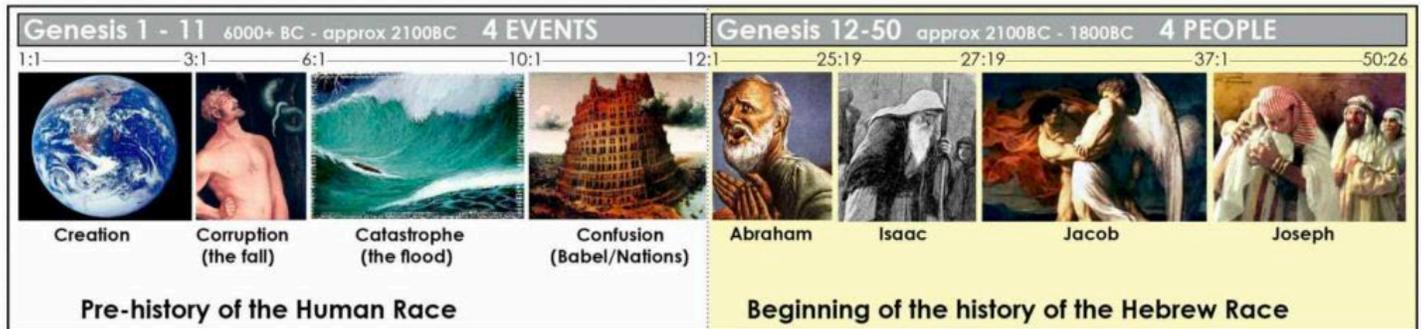


GENESIS

genesis (Greek, “birth,” “lineage,” “becoming,” “generation”)



The Book of Genesis covers the prehistoric period from the Creation to the Flood and the Tower of Babel (chapters 1-11), to the stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (chapters 12-36), and finally the story of Joseph and his brothers and their father, Jacob (chapters 37-50). Genesis is the first of the five books of the Hebrew Scriptures. Together these five books—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy—are called the *Pentateuch* (Greek, *penta*, five + *teuchos*, tool or book). The five books are also called the *Torah* (Hebrew, “law”). Tradition credits authorship of all five books to Moses because he delivered God’s Law (Ten Commandments) to the Israelites on Mount Sinai (Joshua 8:31; Nehemiah 8:1). However, due to inconsistencies and duplications throughout the text, Scripture scholars believe there were several authors of the Pentateuch. For example, the Book of Deuteronomy recalls the death of Moses; but for Moses to have written Deuteronomy, he would have had to write about his own death before it happened (Deuteronomy 33 & 34)!

In fact, the Pentateuch is a composite work of various sources and traditions. Genesis in particular is the result of epic poems, legends, and hymns from the Near East which—inspired by the Holy Spirit—were rewritten to communicate eternal truths. This is the four-source or four-tradition theory of how the Book of Genesis came to be: a collection from several centuries of materials from the 900s B.C. until the time of and following Israel’s deportation to Iraq—the Babylonian Exile (586-538 B.C.).

WHY WAS GENESIS WRITTEN?

During the relatively stable years of King David and King Solomon (1000–922 B.C.), scribes in the royal court and Temple began to compile and record Israel’s oral history and traditions. Following King Solomon’s death in 922 B.C., the kingdom split in two. Judah (the southern kingdom) kept or continued the written tradition, and Israel (the northern kingdom) developed an alternative written tradition.

After the southern kingdom was conquered by the Babylonians in 587 B.C., the Exile that resulted caused much soul-searching for Israel: “**By the rivers of Babylon, There we sat down and wept, When we remembered Zion**” (Psalm 137:1). In the face of such a disaster, Israel’s leaders—particularly the temple priests—felt compelled to try to answer basic questions as to why this happened and how they were to think about it. In an attempt to cope with this disaster and protect their fellow Jews from the influences of the Babylonians, they began to write again their history. This time it would be a *complete* history; for in addition to recalling the covenants God made with their ancestors, there would be an account of the events and people that pre-existed Israel. In other words, how did the world and mankind begin? Given their current predicament in Babylon, Genesis was written to answer these questions, including man’s sinful rebellion and the renewal of the human race after the Flood.

Such an accounting of Israel’s pre-history and eventual formation into the People of God would support Israel’s faith given they were now surrounded by the many gods and goddesses of the Babylonians. Some of these gods were “personal” gods that families worshipped before simple shrines within the home.

But most of Babylon's gods were "official" gods, such as Marduk, the chief patron god of Babylon. On great festival days the images of these official gods were paraded through the streets of the city.

