

STUDIES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Adult Bible Equipping Class
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Genesis is the book of beginnings and contains the foundations for much of the theology of the Old Testament An understanding of the book's content and message is essential to the study of the rest of the Bible. It is not a book of science, though scientists are right to investigate its claims. It is not a book of biographies, though much can be learned from the lives of men and women portrayed in its pages. It is not a book of history, though history is the path it follows. It is a book of theology, though its task is not accomplished systematically.

—Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament*, 3rd ed.
(Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 78.

OLD TESTAMENT FLYOVER:

Genesis

I. Introduction

- A. There are more commentaries written on the book of Genesis than any other book in the Torah. This fact, by itself, is quite revealing:
1. It demonstrates the immense significance of the book of Genesis to Christian life and theology.
 2. It highlights the tendency of scholars to study Genesis in isolation from the rest of the Torah. This practice reveals the significant difference between Christian and Jewish traditions. While the latter has focused on Leviticus as the center of the Torah, the former has treated Genesis as an autonomous work with only marginal literary connections to the books which follow it. This, indeed, is unfortunate.

II. Titles

A. Greek Title

1. The title “Genesis” comes from the title used by Jerome in the Latin Vulgate (*Liber Genesis*), which itself was derived from the Greek title used in the LXX.
2. The Greek term *γένεσις* (*genesis*), used five times in the NT (Matt 1:1, 18; Luke 1:14; Jas 1:23; 3:6), means “source,” “birth,” “origin,” “generation,” or “history.”
3. Scholars and laymen alike have tended to view the name as a key to the theme of the book: a book of the origins of the universe, man, sin, Israel, society, nations, etc.

4. The use of the term, however, appears to be more intentional than a mere thematic title for a book that deals with origins. It is the term that the LXX translators used to translate the *key* structural term used throughout the book: תולדות (*toledoth*), meaning “generation,” “history,” or “account” (see the section on Structure).
5. It appears that the LXX translators recognized the significance of the term throughout the book and used it for the title—an apt choice.

B. Hebrew Title

1. The Hebrew title is derived from the opening word of the book: בְּרֵאשִׁית (*bērēšît*), “In the beginning.”
2. While some have suggested this to be chosen for thematic reasons, the titles of the four remaining books of the Torah follow this same pattern, suggesting that the Hebrew titles were used for identification and organization and not simply for literary purposes.
3. Nonetheless, the Hebrew title does highlight one of the chief emphases of the book: chronology. It is a book that begins with the beginning itself—creation—and serves as a historical introduction to the Torah, preparing the way for the covenant relationship formed between Yahweh and Israel at Sinai.

III. Major Themes

A. The Powerful God

1. **Demonstrated through Creation:** Throughout the book, Moses portrays God as the one who has ultimate power. His power demonstrated through creation. In fact, the term used throughout the creation narrative is *Elohim* (אֱלֹהִים), a term that itself denotes strength and power, and the term “create” (בָּרָא, *bara*) is used 54 times in the OT, and God is always the subject of the verb.
2. **Demonstrated through Judgment:** God also has the power to destroy. The flood provides a stark reminder of the destructive power of God in judgment, and the intentional use of language and imagery from the creation account suggests Moses’ intent that the flood was in some sense a de-creation and re-creation of what God had made. Yet God’s power is not a threat to those whose trust is placed in Him. Instead, it is a shield of protection and the means by which He accomplishes His purposes.

B. The Sovereign God

1. **Demonstrated through Providence:** The book of Genesis presents God as completely in control of all circumstances and all people. Men may attempt to rebel against God, but nothing man can do can thwart the purposes of God. In fact, God accomplishes His sovereign plan not only *in spite of* but even *through* the sinful actions of man.
2. **Demonstrated through Election:** God’s sovereignty is on prominent display in how and to whom He dispenses His special grace and blessing.

- a. Abram instead of Nahor or Haran
- b. Isaac instead of Ishmael
- c. Jacob instead of Esau

C. **Sin & Judgment:** Only two of the book's 50 chapters describe events which take place in a world unstained by the corrupting power of sin. Genesis is in every way a revelation of the origin and spread of sin throughout humanity and creation. And walking hand in hand with man's sin is God's responsive judgment. Man's continual attempt at his own autonomy is met by the judgment of God.

D. **Blessing & Cursing**

1. God is portrayed as a God who *desires* to bless. Three times in the creation account, God confers a blessing on what He has made (1:22, 28; 2:3), giving His works the ability to do what He has purposed for them
2. Even though man rejected the blessing of God in favor of autonomy, God's plan involves bringing about blessing to the world (12:3).
3. But this involves the specific blessing of Abram and his descendants.
4. It is the patriarchal covenant blessing, that becomes to focal point—and the battleground—throughout the book, especially between Jacob and Esau, where the term appears some 29 times between Gen 27:1-28:14.
5. Coupled with God's blessing, however, is the reality of cursing which is inextricably tied to the Abrahamic Covenant (12:2). While those align themselves with Abraham and his offspring will themselves incur blessing, those who set themselves against the covenant family will lose that blessing and instead experience cursing.

