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# GENESIS

**The book at a glance.** 50 chapters, 1,533 verses. As its title signals, the book of Genesis is the Bible's book of beginnings. It is a foundational book that informs us about the first principles of the biblical faith—such first principles as how the world came into being, how sin entered the world, how God began to unfold his plan of salvation, and what people and human institutions (especially the family) are like. Although Genesis is a history book, its history is packaged in highly literary forms, the most dominant of which is \*hero story. Because the history that is recounted in the book of Genesis reaches back to the primitive origins of the human race, it is particularly rich in universal, elemental human experience. Despite the seeming remoteness of the world of Genesis, the experiences are actually very close to our everyday lives.

■ **Genres.** The book of Genesis is very complex, with numerous \*genres converging in it. We are on safest ground if we begin with the premise that Genesis is an anthology or collection of diverse works. This anthology is more highly unified than most anthologies, however, inasmuch as all the material falls into the overall genre of historical \*narrative. But the history is not packaged like history books with which we are familiar. Instead, the book of Genesis is primarily a collection of \*hero stories, with interspersed \*genealogies. In keeping with the nature of heroic narrative, the heroes of Genesis, for all their uniqueness in the drama of salvation history, are also representatives of the human condition generally. As a result, we can see our own experiences in their stories, and their heroism is in many cases a model for us to emulate. The first three chapters belong to a genre known as the \*story of origins. Also, because the story is one of universal history (chapters 1–11) and the origins of the nation of Israel (chapters 12–50), the book of Genesis has affinities with \*epic. (For more information on items accompanied by an asterisk, see the glossary at the back of this Bible.)

■ **The literary concept of a hero.** A literary approach to the book of Genesis requires that we think correctly about the concept of a literary hero. Here are five crucial principles regarding a literary hero: (1) real life provides the materials for a hero, but the image of the hero is always a selection and distillation drawn from a larger body of information about a person; (2) cultures celebrate heroes as a way of codifying their ideals, values, and virtues; (3) literary heroes are representative of the culture producing them and of people universally; (4) to rank as a hero, a person must be generally admirable—an ideal character to whom we look up; (5) this does not mean, however, that heroes are wholly idealized, and in the Bible they rarely are wholly idealized. Much of what a storyteller aims to say about life is embodied in the character

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Passage	Content	Contribution to the Story of Redemptive History	Type of History	Cast of Characters	Most Memorable Events or Characters
1:1–2:25	God's perfect creation	God blesses his creation	Primeval history	The whole human race	Four main events: creation, fall, flood, Tower of Babel
3:1–24	Humanity's fall into sin	The human race forfeits God's blessing			
4:1–5:32	Cain, Abel, genealogies				
6:1–9:29	Noah and the flood				
10:1–11:32	Dispersion of the nations				
12:1–25:18	Story of Abraham	God unfolds a plan to bless his covenant people	Patriarchal history	A single family line	Four main characters: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph
25:19–26:35	Story of Isaac				
27:1–35:29	Story of Jacob				
36:1–43	Generations of Esau				
37:1–50:26	Story of Joseph and his brothers				

and experiences of the hero. As we read a hero story, we become the observant traveling companion of the hero, sharing his or her experiences and learning the lessons that the hero learned.

■ **The story lines.** Even though Genesis is an anthology of diverse (mainly narrative) units, there are underlying story lines that unify the book. The first eleven chapters tell the history of the entire human race and are called primeval history. The rest of the book gives us patriarchal history and tells the story of a single family line beginning with Abraham. Despite all the diversity, therefore, two main stories are told. Another unifying plot line is covenant history—the story of the binding agreements by which God relates to his people. Some of these are stated explicitly and others are inferred by the reader: the covenant of works with Adam and Eve (Genesis 2), in which their complete perfection depended on their continued obedience to God; the covenant with Noah (Gen. 9:1–17), in which God promised never to destroy the earth with a flood again; the covenant with Abraham, in which God promised to bless all nations. Within the context of the foregoing story lines, an additional one emerges: the story of individuals' choosing either to trust and obey God or to follow a path of expediency in which they behave according to their own inclinations (which are usually depraved).