Therefore by documenting their own religious history, the Jews would be able to retain their religious identity and renew their relationship with God. Furthermore, to ensure their commitment to God's covenant, they revised and added still more laws to the Law of Moses and the rituals of worship. All told, this literary effort eventually became the Books (scrolls) of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

The significance of Genesis for Christian theology and Western culture cannot be exaggerated. In less than seventy pages, beginning with the first eleven chapters, vast periods of time are covered, with a few additional stories about the early ancestors of the human family. In chapter twelve the pace slows down with the introduction of the three patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and the call for Abraham to leave Mesopotamia (Iraq and parts of Iran, Kuwait, Syrian and Turkey) to go with his son to Egypt. In short, Genesis is the first stage in the history of God's Chosen People.

THE ORAL TRADITION

In both the Old and New Testaments, God used human language and knowledge—with all of its limitations—to communicate eternal truths. At a time when most people did not read or write, oral transmission was the norm and memorization was the means. It was simply the way people handed down their history and tradition from one generation to the next. Eventually, and inspired by the Holy Spirit, these sources were collected and written to form a single work: the Hebrew Scriptures, the purpose of which was the divine preparation of Israel to welcome the Messiah.

TWO ACCOUNTS OF THE CREATION OF MAN

In the first account (Genesis 1:26-27) the language is grandiose, emphasizing the majesty and the ordered nature of creation. God is *Elohim* (Hebrew, pl. "the Lords"). *Elohim* is "above" and creating the world by His will alone, creating man "**in his own image**" (1:27). The Spirit of God need not exert himself to create, but only speaks and needs no interaction with man.

In the second account (Genesis 2:4-3:24) God is *Yahweh* (Hebrew, sing. God). The tone is more familiar, more "folksy" and simple. God can grow tired and need rest. God plants a garden and wants helpers to tend it. Like a potter, God shapes man "**of dust from the ground**" (2:7). God even removes one of Adam's ribs to create woman. God seems more earthy and physically present, even to taking walks in the shade of the garden. *Yahweh* talks and interacts with Adam. After Adam and Eve eat from the forbidden fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, they hide from God and God can't seem to find them (3:9)! Clearly the two creation accounts characterize God differently, which again suggests different perspectives of God, and thus indicative of more than one author.

Of course the two creation accounts are not actual *history* as we use the term today. Such an account was never the author's intent. The creation of the world and human beings is not "a question of knowing when and how the universe came to be, or when man appeared, but rather of discovering the meaning of such an origin. Is the universe governed by chance, blind faith, anonymous necessity, or by a transcendent, intelligent and good Being called God (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 284).

MAN AND WOMAN CREATED IN GOD'S IMAGE AND LIKENESS

Human beings are the only creatures God creates for Himself. All other creatures are created for the service of mankind, that is, ". . . **to fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air, . . .**" (1:28). Created in God's image and likeness, man is blessed with intelligence, free will, and an immortal soul. Most importantly man is capable of a relationship or covenant with God. For a human being is not a thing but a person with self-knowledge and self-possession, and called to a union of love in likeness to the love within the Blessed Trinity.

PROMISE OF THE SAVIOR

Genesis 3:15 is considered the “first gospel” (*protoevangelium*) because it contains the first promise of the Messiah to come: **“And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”** The “woman” is Mary, the New Eve, whose “offspring” is Jesus. While the serpent can only “strike his heel,” Jesus will “crush” its head. Theologically we understand the “striking of His heel” to be the Lord’s Passion and death; but because Jesus rises from the dead, it is the devil that is ultimately defeated and eternal death vanquished. And despite the confusion of pronouns in various translations where it reads “*she* will crush your head” (and the reason many statues and images of Mary depict her crushing the serpent’s head), scripture scholars contend that a more accurate translation of the text is the original masculine pronoun.

GOD THE FATHER

Although theologically God is neither male nor female but pure Spirit ((John 4:24), Jesus certainly speaks of Him as Father. In the Scriptures the inspired authors take care to avoid any suggestion of possible “generation” that was commonly attributed to the many gods of the ancient world.

CAIN’S WIFE

The first generations of the human race maintained close relations given that Adam had “other sons and daughters” (5:4). St. Augustine argues that marriage between siblings in the first generation was necessary for the human race to multiply, but due to the purity of the race, no adverse effects resulted. Gradually, as the effects of sin took its toll on the human race, marrying one’s own sister, etc., began to create hereditary problems.

LONG LIFE SPANS

What accounts for the long lifespans in Genesis? Ancient Near Eastern cultures commonly assigned improbable lifespans to kings and heroes, with reigns lasting thousands of years. Such lifespans are not meant to be taken literally but to show the importance and honor given to ancestors.

