



Week 2: Background to Genesis

Genesis
January 13, 2008

Title

The Hebrew name for the first book of the Torah comes from the opening words: “In the beginning.” The English name for the book comes from the Septuagint, the 2nd century BC translation of the Old Testament into Greek. This Greek translation titled the book Genesis from the Greek word *geneseos*, which means “generations.”

Geneseos was used to translate the Hebrew word *toledah*, which is found repeatedly in the book as a structural marker (see *Structure* below). This term can convey the meaning of the “generations” as well as “account” or “story.” So, in Genesis 2:4, the term is translated into English as “account,” but in Genesis 5:1 it is translated into English as “generations.”

Structure

Foundations of Redemption (chapters 1-11)				Family of Redemption (chapters 12-50)				
(1-3) Generations of Creation	(4-5) Generations of Adam	(6-9) Generations of Noah	(10-11) Generations of Ham, Shem & Japheth	(12-24) Generations of Terah	(25) Generations of Ishmael	(26-35) Generations of Isaac	(36) Generations of Esau	(37-50) Generations of Jacob (Israel)

Genesis is also structured around several genealogies, or in the Hebrew *toledah*. The term literally means “generations” but can also be thought of as the “story of.”

- 2:4 The generations of heaven and earth
- 5:1 The generation of Adam
- 6:9 The generation of Noah
- 10:1 The generation of Ham and Japheth
- 11:10 The generation of Shem
- 11:27 The generation of Terah
- 25:12 The generation of Ishmael
- 25:19 The generation of Isaac
- 36:1 The generation of Esau
- 37:2 The generation of Jacob

Each genealogy contrasts the Messianic lineage with a non-Messianic lineage (e.g. the line of Cain in 4:17ff with the line of Shem in 5:1ff; Ham & Japheth vs. Shem, Ishmael vs. Isaac, Esau vs. Jacob). This reveals the narrowing focus of the book of Genesis from all of humanity in chapter 1-11 to a single family in chapters 12-50 through whom the Messiah would be revealed.

Author

According to tradition, the Torah was written by Moses. Moses was well qualified to write the Torah. He had been educated in the royal court of Egypt and would have had access to historical records and the skill to research and write such a book.

Skepticism about Mosaic Authorship

It was not until the 18th century that any serious challenge to this tradition was raised. In 1753, Jean Astruc proposed a theory that the Torah was a compilation of material from several different sources. The basis of the compilation theory is that Genesis contains several stories which are told from multiple perspectives. For example, chapter one tells one creation story, while chapter two tells a different creation story.

In 1877 Julius Wellhausen codified the multiple source theory. Wellhausen stated that there were four distinct original sources which were later compiled into what we know as the Torah today. He named these four sources J, E, D and P. "J" was named for "Jehovah" and represented a source written in the southern kingdom of Judah about 850BC, showing a personal and anthropomorphic God. "E" was named for "Elohim" and represented a source written in the northern kingdom of Israel about 750BC, and showed a more objective view of God. According to Wellhausen, these two sources were combined to form JE around 650 BC.

"D" (which stands for "Deuteronomy") was written by the priest Hilkiah around 621BC during the reforms of King Josiah, while "P" was written by Ezra around 500BC and included the genealogies, rituals, and the sacrificial passages of the Torah².

Wellhausen divided the entire book into either a J, E, D, or P source. For example, the creation story in Genesis 1 uses the Hebrew word "Elohim" when referring to God and came from the "E" source, while the story in Genesis 2 uses the Hebrew word "Yahweh" when referring to God, and came from the "J" source.

Wellhausen's theory was thoroughly developed and widely accepted by biblical scholars. However, more recently the Wellhausen theory has been challenged even by secular scholars. However, no consensus has emerged except to continue to doubt Mosaic authorship³.

Evidence for Mosaic Authorship

For the Christian, the only problem with the Wellhausen or other theories doubting Moses' authorship is that it contradicts scripture, and more importantly contradicts Christ.

First, the Torah itself seems to indicate that Moses wrote down at least a significant portion of these books (Exodus 24:4, 34:28, Numbers 33:2, Deuteronomy 31:9). In the New Testament, John tells us that the "law was given through Moses" (John 1:17). Paul also affirms Moses authorship (Romans 10:5, 1 Corinthians 9:9), as does the writer of Hebrews (Hebrews 9:19).

Finally, Jesus himself attests to Moses authorship. In Mark 12:26 Jesus states:

And as for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the passage about the bush, how God spoke to him, saying, 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not God of the dead, but of the living. You are quite wrong." (Mark 12:26-27. ESV)

This is not an isolated account, as Jesus frequently refers to the Law of Moses, or states "Moses says" when quoting from the Torah. To doubt the Mosaic authorship of the Torah, then, is to doubt the words of Christ.