■ **The cast of characters.** God is the only character who is present from start to finish, and in the overall story of Genesis God is the protagonist or central character. All the human characters in the story interact with this great protagonist and his designs. Even though the human scene in Genesis becomes crowded as the stories unfold, there are

eight great heroes of Genesis: Adam, Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. There are also five major heroines: Eve, Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, and Rachel. In a book where the arena of action is usually the family, five couples occupy much of our interest: Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Leah, Jacob and Rachel.

■ **Unifying motifs.** (1) The characterization of God and the story of his dealings with people. (2) The sinfulness of the human race and individuals. (3) The story of God's unfolding plan to redeem a people for himself despite human waywardness (to use John Milton's formula, "supernal grace contending with sinfulness of men"). (4) Hero story as the nearly constant genre. (5) An abundance of universal, recognizable human experience. (6) Characters, characters, characters: in both the narrative parts of Genesis and in the genealogies, we are continuously drawn into an encounter with unforgettable characters and their stories.

■ **Inferred literary intentions.** The book is designed to achieve the following literary purposes:

- acquaint us with first things—the events that happened first in human history and the foundational principles of human existence
- satisfy our taste for story by giving us stories that are the very touchstone of great narrative
- give us a full-fledged portrait of the character of God
- get us to share essential human experiences with the memorable characters of the book
- clue us in to the beginnings of God's covenant of redemption that culminated in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus
- show us how to live our daily lives in accordance with God's will for people

■ **Theological themes.** (1) Creation: early Genesis is the most important repository of biblical teaching on the physical world of nature. (2) The nature of God: the acts and attributes of God are so extensively portrayed that we can compile a theology just from this book. (3) The nature of people: Genesis is also the basic biblical text on what theologians call anthropology, or the nature of people. (4) Sin: Genesis is an anatomy of human sinfulness—an ever-expanding picture of how people do what is evil. (5) Covenant: Genesis traces the early phases of God's plan to redeem sinful humanity. (6) Providence: God guides the history of the world and of individuals (especially Joseph) to accomplish his purposes. (7) Faith: the heroic characters (especially Abraham) are examples of faith in God.

■ **Genesis as a chapter in the master story of the Bible.** The master story of the Bible begins in Genesis. Genesis is our introduction to the character of God and his plan for dealing with the human race. It is also the beginning of human history, starting with the state of innocence and then plummeting to the fallen state. The great struggle

between good and evil begins in Genesis. A major strand in the master story of the Bible is the unfolding of God's covenant with the human race, and this covenant history starts with the book of Genesis. From the beginning, God's purpose for Abraham and his offspring is to bless all the nations. Genesis 3:15 is the first announcement of the master story of the Bible that finds its fulfillment in Christ.

**The creation of the world** [ chapter 1 ]. Genesis 1 is a story of origins that narrates how the universe in which we live came into being. God is the only character in the story, which is structured as a catalog of his creative acts. The account is highly artistic in its patterning, with a general set of ingredients appearing in all six days of creation: (1) the announcement "and God said"; (2) a divine command using the formula "let there be" or some other form of "let"; (3) the report "and it was so"; (4) evaluation by means of the formula "God saw that it was good"; (5) placement in time, using the formula "there was evening and there was morning, the \_\_\_\_\_ day." Further patterning exists in the orderly arrangement of God's filling in the canvas as divine artist: first he creates three places or settings (light; sky and sea; dry land and vegetation), and then he fills each setting with the appropriate creatures (light bearers; birds and sea creatures; land animals and people).

**1** In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.<sup>2</sup>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.

