

Genesis Introduction

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Overview

Zoom in on the structure of the book.

Bible

Two major divisions:

	Old Testament	New Testament
Earliest Book	Pentateuch (1400 BC)	Galatians (AD 48)
Latest Book	Malachi (400 BC)	Revelation (AD 100)
Root Character	Adam	Jesus Christ
Institution	Israel	The Church
Promise	Coming of Messiah (1 st and 2 nd)	Coming of Messiah (2 nd)

The NT describes the coming of the Messiah promised throughout the OT. Thus the OT is foundational to the NT.

OT

Three major groups of books:

Law.—First five books, written by Moses. The earliest written; from creation down to Israel in the plains of Moab, ready to enter the promised land. Foundation history; cf. the Gospels.

Prophets.—Divided by the Jews into

- Former prophets: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings. History from Conquest up to the Babylonian captivity. Developmental history; cf. Acts.
- Latter prophets: what we think of as “prophets.” They include both moral exhortation (cf. the Epistles) and foretelling of the future (cf. Revelation). Further divided on the basis of size into
 - Major: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel
 - Minor: the Twelve

Writings.—Several things fall together here:

- Poetic books: Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Canticles, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes
- Captivity and postexilic history: Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah.
- Other history: Ruth, Chronicles (last book in the Hebrew Bible).

So Genesis is the first part of the foundational history, the oldest both in terms of what it relates and when it was written. It is thus *the* introduction to the Bible. (Note on Mosaic authorship: It is customary to discern several different sources behind the Pentateuch, and to date them between the 900's and the 400's B.C. But our Savior ascribed these books to Moses (John 5:46), and

whatever documents may lie behind them, the version used by our Lord and the apostles is the same as that which we have today.)

Toledot Sections

The dominant structural feature is the repeated phrase “these are the generations of x.” Consider the use of this expression elsewhere in the OT, then in Genesis, and finally consider its referential use in the NT.

Not in Genesis

Ruth 4:18 Perez.—Genealogy

Num 3:1 Aaron and Moses.—Introduces considerable narrative, probably running down through the numbering of the Levites in ch. 4.

Best translation is probably “family history.” The heading always names a person whose offspring are the focus of the following discussion. Thus it looks forward, not backward.

In Genesis

Note alternation between chosen and rejected lines, emphasizing the selection that is going on throughout the book.

Chosen	Rejected
2:4, Heaven and Earth	
5:1, Adam	
6:9, Noah	
	10:1, Sons of Noah
11:10, Shem	
11:27, Terah	
	25:12, Ishmael
25:19, Isaac	
	36:1,9, Esau
37:2, Jacob	

2:4 Heavens and Earth.—The only one not attached to a person’s name. However, “Heaven” and “Earth” were a pair of “olden gods” (Cross in *Magnalia Dei*; Wright fs) who gave birth to the younger (active, cultic) gods in Phoenician and Hittite theogonies. The use of the pair here (and in 1:1!) seems a deliberate polemic against then-current mythologies, an anti-myth. Elohim, the central (only!) God of the Israelite cultus, is not spawned by Heaven and Earth, but instead creates them.

5:1 Adam (*zeh sefer*).—Note the distinctive formula, “this is the book of the generation.” Two parts:

- 5, Genealogies
- 6:1-8, Intermarriage story

6:9 Noah.—Mainly the flood narrative, with a few genealogical details near the beginning.

10:1 Sons of Noah (*we'eleh*).—Two parts (cf. 5:1):

- ch. 10 genealogy (note rounding off end)
- 11:1-9 Tower of Babel

11:10 Shem.—Just a genealogy.

11:27 Terah (*we'eleh*).—Abraham story, introduced by brief genealogy. CHECK whether the grand chiasm fits within this section or not.

25:12 Ishmael (*we'eleh*).—Mainly genealogy, with a few narrative details.

25:19 Isaac (*we'eleh*).—Isaac's story, starting with his birth from Abraham, and including Jacob's wanderings and return home. Note that these are included here, not in the "genealogies of Jacob" starting in 37:2.

36:1,9 Esau (*we'eleh*).—Starts with narrative, then includes genealogy.

37:2 Jacob.—Mainly stories about his offspring, most notably the Joseph cycle.

Later References

Matthew 1:1. Note that it uses the form of the reference distinctive to Adam, "this is the book of the generation..." rather than the more common "these are the generations..." Points up

- Jesus as the new Adam
- The gospels as the new Genesis (cf. also John 1:1 with Gen 1:1, both with seven days).

Structure of 1:1-2:3

How does 1:1 relate to the rest of the chapter?

Several different possible constructions.

- 1:1 might be a summary, with the details in 1:2-2:3. Note 2:1 as concluding inclusio.
- 1:1 might be circumstantial, either to 1:2 or to 1:3: "When God began to create the heavens and the earth."

Neither of these constructions answers the question, "Where did angels and demons come from?" Consider:

- Later scripture, evidently referring to Gen 1, says that God created everything (2:1; Exod 20:11; Neh 9:6).
- "Host of heaven" in itself might be stars, or the angels; the reference to worship in Neh 9:6 suggests angels, but the decisive reference is Col 1:16,17, which does not sound as though it is trying to give new revelation, but rather setting forth something that the readers should take for granted.

