In Genesis, God seems to be forming this nation of Israel with its covenant land in order to be a conduit of some sort of special blessing that is for all people. Though Genesis is silent about just what this blessing is, the careful reader can gather that it must be a continuation of God’s struggle against sin on behalf of humankind. Little is mentioned about sin after chapter 12, but the problem of sin and God’s desire to free humanity from its evil grip is well established in chapters 1-11. In the latter section, sin is presented as hindrances and obstacles to the covenant promises, over which God’s word continually prevails. That God’s sentiments toward sin have not changed is evident in his command to Abraham, “Walk before me and be blameless,” (17:1) and in the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and the other cities of the plain (18:17-19:29). However, for the specific identification of this blessing, one must continue reading beyond Genesis to the Mosaic covenant and eventually to the New Testament in which the “good news” of freedom from sin through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ, God’s son (which is reminiscent of the Moriah episode in Genesis 22) is preached and accepted throughout all the world.

Through Abraham, God promises a blessing to all nations, and the book ends on that very note. God provides a blessing to the whole earth by guiding Joseph to prepare in Egypt for the coming catastrophic famine. It is clear throughout the unfolding of Genesis that God desires what is best for humanity, and that he is has a tremendous blessing that he is working to bestow on humanity. Furthermore, at the beginning of the book, humanity was in Eden, the perfect garden paradise. At the end of the book, the Israelites are leaving the Promised Land to dwell in Egypt because of the famine. Interestingly, the opening chapter of the book of Genesis ends with food being provided by God to his newly created humanity. The book ends similarly with food provided by God during a time of severe famine. So, like a loving parent, God is the one who takes care of and provides for humanity whom he has created, and with which he has chosen to crown his creation.

Conclusion

The Book of Genesis tells the story of the early origins of the Israelite people. It begins with the story of all humanity, the origin of life, sin, judgement, and rescue. Then, in chapters twelve and beyond, the story focuses in on the origin of the Hebrew people, who would eventually become the nation of Israel, descended from Jacob who was renamed Israel. More than the story of a nation, Genesis is the story of how God, the Creator of all things both living and non-living, formed the Israelite people to be a conduit of blessing from God to all other people on the earth. This is the message of Genesis.

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