

The Old Testament: Part Two - Genesis – Chapters 1-11

The 46 books of the Old Testament are usually divided into four parts: the Pentateuch (meaning five books), the historical books, the Wisdom books, and the prophetic books. The Pentateuch is the name given to the first five books of the Old Testament: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. These are considered foundational books in Israel's history.

Genesis—Beginnings

The first book of the Bible opens with the words: "*In the beginning....*" Genesis is a book about beginnings: beginning of the natural world, beginning of humans and human culture, beginning of sin, suffering and death, and beginning of Israel whose story dominates the rest of the Old Testament and, in a sense, the rest of the Bible.

Structure. The 50 chapters of Genesis are usually divided into two parts.

Part One: Chapters 1-11 - Creation and the Spread of Sin. These chapters are called *primeval history* because the events that occurred thereat happened before recorded time.

Part Two: Chapters 12-50 - The Patriarchs. These 39 chapters are usually subdivided into the story of Israel's first fathers and mothers: the story of Abraham and Sarah (chs. 12-25); the story of Isaac and Rebekah and Jacob and Rachel (chs. 26-36) and the story of Joseph (chs. 37-50).

Chapters 1-11: Primeval history

These opening chapters of Genesis deal with stories we are all familiar with: creation of the world, Adam and Eve and their fall from grace, Cain and Abel, the Great Flood, and the Tower of Babel. The stories narrated herein raise many questions.

- When was the book of Genesis written?
- Why are there two creation stories that seem to be at odds with each other?
- Did God really create the world in six days?
- If Adam and Eve only had sons, whom did they marry?
- What is the purpose of genealogies in the Bible?
- Did people live for several hundreds of years during the time we call primeval history?
- Did the Great Flood really take place?
- What is the meaning of the Tower of Babel story?

When was the book of Genesis written? Even though the historical events in Genesis (chs 12-50) took place between 1800 B.C. and 1300 B.C., the final form of the

book did not appear until around the time of the Babylonian exile (sixth century B.C.).

Why two creation stories? In chapters 1-2 of Genesis, we find not one but two creation stories. Why do these two creation stories differ from each other?

Biblical scholars in the past 100 years have been able to detect four different historical traditions or sources in the first five books of the Bible. The short name for the four traditions is JEPD (Jahwist, Elohist, Priestly, and Deuteronomist). These four traditions are a bit like the four Gospels in the New Testament which are four versions of *one* story. (For more on the four sources theory, google JEPD.) When the final editor was writing the book of Genesis, two accounts of creation were in existence. Rather than choosing one account of the creation, he decided to include both accounts because they had long been treasured in the community, and each emphasized particular religious truths.

Neither of the two creation stories were intended to tell us *how* the world was created. The author's interest in chapters 1-11 of Genesis was not scientific but theological. Its purpose was to convey important religious truths about the beginnings of the world, man's fall from grace, the spread of sin, and the development of different peoples and tongues.

Both creation stories have some common elements: one Creator makes the universe by shaping and organizing everything within the confines of time and space to make sure every creature belongs in it and nothing is destroyed. Among all the creatures, humans are given a special place. Each of the creation stories has distinctive features as well. We will now look at these two beautiful stories.

Features of the first creation story (1:1-2:4)

- The first creation story has a poetic quality to it. Each day begins with the words: "*Then God said: 'Let...'*" and ends with the words: "*Thus evening came and morning followed...*" This made the story easy to memorize at a time when oral tradition was the primary way for history to be passed on from one generation to the next.
- The first creation story illustrates the *power* of God's word. When God speaks, things happen. When God says: "*Let there be light,*" light comes into existence" (1:3). We see the power of God's word in the ministry of Jesus. For example, in John 11:43, Jesus says: "*Lazarus, come forth!*" and Lazarus rises from the dead.

- In the first three days of creation, God *separates* things: darkness from light, the waters above (rain) from the waters below (ocean), the dry land from the waters below (see diagram below). In days 4, 5 and 6, God *decorates* the world he has made with sun, moon and stars, with birds in the air, fish in the sea, and humans. In the first creation story, God is imaged as an *artist*.
- The creation of man is seen as the crescendo or climax of God's creation. The man and the woman are created "in the image and likeness of God." Like God, humans have a mind with which they can think and make decisions. When they behave in godly ways, they are very much like God. Man is given dominion over all creation—not to abuse or misuse but to use in a way that would please the Creator. On the sixth day, we find God looking at all that he has created and finding it very good. On the sixth day, God is full of smiles as he looks upon all he has created. He is probably wearing his "Life is Good" t-shirt. Creation and the material universe are good. Pondering its beauty should lead us to praise the Creator as the psalmists do. We humans at our core are very good. "We are wonderfully made," as Psalm 139:13-14 testifies.
- Finally, God blesses the seventh day and thus makes it holy. He rests on the seventh day. The author's purpose here is to convey to the people of his time and to us the importance of taking a break from human labor and taking time to worship the Creator.