The Unity of Genesis

While Christ himself affirms that Moses is the author, that does not mean Moses didn't use multiple sources when writing the book. Because the events of Genesis took place centuries before the time of Moses, he had to have used other source documents. In fact, Moses at times even identifies the source document (Genesis 5:1).

² For a more detailed explanation of Wellhausen's theory, see Allen P. Ross, "Genesis," from *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*. John F. Walvoord & Roy B. Zuck, ed., Victor Books, 1985.

³ *Nelson Study Bible*.

Even with evidence of multiple source documents, the literary beauty of Genesis is in the unity creating in the compilation of these documents. Moses compiled these older documents and edited them to fit a specific purpose for the audience at hand. The message of Genesis, then, is found not in dissecting the book into its source documents but in understanding how Moses weaved them together into a unified whole.

We must ask why Moses chose to include each of these narratives, and just as importantly, why did Moses not include certain items. For example, the account of creation in Genesis 1 and 2 do not provide us with the details about creation that we might want to see. For example, there is very little said about the creation of the heavens. There is no discussion about the creation of angels and spiritual beings. Instead, Moses focuses the narrative on the creation of the land and the creation of humanity. If we focus on the things Moses emphasizes in his editing process, the primary message of the book will become more evident.

Audience

Genesis was written somewhere between 1450 and 1400 BC during the desert wandering of the nation of Israel and before they conquered Canaan.

For nearly 400 years, Israel had been enslaved in Egypt by Pharaoh. Then God miraculously reveals himself and his power over Egypt through 10 terrible plagues. This culminated in the 10th plague, Passover, where God illustrated his redemption of the nation from the angel of death through the slaughter of a lamb. Through the course of these events, God forced Pharaoh to let His people go. But not without a final show down at the crossing of the Red Sea.

Israel then camped at the base of Mt. Sinai, where God himself descended onto the mountain the form of a storm cloud. From there, God gave to Moses the Law, carved into stone by the hand of God himself.

However, when the Torah was being written, these incredible events had taken place a generation before. Nearly all of those who were first hand witnesses to these events had passed away. Because of the sin of their parents, all this generation knew was 40 years of nomadic desert wandering. They hadn't experienced the hardship of slavery. They hadn't seen the miracles. They hadn't experienced the presence of God on Mt. Sinai.

Moses did not want this generation to forget the amazing things which God had done for them. He didn't want them to forget their roots. He didn't want them to forget their God, who not only created the world, but called them out as a nation through their ancestor Abraham, and then redeemed them from slavery.

So after meeting with God on Mt. Sinai, Moses undertook the project of creating a written record of all that had transpired. He wrote the "prequel" to these events in the book of Genesis. He wrote down the events of the Exodus from Egypt and their desert wanderings. He wrote down all the Laws which God had given. And finally He wrote down his final address to the nation before he died, and included in it a song so they could easily remember his words. Today Moses words to that generation are available for us in the Torah.

Purpose

Genesis was written during the desert wanderings of the nation Israel after their redemption from Egyptian slavery. Moses wrote the book to explain the "family-history" of their nation. Moses' purpose in writing Genesis is:

- To explain how the nation found itself in slavery in Egypt (Exodus 1:8)
- To explain why the land they were about to enter was their "promised land" (Genesis 17:8).
- To show God's sovereignty over all that happened to Israel, and that their slavery in Egypt was not an accident, but part of God's larger plan (Genesis 15:13-16, 50:20)

- To show that the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob was the same God who created the world (Exodus 3:15-16). Israel's God was not merely one of many gods, but was the supreme creator of the heavens and the earth.

The Plan of Salvation in Genesis

On a larger scale, Genesis was written to show God's plan of salvation for Israel and for the whole world.

- Genesis reminds us in the sin of Adam (Genesis 3), all of humanity is prone towards evil (Genesis 6:5). In fact, the apostle Paul tells us that it is the sin of Adam which condemns all of humanity to death (Romans 5:12-14).
- Genesis reminds us that God has a plan to rescue humanity from salvation (Genesis 3:15).
- Genesis explains that God's instrument of salvation will come through the descendents of Abraham (Genesis 12:3), and specifically through the tribe of Judah (Genesis 49:10-12).
- Genesis explains that salvation is found not in doing good works, but in believing by faith in God's ultimate plan of salvation (Genesis 15:6, Romans 4:3-5)
- Genesis reminds us that God has not given up on humanity, but wants to restore humanity and creation back to how it was before the fall. Just as sin and death were imposed on all humanity by one man, Adam, so also God would bring salvation and life through one man, Christ (Romans 5:17).

Theme

God's redemption of a fallen humanity through the family of Abraham.