So I understand 1:1 as an independent clause, and a step before the later events in the chapter.

What does 1:1 mean?

Put yourself in the place of Moses, “learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians” (Acts 7:22). Zealous for the God of Israel, custodian of their traditions, moved by the Spirit of God to record their early history and the law that God has committed to them. He takes up pen to write. Where to begin? What to say first? Anyone who has written knows that the first sentence is the hardest. It sets the expectations for all that is to follow. What do we have?

- “In the beginning” indicates the earliest point to which reference can be made. We must understand ourselves with reference to our origins and our destiny. Moses is no existentialist. History does matter; there is purpose. The universe is not random, but under the causal direction of God.
- The next word in Hebrew is “created,” a verb that takes only Israel’s God as subject. It thus emphasizes the uniquely divine source of the things that exist. It does not in itself mean *ex nihilo*, because it is used of man (1:27), and we know that man was formed from preexisting dust (2:7). But it definitely deemphasizes the substance and emphasizes the divine power. (The creation was, though, *ex nihilo*; cf. Heb. 11:3, “Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear”; John 1:3; Rev 4:11.)
- “God” is the generic Hebrew term describing a deity, “El,” with emphasis on his transcendence and power. Here, the first time Moses names Israel’s god, he uses the plural form of the noun, “gods,” as though he were describing many gods. Yet he has just used a singular verb. This pattern is pervasive throughout the OT, but here we are in the opening chapter, and it is a good place to try to figure it out. What are we to make of this?
 - Some would see here an echo of old pagan myths and polytheism. But we will see over and over again that Moses is consciously opposing and denying the myths. He would hardly leave in a pagan term for the gods.
 - Most scholars today see the reference as a “plural of majesty.” There are occasional uses of plural nouns for singular individuals, particular those who are in positions of power. But the construction is infrequent, and may be derivative from *elohim*. Strikingly, none of the pagan high gods is referred to in the plural.
 - The old commentators saw here a reference to the trinity. Calvin notes that a trinitarian plural would lead in v.2 to Sabellianism, the heresy that the members of the trinity are different modes of the same person. But this criticism only applies if we see this as a full-blown statement of the “three-in-one.”
 - What we do have later in this chapter is clear evidence of plurality in the godhead. The very next verse will tell us that God has a spirit, and in v.26 he will refer to himself in the plural in the decision to make man. We do not need to assume that Moses understood the full doctrine of the trinity. This chapter, and the alternation later in the Pentateuch between the angel of the Lord and the Lord himself, shows that he knows God is not monolithic.
- Those who understand 1:1 as a summary take “the heavens and the earth” as a merism expressing totality, like our expression “from soup to nuts” (the first and last courses of a dinner). But the terms are not necessarily thus understood: Deut 10:14; Ps 96:11; Isa 42:5; etc.

It is more appropriate to understand the expression of the two great spheres of creation: heavenly (including the angelic host) and earthly (the focus of the rest of Gen 1-2).

- This fits better with 1:2, which as a disjunctive clause focuses in on the second of these two: “Now as far as the earth is concerned, it was without form and void, ...”
- It also directly attacks the pagan view of heaven and earth as olden gods, the parents of the gods whom men worship and with whom we have to do on a daily basis. Quite the contrary, it is the God of the cultus who has created the heavens and the earth.

How does 1:2 relate to the rest of the chapter?

On this understanding, 1:2 describes the earthly sphere of creation as it emerges from the initial action of 1:1. God first forms the raw material for creation, then (in the rest of the chapter) shapes it. Three expressions describe its state. These amount to a zooming in, each providing us with further information.

Tohu wabohu

“Without form” (*tohu*) is used in the prophets to speak of vanity, nothingness, and elsewhere to speak of a trackless wilderness with no distinguishing marks (Ps 107:40).

“Void” (*bohu*) is used only here and in a few passages derivative from this.

The point is that at the beginning of the creative process described in this chapter, the earth was amorphous, without distinguishing features. It made no sense.

Three texts have been taken to suggest that this state is the result of judgment, resulting from the fall of Satan and his host (Scofield Bible’s “gap theory”). I believe there is no substantiation for this. Consider these passages:

- Isa 45:18 says that God did not create the world *tohu*. The reference is to the outcome of the entire process, as the next clause indicates, viewing his purpose in the creation. The process isn’t finished yet.
- Isa 34:11 and Jer 4:23 use both words to describe the result of judgment. Consider Jer 4:23 in detail. It offers parallels with the subsequent days of creation: removal of light, birds, dry land, vegetation, even men. This is a commentary on the nature of judgment, not the nature of the original creation. In judgment, God rewinds the tape. This does not mean that the original state was the result of judgment. Cf. (Waltke) a box of disassembled Legos: might result from initial mfg process, or might reflect the anger of a child who builds something and then takes it apart.