Features of the second creation story (2:4b-25)

- This creation story has an agricultural context. Most of the action happens in a garden—'a garden of delight' (2:8).
- The image of God in this story is that of a *potter* when it comes to the creation of the man, and a *sculptor* when it comes to the creation of the woman. The God of this story is much closer to the earth and to the man and woman.
- Whereas the first story *ends* with the creation of the man and woman, the second creation story *begins* with the creation of the man.
- The man is formed from the clay of the earth and the breath of God. The former speaks of man's relationship to the earth and his closeness to the animal world, whilst the latter speaks of man's closeness to God. The description of God blowing the 'breath of life' into the man signifies man's participation in the divine nature of God and his call to be in communion with God.

- The naming of the animals by the man is a Semitic way of inferring that he has power over the animal world. Notice the man does not name the sun, moon, stars, day and night, because he does not have power over them.
- Since none in the animal world is judged to be a suitable partner for the man, God creates the woman. The man is incomplete without the woman. The woman is created from the rib of the man, which is intended to demonstrate the closeness and solidarity between the man and the woman. The term *helper* does not imply inferior assistant but rather a genuine partner that comes to the aid of the other. The man and the woman are equal partners in life's journey.
- The second creation story ends with a reference to marriage and sexuality. Marriage and human sexuality are two goods created by God. '*Naked and unashamed*' (2:25) is a way to speak of the beauty of the human body. After they sin, the man and woman become ashamed of their bodies and cover them up.

The two creation accounts proclaim that light, darkness, sea, sun, living creatures, human beings, and all of creation bear the mark of our God. The glory of God lies within each of these creations. Sometimes God's glory is visible and at other times it is invisible. Creation was not an accident. God orchestrated it. God is the originator, sustainer, and redeemer of all creation.

Genesis 3: Paradise lost through an act of disobedience.

At the end of Genesis 2, all is rosy in the Garden. The man and the woman are at peace with their Maker and with each other, and are enjoying all the pleasures of Paradise—they even have their own little nudist colony. Their only restriction is that they must not eat the forbidden fruit from the tree in the middle of the Garden. This is a reminder to them that they are creatures and not the Creator, a reminder that following the laws of God is key to their ongoing happiness.

Enter Satan in the form of a serpent. As we read Genesis 3, we may wonder if we are to believe in a talking serpent. Speaking of this chapter, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (309) states: "*The account of the Fall in Genesis 3 uses figurative language, but affirms a primeval event, a deed that took place at the beginning of the history of man.*"

The story is considered a masterpiece of psychological insight into the nature of temptation. In other words, this is the way the evil one or the sinful tendency within us causes us to turn our backs on God. One reason the serpent is used to symbolize Satan is because people of ancient times attributed extraordinary wisdom to that animal.

In John 8:44, Jesus calls Satan the “father of lies.” We notice that the first words out of Satan’s mouth are lies. He says that God has forbidden Eve not to eat the fruit of *any* of the trees in the Garden. Then he seduces Eve into thinking that violating God’s command will lead her to a new level of happiness. Like Eve, we usually choose to do the wrong thing because it is ‘pleasing to the eye’ (sensual dimension of sin) and ‘good for the knowledge’ it will give us (intellectual dimension).

Immediately after their transgression, the man and the woman feel a sense of shame (v.7). Their conscience must have told them that they have done wrong or made a destructive choice. The pleasure experienced from eating the forbidden fruit is short-lived.

Consequences. Choices have consequences, sometimes dire consequences. This first sin (which became known as ‘original sin’) leads to a general loss of harmony and peace. When God calls out for Adam and Eve, they hide and they become afraid (v.8). Their relationship with God is damaged. When God questions them, the ‘blame game’ begins. Adam blames Eve, and Eve blames the serpent for their bad choice. Neither wants to fess up and take responsibility for his/her sinful choice. In addition, henceforth, work will be tedious and pain will accompany childbirth.

Verses 22-24 describe the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden. Their disobedience set loose in the world a whole new ugly force: Satan, sin and death often preceded by sickness. Satan’s kingdom has now been established upon earth.

The first good news (3:15). Genesis 3 does not end in total darkness. In Gn 3:15, God speaks to the serpent and says: “*I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your offspring and hers. He will strike at your head, while you strike at his heel.*” This verse indicates that there is going to be a big battle between the offspring of the serpent and the woman. But ultimately, the offspring of the woman will be victorious. The Early Church Fathers saw in this verse a reference to Mary and her offspring, Jesus, who would come to defeat Satan and the powers of darkness (Catechism 411).