<sup>3</sup>And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.<sup>4</sup>And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness.<sup>5</sup>God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

<sup>6</sup>And God said, "Let there be an expanse<sup>1</sup> in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters."<sup>7</sup>And God made<sup>2</sup> the expanse and separated the waters that were under the expanse from the waters that were above the expanse. And it was so.<sup>8</sup>And God called the expanse Heaven.<sup>3</sup> And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

<sup>9</sup>And God said, "Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so.<sup>10</sup>God called the dry land Earth,<sup>4</sup> and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good.

<sup>11</sup>And God said, "Let the earth sprout vegetation, plants<sup>5</sup> yielding seed, and fruit trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind, on the earth." And it was so.<sup>12</sup>The earth brought forth vegetation, plants yielding seed according to their own kinds, and trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind. And God saw that it was good.<sup>13</sup>And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

<sup>14</sup>And God said, "Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night. And let them be for signs and for seasons,<sup>6</sup> and for days and years,<sup>15</sup> and let them be lights in the expanse of the heavens to give light upon the earth." And it was so.<sup>16</sup>And God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule

<sup>1</sup> Or a canopy; also verses 7, 8, 14, 15, 17, 20 <sup>2</sup> Or fashioned; also verse 16 <sup>3</sup> Or Sky; also verses 9, 14, 15, 17, 20, 26, 28, 30; 2:1 <sup>4</sup> Or Land; also verses 11, 12, 22, 24, 25, 26, 28, 30; 2:1 <sup>5</sup> Or small plants; also verses 12, 29 <sup>6</sup> Or appointed times

the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars.<sup>17</sup> And God set them in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth,<sup>18</sup> to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good.<sup>19</sup> And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

<sup>20</sup>And God said, “Let the waters swarm with swarms of living creatures, and let birds<sup>1</sup> fly above the earth across the expanse of the heavens.”<sup>21</sup> So God created the great sea creatures and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarm, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good.<sup>22</sup> And God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.”<sup>23</sup> And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

<sup>24</sup>And God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures according to their kinds—livestock and creeping things and beasts of the earth according to their kinds.” And it was so.<sup>25</sup> And God made the beasts of the earth according to their kinds and the livestock according to their kinds, and everything that creeps on the ground according to its kind. And God saw that it was good.

<sup>26</sup>Then God said, “Let us make man<sup>2</sup> 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.”

<sup>27</sup> So God created man in his own image,  
in the image of God he created him;  
male and female he created them.

<sup>28</sup>And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”<sup>29</sup> And God said, “Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food.<sup>30</sup> And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so.<sup>31</sup> And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

**Life in Paradise** [ chapter 2 ]. Chapter 2 is not a duplicate creation story—still less a creation story that contradicts the one told in chapter 1. Rather, it takes the creation of the cosmos (chapter 1) for granted and narrates how within that cosmos God created the perfect environment for his human creatures. A new name for God appears: *Yahweh Elohim* (the LORD God), the personal and covenant name of God, to complement the name *Elohim* (the Mighty One) used in Genesis 1. The cast of characters expands from the single divine protagonist in chapter 1 to the inclusion of Adam and Eve. Dialogue now balances the list of divine acts, as God enters into relationship with his creatures. The cosmic setting of chapter 1 is replaced by the enclosed garden. The terms used for plants (v. 5) and animals (vv. 19–20) imply domesticated plants and animals (and there is no mention of sea creatures). We can organize the story around the motif of the things that God provided for his human creatures—physical life (v. 7); a perfect environment

<sup>1</sup> Or *flying things*; see Leviticus 11:19-20 <sup>2</sup>The Hebrew word for *man* (*adam*) is the generic term for mankind and becomes the proper name *Adam*

that is both beautiful and functional (v. 9); food (v. 9); work (v. 15); moral choice (vv. 16–17); human companionship and marriage (vv. 20–24); overarching everything, communion with God.

**2** Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them.<sup>2</sup> And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done.<sup>3</sup> So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.

<sup>4</sup> These are the generations  
of the heavens and the earth when they were created,  
in the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens.

