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THE BOOK OF GENESIS

Genesis is the first book of the Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy), the first section of the Jewish and the Christian Scriptures. Its title in English, “Genesis,” comes from the Greek of [Gn 2:4](#), literally, “the book of the generation (*genesis*) of the heavens and earth.” Its title in the Jewish Scriptures is the opening Hebrew word, *Bereshit*, “in the beginning.”

The book has two major sections—the creation and expansion of the human race ([2:4–11:9](#)), and the story of Abraham and his descendants ([11:10–50:26](#)). The first section deals with God and the nations, and the second deals with God and a particular nation, Israel. The opening creation account ([1:1–2:3](#)) lifts up two themes that play major roles in each section—the divine command to the first couple (standing for the whole race) to produce offspring and to possess land ([1:28](#)). In the first section, progeny and land appear in the form of births and genealogies (chaps. [2–9](#)) and allotment of land (chaps. [10–11](#)), and in the second, progeny and land appear in the form of promises of descendants and land to the ancestors. Another indication of editing is the formulaic introduction, “this is the story; these are the descendants” (Hebrew *tōledôt*), which occurs five times in Section I ([2:4](#); [5:1](#); [6:9](#); [10:1](#); [10:31](#)) and five times in Section II ([11:10](#); [25:12](#), [19](#); [36:1](#) [v. [9](#) is an addition]; [37:2](#)).

The Composition of the Book. For the literary sources of Genesis, see Introduction to the Pentateuch. As far as the sources of Genesis are concerned, contemporary readers can reasonably assume that ancient traditions (J and E) were edited in the sixth or fifth century B.C. for a Jewish audience that had suffered the effects of the exile and was now largely living outside of Palestine. The editor highlighted themes of vital concern to this audience: God intends that every nation have posterity and land; the ancestors of Israel are models for their descendants who also live in hope rather than in full possession of what has been promised; the ancient covenant with God is eternal, remaining valid even when the human party has been unfaithful. By highlighting such concerns, the editor addressed the worries of exiled Israel and indeed of contemporary Jews and Christians.

[Genesis 1–11](#). The seven-day creation account in [Gn 1:1–2:3](#) tells of a God whose mere word creates a beautiful universe in which human beings are an integral and important part. Though [Gn 2:4–3:24](#) is often regarded as “the second creation story,” the text suggests that the whole of [2:4–11:9](#) tells one story. The plot of [Gn 2–11](#) (creation, the flood, renewed creation) has been borrowed from creation-flood stories attested in Mesopotamian literature of the second and early first millennia. In the Mesopotamian creation-flood stories, the gods created the human race as slaves whose task it was to manage the universe for them—giving them food, clothing, and honor in temple ceremonies. In an unforeseen development, however, the human race grew so numerous and noisy that the gods could not sleep. Deeply angered, the gods decided to destroy the race by a universal flood. One man and his family, however, secretly warned of the flood by his patron god, built a boat and survived. Soon regretting their impetuous decision, the gods created a revised version of humankind. The new race was created mortal so they would never again grow numerous and bother the gods. The authors of Genesis adapted the creation-flood story in accord with their views of God and humanity. For example, they attributed the fault to human sin rather than to divine miscalculation ([6:5–7](#)) and had God reaffirm without change the original creation ([9:1–7](#)). In the biblical version God is just, powerful, and not needy.

How should modern readers interpret the creation-flood story in [Gn 2–11](#)? The stories are neither history nor myth. “Myth” is an unsuitable term, for it has several different meanings and connotes untruth in popular English. “History” is equally misleading, for it suggests that the events actually took place. The best term is creation-flood story. Ancient Near Eastern thinkers did not have our methods of exploring serious questions. Instead, they used narratives for issues that we would call philosophical and theological. They added and subtracted narrative details and varied the plot as they sought meaning in the ancient stories. Their stories reveal a privileged time, when divine decisions were made that determined the future of the human race. The origin of something was thought to explain its present meaning, e.g., how God acts with justice and generosity, why human beings are rebellious, the nature of sexual attraction and marriage, why there are many peoples and languages. Though the stories may initially strike us as primitive and naive, they are in fact told with skill, compression, and subtlety. They provide profound answers to perennial questions about God and human beings.

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