E. **Covenant:** The concept of covenant-making is itself not limited to the biblical record; other ANE writings attest to covenants and treaties made between individuals as well as nations. However, the OT is rather unique in its development of divine-human covenants, and in fact all of OT theology could be said to rest on the contents of these covenants and the unfolding promises made in them.

1. **The Noahic Covenant**

- a. The term "covenant" (בְּרִית, *bērît*) first appears in 6:18 and looks forward to the promise that God would make with Noah following the flood.
- b. The flood was the divine response to the immense wickedness that had developed in humanity, yet even before the deluge comes, God's redemptive plan is seen in the promise of a covenant that God would establish with Noah once the waters subsided (6:18).
- c. That covenant, initiated by Noah's offering, was in no way based upon a perceived change in man's heart. Man was still as wicked as he had been (8:21).
- d. Rather, this covenant, summarized in 8:22 and then formalized in 9:1-17, became the foundation for all the covenant promises to come because it articulated the

true intention of God: *despite man's rebellious nature, man's ultimate end would not be judgment but blessing.*

- e. This is, indeed, the widest of God's covenants because it involves all of creation.
- f. "God makes a covenant not just with Noah but with all creation, never again to unleash the waters of chaos over the planet. To guarantee it he tosses aside his weapon in the sky in the first unilateral disarmament treaty! Thus the discarded (rain)bow is a covenant sign, a visible reminder to God (and humanity) of the promise of grace for the world." —Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Theology of the Hebrew Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 73.

2. The Abrahamic Covenant

- a. It is His covenant with Abraham that receives the most "press." It is the covenant that Moses and the prophets appeal to throughout the OT as the basis for the blessings promised to Israel.
- b. The need for this covenant arises out of the failure of man to fulfill God's original purpose: exercise dominion over the earth as God's divinely appointed representatives. While man strives to make a "name" for himself (Gen 6, 11), God has His own plan to make a "name" for them through the descendant of Shem (lit. "name" in Hebrew).
- c. The Development of the Covenant
 - 1) *Foundation of the Covenant* (12:1-3): God first announces His intentions for Abraham and his descendants.
 - 2) *The Making of the Covenant* (15:1-21): Through formal ceremony, God takes upon Himself full responsibility for fulfilling the covenant promises.
 - 3) *The Sign of the Covenant* (17:1-14): God gives the sign of circumcision as a tangible reminder of the promise and places this sign on the very organ that will bring forth the chief element of the covenant.
 - 4) *The Reaffirmation of the Covenant*: God reaffirms the covenant with Isaac (26:2-5, 23-25), and then with Jacob (28:10-17; 35:9-12; 50:24).
- d. The Elements of the Covenant
 - 1) *Personal blessing* (12:2; cf. 24:1; 25:8): God blessed Abraham in every way with the exception that he did not yet receive the blessing of the land. His personal blessing was that he died "old and satisfied" (25:8).
 - 2) *A great nation* (12:2; 17:4-6; 18:18; 25:23; 35:11; 46:3): This promise in and of itself provides several important promises:
 - i. A nation through the Seed: even at the age of 99, and still with no offspring of his own, God would provide descendants that would multiply into a nation

- ii. God would give him land upon which his descendants would live (12:1, 7; 13:14-18; 15:18-21; 17:8; 23:1-20; 24:7; 26:3-4; 28:13; 35:12; 50:24).
- 3) *Universal blessing* (12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14): The divine end game is that Abraham's descendants would serve as a conduit for the blessing of God and the reconstitution of God's original purpose for man.
- e. The Nature of the Covenant
 - 1) *Unilateral Covenant*: When God formalized the covenant through ceremony (Gen 15:1-21), Abraham was not a party to the oath. Yahweh took upon Himself fully responsibility of fulfilling the promises. Thus, no matter how badly Abraham's descendants acted, Yahweh could never "take it all back." He had obligated Himself to carry out what He promised.
 - 2) *Conditional Covenant*: There was nothing Abraham or his offspring could do to nullify the promises. However, Abraham's descendants must "keep the way of Yahweh by doing righteousness and justice, so that Yahweh may bring upon Abraham what He has spoken about him" (18:19). In other words, the actions of Abraham and his descendants never determined *if* the promises would be fulfilled, but they would determine *when* they were realized.

IV. Purpose

- A. Since Genesis is the introduction to the Torah, the purpose it serves must align with the purpose of the Torah as a whole:

Book	Purpose Statement
Torah	God chose Israel as the seed of Abraham to be the priestly nation that would restore mankind to its proper role as rulers for God over His created earth.
Genesis	<i>The God of Creation chose to bless sinful mankind through Abraham and his Seed who will inherit the Land.</i>
Exodus	
Leviticus	
Numbers	
Deuteronomy	

- B. Genesis begins the story first by introducing the reader to the God of Creation, who intended mankind to act as vice-regent over creation. Because of man's rebellion, that divine intention has been lost.
- C. God, however, intends to reinstate man to his former purpose, and Genesis begins to show how God will do that: He has chosen one man—Abraham—out of all the families of the earth, and He has promised to bless him and make him into a great nation. And it is his descendant(s) who will be the conduit for blessing.