THE FLOOD AND COVENANT

Theologically, the Flood is God “re-creating” the world almost all the way back to the original state of a **“formless void”** (1:1). After the Flood, man’s covenant relationship with God is renewed. The covenant—symbolized by the rainbow—is a sign of God’s faithfulness to Noah and his descendants. Despite Adam and Eve’s rebellion against the Creator, God allows the waters to recede and the natural rhythms of the earth to continue in order to sustain life.

TOWER OF BABEL

The Tower of Babel was a symbol of human pride. Rather than call on the name of God as their ancestors did (**“To Seth also a son was born; and he named him Enosh. Then people began to call upon the name of the LORD.”** 4:26), the people insisted, **“let us make a name for ourselves”** (11:4). The tower represents a widespread collective rebellion against God. To prevent this God confuses their speech, a state without respite until the Pentecost of the New Testament (Acts 2:1-11).

ANCIENT NAMES FOR GOD

In Hebrew the most common name for God is **Yahweh** as revealed to Moses on Mt. Horeb. Since God’s name was considered too sacred to be written out in full, only the consonants **YHWH** were used. Or sometimes *Adonai* (“Lord,” “Master”) served for God’s name. **El** is another name for God (*E-Elyon*, Most High God; *El Shaddai*, God Almighty). El or -el are also used generically, for example in the name of Israel itself (*Isra-el*), and even in the name of Israel’s national airline: El Al (“God skywards”).

WHO WAS MELCHIZEDEK?

Melchizedek (also spelled Melchisedech), the Canaanite King of Salem, appears in Genesis (14:18-20) during his meeting with Abraham. As was common in the ancient world, a king was also a priest. Melchizedek blest Abraham and brought out food and drink for Abraham and his men. Bread and wine were the usual sacrificial offerings of thanksgiving for the Creator. Although Melchizedek is technically a pagan priest, he recognizes the one supreme deity by using the same Jewish title for God: El-Elyon (Hebrew, “Most High God”). Abraham recognized the priesthood of Melchizedek by accepting the bread and wine. In this action, the priesthood that descended from Abraham and Aaron was to wait for the greater and definitive priesthood of Jesus Christ. Thus we pray at Mass in Eucharistic Prayer I, **“Be pleased to look upon these offerings with a serene and kind countenance, and to accept them, as once you were pleased to accept the gifts of your servant Abel the just, the sacrifice of Abraham, our father in faith, and in the offering of your high priest Melchizedek, a holy sacrifice, a spotless victim.”** Melchizedek’s offering of bread and wine in thanksgiving to God foreshadows Jesus’ own sacrifice of bread and wine at the Last Supper.

ABRAHAM’S MARRIAGE WITH HALF-SISTER SARAH

Marriage with a half-sister was permitted in the ancient world (2 Samuel 13:13), but was later forbidden (Leviticus 18:9,11).

THE SACRIFICE OF ISAAC

Isaac voices no objection and makes no effort to resist his father, Abraham. Although he is not actually sacrificed, Isaac was willing to accept his death as God’s will, thus justifying the expression, *the sacrifice* of Isaac. Because Abraham passes the test of faith, God elevates the promise of universal blessing to the level of a covenant: **“. . . and by your descendants shall all the nations of the earth bless themselves, because you have obeyed my voice”** (22:17-18).

SODOM AND GOMORRAH

The men of the city of Sodom demanded that Lot, **“bring them (two male visitors) out to us, that we may know them”** (19:5). The word “know” is a Hebrew euphemism for sexual relations. This is made explicit immediately afterwards when Lot tries to protect his guests (actually angels) by offering instead his two daughters who **“have not known man”** (19:8). In that culture and time, hospitality was demanded even if at great sacrifice, and even though it was clearly wrong for Lot to offer up his daughters. In the end, the Lord’s messengers protect Lot and his daughters in spite of Lot’s disordered worldview.

JOSEPH SOLD INTO SLAVERY

According to Saint Ambrose, the story of Joseph’s brothers who sell him into slavery is a “symbolic representation of the Lord’s passion.” That is, as the offspring of Jacob and the great-grandson of Abraham, Joseph is betrayed by his brother Judah (or *Judas* when translated from the Greek) for pieces of silver. Joseph then descends into the pit of death (prison), only to be raised up to the right hand of Pharaoh and eventually becomes the source of blessing when Joseph feeds the Egyptians with the stored grain that Joseph had organized (41:33-41;56-57).

CONCLUSION

Genesis ends with Joseph reconciled with his brothers and all of them living with Jacob their father in Egypt. Throughout the remaining books of the Pentateuch or Torah—Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy—God’s plan of redemption will unfold, beginning with the Book of Exodus and Israel’s liberation from Egyptian slavery when a new Pharaoh comes to power.