In Catholic tradition, the sin of Adam and Eve is called *original sin*, which arose at the beginning of the history of humanity. How original sin got transmitted to all their descendants is, according to the *Catechism*, a ‘mystery that we cannot fully understand’ (404). The *Catechism* states: “*We do know through divine revelation that Adam and Eve received original holiness not for themselves alone, but for all human nature. By yielding*

to the tempter, Adam and Eve commit a personal sin, but this sin affected the human nature that they would then transmit to all mankind, that is, by the transmission of a human nature derived of original holiness.” This means that each person is born with a certain inclination to sin and selfishness. Our natural powers for seeking God have been weakened and our emotions disordered. But the graces received in Baptism helps us to deal with our fallen state.

Genesis 4-11: The spread of sin. The Cain and Abel story (4:1-16) presupposes the existence of a developed civilization with shepherds and farmers, and we can also assume that there were women who could marry Cain and Abel. It is not clear why God rejects Cain’s sacrifice. Perhaps his sacrifice is looked upon as less generous (see v.3). After his sacrifice is rejected, Cain becomes very jealous of his brother, so jealous that he murders him. The story, amongst other things, raises the question of how to deal with the issue of God’s seeming to favor one sibling or one person over another. In verses 6-7, God speaks to Cain and tells him that he can resist his desire to take out his anger on Abel: “*Sin is a demon lurking at your door.... Yet you can master it.*” Like his parents, Cain is given the freedom to choose between right or wrong. He allows his feeling of rejection by God and his jealousy of his brother to lead him to commit the first recorded murder.

When the Lord comes looking for Cain and asks where his brother is, Cain responds with one of the best known lines in Scripture: “*Am I my brother’s keeper?*” While Cain, like his parents, is punished for his sinful deed, God does not abandon him (vv 15-16).

Seth. When Cain kills Abel, Adam and Eve lose both of their sons, for Cain is banished (4:11-12). But God gives Adam and Eve a third son, Seth (4:5). Noah is a descendant of Seth (5:6-32).

The purpose of genealogies. In Genesis chapters 4 and 5, we have two genealogies. In Genesis and in other places, genealogies are used to tie stories together which originally had no connection. Genealogies are also used to prove one’s ancestry. The genealogy of Cain shows that the exiled murderer is blessed with the gift of life and family. The genealogy of Adam (5:1-37) links the first man with the flood. This genealogy is continued in chapters 10 and 11 and links the flood with Abraham.

The Great Flood (6:5-9:29). The third sin story in Genesis 3-11 has to do with God’s reaction to the spread of sin in the world. The flood story is so widespread in ancient literature that it presumes a historical event in the Mesopotamian world which the Genesis author uses to show God cleansing his creation of sin. The flood

story begins with these words: “*When the Lord saw how great was man’s wickedness on earth, and how no desire that his heart conceived was ever anything but evil, he regretted that he had made man on the earth and his heart was grieved. So the Lord said: ‘I will wipe out from the earth the men whom I have created, and not only the men, but also the beasts and the creeping things and the birds of the air, for I am sorry that I made them.’ But Noah found favor with the Lord*” (6:6-8).

The world has become so immersed in sin that God has had to start all over again with Noah as the new father of the human race.

The rainbow—sign of the covenant (9:12-17). God said: “*I will set my bow in the clouds to serve as a sign of the covenant between you and me.... This is the sign of the covenant I have established between me and all mortal creatures that are on the earth*” (vv 14 & 17). Covenants are sealed with a “sign.” Just as circumcision will be a sign of God’s covenant with Abraham, the rainbow is a sign of the covenant with Noah, his descendants and all creation. Scripture scholar Diane Bergant writes: “*If the waters of the flood symbolize the return of chaos, the bow in the sky represents victory over those forces. The flood story is much more than an account of a natural disaster; it signifies the battle between cosmic forces of evil and the corresponding forces of good.*”

The Tower of Babel (11:1-9) is another sin story in chapters 4-11. It is not easy to see what the sin is here. But generally, scholars see the peoples’ plan to build a tower to the sky as an attempt to penetrate the heavens, God’s domain. Their desire to make a name for themselves (11:4) is interpreted as a sin of pride. God punishes this sin by creating many languages among the people so that they will be confused and not understand one another. Some stories in the Bible are called *etiological* stories which are told to explain the origin of something. The Tower of Babel story explains the origin of many languages.

The presence of sin is finally symbolized by the list of phenomenal ages attributed to people in these chapters (5:1-6 & 11:10-26). We can see a general pattern of people’s ages decreasing from the beginning of each list to the end. The decrease in age is a sign of the constant growth in sin. Lifespan decreasing is a sign of sin increasing. Needless to say, we do not need to believe that people in those days lived for several hundreds of years.

By the time we get to the end of Genesis chapter 11, we see that sin is growing by leaps and bounds, and

humanity is in great need of salvation. It is against this dark background that the author of Genesis decided to present the great figure of Abraham, ‘the friend of God’ and the father of the Chosen People.

Abraham’s story will be the focus of our next article. You can prepare for it by reading Genesis chapters 12-25.

Bible translation. There are many translations of the Bible. The Sunday readings and the quotes in these articles are taken from the *New American Bible*.