<sup>5</sup> When no bush of the field<sup>1</sup> was yet in the land<sup>2</sup> and no small plant of the field had yet sprung up—for the LORD God had not caused it to rain on the land, and there was no man to work the ground,<sup>6</sup> and a mist<sup>3</sup> was going up from the land and was watering the whole face of the ground—<sup>7</sup> then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.<sup>8</sup> And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed.<sup>9</sup> And out of the ground the LORD God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

<sup>10</sup> A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden, and there it divided and became four rivers.<sup>11</sup> The name of the first is the Pishon. It is the one that flowed around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold.<sup>12</sup> And the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there.<sup>13</sup> The name of the second river is the Gihon. It is the one that flowed around the whole land of Cush.<sup>14</sup> And the name of the third river is the Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.

<sup>15</sup> The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it.<sup>16</sup> And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden,<sup>17</sup> but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat<sup>4</sup> of it you shall surely die.”

<sup>18</sup> Then the LORD God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for<sup>5</sup> him.”<sup>19</sup> Now out of the ground the LORD God had formed<sup>6</sup> every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens and brought them to the man to see what he would call them. And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name.<sup>20</sup> The man gave names to all livestock and to the birds of the heavens and to every beast of the field. But for Adam<sup>7</sup> there was not found a helper fit for him.<sup>21</sup> So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh.<sup>22</sup> And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made<sup>8</sup> into a woman and brought her to the man.<sup>23</sup> Then the man said,

“This at last is bone of my bones  
and flesh of my flesh;

<sup>1</sup> Or open country <sup>2</sup> Or earth; also verse 6 <sup>3</sup> Or spring <sup>4</sup> Or when you eat <sup>5</sup> Or corresponding to; also verse 20 <sup>6</sup> Or And out of the ground the LORD God formed <sup>7</sup> Or the man <sup>8</sup> Hebrew built

she shall be called Woman,  
because she was taken out of Man.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>24</sup>Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. <sup>25</sup>And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.

**The Fall** [ chapter 3 ]. Genesis 3 completes the Bible's three-part story of origins. Its contribution is to record how sin and suffering entered the world. The story encompasses multiple archetypal plot motifs, including temptation, the fall from innocence, crime and punishment, and initiation. Additionally, Genesis 3 is the prototypical literary tragedy in the Bible. Satan (in the form of a serpent) is the archetypal tempter; Adam and Eve are the archetypal guilty children; God is the judge who, as a divine parent, ferrets out the truth from reluctant children. Even though this is one of the saddest stories in the Bible, nonetheless loss is balanced by restoration and judgment by mercy. The mainspring of the plot is disobedience. The story is an anatomy of how sin works in people's lives and of the effects of sin. The theological center of the story is Adam and Eve's spiritual alienation from God through sin, but at the human level the story is also a psychological portrayal of the dynamics of guilt. This historical narrative tells us both what *happened* on that fateful day and how sin *happens* in our own lives.

**3** Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made.

He said to the woman, “Did God actually say, ‘You<sup>2</sup> shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’” <sup>2</sup>And the woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, <sup>3</sup>but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.’” <sup>4</sup>But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. <sup>5</sup>For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” <sup>6</sup>So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise,<sup>3</sup> she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. <sup>7</sup>Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.

<sup>8</sup>And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool<sup>4</sup> of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. <sup>9</sup>But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, “Where are you?”<sup>5</sup> <sup>10</sup>And he said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.” <sup>11</sup>He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” <sup>12</sup>The man said, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.” <sup>13</sup>Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this that you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.”

<sup>14</sup>The LORD God said to the serpent,

“Because you have done this,  
cursed are you above all livestock

<sup>1</sup>The Hebrew words for *woman* (*ishshah*) and *man* (*ish*) sound alike <sup>2</sup>In Hebrew *you* is plural in verses 1-5 <sup>3</sup>Or to *give insight* <sup>4</sup>Hebrew *wind* <sup>5</sup>In Hebrew *you* is singular in verses 9 and 11