V. The Literary Structure

- A. It is possible to outline the book based on chapter division alone, and some have done just that. Others outline the book by chapter up through chapter 11, then outline the remaining portion by major characters (i.e., Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, etc.).
- B. *תולדה* (*toledoth*), “generation, origin, history, account,” occurs 11x in strict formula in the text and is the clearest structural marker in the text. The outlines below visualize the structure two different ways. The first provides a basic linear outline that allows us to see the overall flow of the book broken up first by major section and then by the inherent *toledoth* structure in the text. It is described in such a way that its relationship to the rest of the Torah is clear:

GENESIS

I. The Primeval History (1:1-11:26)

The Introduction to the Patriarchs and the Sinaitic Covenant [i.e., the Noahic Covenant and the Need for the Abrahamic Covenant]

A. The Introduction (1:1-2:3)

God’s Creation of the Universe with Mankind as the Apex

B. The *Toledoth* of the Heavens and the Earth (2:4-4:26)

The Entrance and Spread of Sin among Mankind

C. The *Toledoth* of Adam (5:1-6:8)

The Corruption of Mankind

D. The *Toledoth* of Noah (6:9-9:29)

God’s Judgment of Mankind [Uncreation] and Renewal [Recreation] Culminating in the Noahic Covenant

E. The *Toledoth* of the Sons of Noah (10:1-11:9)

God’s Dispersion of Mankind as Nations after the Rebellion at Babel

F. The *Toledoth* of Shem (11:10-26)

The Hope of the Nations for God’s Blessing [through a second Noah] in the Family of Terah

II. The Patriarchal History (11:27-50:26)

The Abrahamic Covenant as the Means of God’s Blessing to the Nations [the Noahic Covenant] and the Foundation to the Sinaitic Covenant

A. The *Toledoth* of Terah (11:27-25:11)

Yahweh’s Making of His Covenant with Abraham

B. The *Toledoth* of Ishmael (25:12-18)

The Non-covenantal Son of Abraham

C. The *Toledoth* of Isaac (25:19-35:29)

Yahweh’s Reaffirmation of the Abrahamic Covenant with Isaac and Jacob/Israel

D. The *Toledoth* of Esau (36:1-37:1)

The Non-covenantal Son of Isaac

E. The *Toledoth* of Jacob (37:2-50:26)

Yahweh’s Sending of His Covenantal Family from Canaan to Egypt

- C. This outline makes it clear that it is ultimately the development of the Sinaitic Covenant that is in view, and Genesis serves to establish the basis for that covenant in the formation of the Abrahamic Covenant.
- D. What this outline also makes clear is that the *toledoth* formula is both clarifying and confusing. In many cases the person listed in the formula (e.g., the *Toledoth* of Terah) has little to no role in the narrative that follows. Additionally, while some *toledoth* sections are actual genealogies (e.g., 5:1-6:8; 10:1-11:9; 11:10-26; 25:12-18; 36:1-37:1), others

are comprised almost completely of narrative. Suffice it to say, there is still much work to be done in clarifying just how these *toledoth* formulas operate throughout the book.

- E. However, as this second outline shows, there seems to be a pattern to the way these *toledoth* portions relate, especially in each major section (Primeval and Patriarchal). In the first, they suggest a similar pattern beginning with God's creation, man's sinful actions, and culminating in God's determination to bless rather than curse mankind. In the section major section, the focus shifts to the participants and non-participants in the Abrahamic Covenant who have the ability to claim a relationship by blood to Abraham:

GENESIS

THE PRIMEVAL HISTORY	THE PATRIARCHAL HISTORY
<i>Introduction:</i> God's Creation (1:1-2:3)	
<i>Toledoth:</i> Man's Sin (2:4-4:26)	<i>Toledoth:</i> Abrahamic Covenant (11:27-25:11)
<i>Toledoth:</i> God's Blessing [Noah] (5:1-6:8)	<i>Toledoth:</i> Non-covenant Son [Ishmael] (25:12-18)
<i>Toledoth:</i> God's (Re)creation (6:9-9:29)	<i>Toledoth:</i> God's Choice of Jacob/Israel (25:19-35:29)
<i>Toledoth:</i> Man's Sin (10:1-11:9)	<i>Toledoth:</i> Non-covenantal Son [Esau] (36:1-37:1)
<i>Toledoth:</i> God's Blessing [Abram] (11:10-26)	<i>Toledoth:</i> Abraham's Family in Egypt (37:2-50:26)

VI. Recommended Resources

- A. Kenneth A. Mathews. *Genesis 1–11:26*. New American Commentary. Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1996
- B. ———. *Genesis 11:27–50:26*. New American Commentary. Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2005.
- C. Allen P. Ross. *Creation & Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998.
- D. John H. Sailhamer. "Genesis." In *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*. 12 volumes. Edited by Frank E. Gæbelein, 2:1–284. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990.
- E. Derek Kidner. *Genesis*. Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008.