There is a special encouragement in this imagery: judgment often means a chance to start again, a time for a new beginning. When God dumped Jonah on the shore from the whale, it was that he might turn from his sinful flight and do what he had been told the first time. Peter failed in denying the Lord, but went on to preach at Pentecost. If our lives sometimes seem “without form and void,” it may indeed be the result of judgment; but our response should be, not despair, but looking forward to the new creation that God wants to work in us.

Darkness upon the Face of the Deep

Two details here that were not in the first clause.

1. It is dark. Not only are there no distinguishing details, but there would be no way to see them if there were.

2. The earth is covered with water, the “deep.” The first creation bounds the ocean; the new creation (Rev 21:1) eliminates it entirely. The OT views the sea as a fearful and threatening thing.

Isa 45:7 may have an important point to contribute here when it insists that the Lord is the one who forms the light and creates the darkness. We do wrong to assume that all was blackness before the creation began.

- Throughout the eternity before heaven and earth began, it was true, as it is now, that “God is light, and in him is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5). When he was all that existed, it was by definition light.
- At the creation of the “heaven and earth” reported in 1:1, we find the initial mass shrouded in darkness, not as a remnant of the precreation state, but because God, like a theatrical producer skillfully ordering his materials, has elected to begin with the curtain drawn. According to Isa 45:7, he created the darkness.
- Then, in the creation of light, he divides the darkness.

Spirit of God hovering

So far, the picture is discouraging—a formless, sterile ocean shrouded in inky blackness. But there is one further detail: God is there, hovering over it with creative power that is about to burst into glorious view.

- “Spirit of God,” not “mighty wind.” *Ruax yelohim* is never translated “mighty wind” elsewhere in the OT.
- Furthermore, there is elsewhere a close association between the Spirit of God and prophecy: Gen 41:38 (Joseph), Numb 24:2 (Balaam), 1 Sam 10:10; 18:10 (Saul), 19:20 (Saul’s servants); 2 Chr 15:1 (Azariah); 24:20 (Zechariah); Ezek 11:24 (Ezekiel). The Spirit here prepares for the Word that God utters in v.3. The situation is potent. Creation is about to burst out.
- Deut 32:10,11 picks up both *tohu* and this work of the Spirit in God’s recreation of Israel in the Exodus.

This detail is critical in the hopeful perspective on judgment outlined above. No matter how black and formless the world seems, there is hope, if only God is there. Our lives may sometimes seem “without form and void,” but if we open our eyes, we will see that the Spirit of God is hovering over us, incubating new life and hope. (This is not the case in the final judgment, when unbelievers are shut out of God’s presence.)

Structure of 1:3-31

Six days, with a regular structure to each day, and a clear alternation among the days. See handout.

Individual Days

Seven standard formulae, but with local changes in order:

1. Announcement: “God said”
2. Command: “Let there be”
3. Fulfillment: “It was so”
4. Execution
5. Approval: “Saw that it was good”
6. “God called/blessed”
7. Day number

Structure of the Whole

Each of the first three days forms a house within which the elements created on the corresponding member of the last three days lives.

House	Inhabitant
1. Light/Darkness	4. Heavenly Bodies (Sun, Moon, Stars)
2. Firmament dividing the Waters	5. Birds and Fish
3. Dry land and seas; plants	6. Land Creatures; Man

This structure is reinforced by other details:

- The third and sixth days are doubled, with two series of announcements, commands, fulfillment, execution, and approval. Thus days 3 and 6 are marked off as climaxes to their own series.
- The sixth element is naming in the first three days, but blessing in the last three, because man will do the naming.

Polemic

Note the mechanism by which God creates: his spoken word (not lost on John in the first chapter of his gospel). Moses’ description is designed as a polemic against the mythologies of the day. This is in stark contrast with the bloody battles by which the pagan gods were thought to have created the world. Consider the Akkadian epic *enuma elish*, from the early second millennium BC (time of Abraham):

- The olden gods, Apsu (subterranean waters) and Tiamat (the primeval ocean), beget the younger gods.
- Father Apsu becomes upset by the noise caused by his rowdy offspring: “their ways are verily loathsome unto me. By day I find no relief, nor repose by night. I will destroy, I will wreck their ways, that quiet may be restored. Let us have rest.” Leads to battle between the olden gods and their children, in which Ea kills Apsu.

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- Now Mother Tiamat, seeks revenge against the young gods. She is slain by Marduk in a struggle recorded in gruesome detail.
- Marduk then creates the heaven and the earth from her body: “He split her like a shellfish into two parts. Half of her he set up and ceiled it as sky, pulled down the bar and posted gods. He bade them to allow not her waters to escape. ... In her belly he established the zenith.” Later, creates man from the blood of one of the fallen gods.

In contrast to archetypical sitcom, Israel’s God is sublime, unopposed, and absolutely sovereign in his creative work.

- It is not motivated by impatience with his offspring, but only by his will.
- He is not the result of a cosmic struggle with his adversaries; he merely utters his will in a word, and it comes to pass.

Moses does not accommodate the paganism of the day. Instead, he opposes it directly. Israel’s god is not a reprocessed version of the gods of the nations. He is entirely different, the one who is and who has revealed himself, not the product of men’s imagination.