

Chapter 4: Genesis

Key Terms

- covenant: the means by which God reveals himself to, initiates relationship with, and establishes his presence among humanity by entering into a mutually binding agreement with a person or people
- election: in the OT, the predisposition of God that leads him to arbitrarily select/choose the Israelites (through Abraham) to be his covenant people
- monotheism: generally defined as the worship of one God, this term can also encompass preference for, or worship of, only one God (possibly accompanied by belief in the existence of other deities), or belief in the existence of only one deity
- sin: a willful violation of God's expressed will
- origins: concern the beginning of the existence of the universe
- primeval history: the earliest history of the world recounted in Genesis 1–11
- pantheon: a divine assembly of gods and goddesses formally recognized by society as participants in the experiences of community life
- patriarch: one of the primary ancestors of Israel

Key Ideas

- God created, and creation was good.
- Disobedience separated people from God.
- God instituted a program of revelation called the covenant.

Chapter Summary

The author of Genesis is nowhere identified in the biblical canon. However, tradition posits Moses as the author because of his close connection with the other books of the Torah and which are treated as a unit. The authors of this text posit Moses as the divinely inspired editor of preexisting material, whether in oral or written form.

The primeval history of Genesis 1–11 has many parallels with the literature of the ANE, especially that of Mesopotamia. Though many scholars have suggested dependence/borrowing to explain these parallels, the authors of this text suggest that the similarities result from a shared conceptual world or a common source, while the differences reveal important theological commitments of the biblical authors.

The creation account presents Yahweh as the creator who brings order and functionality to the cosmos. The narrative then shifts from God to people and the destruction brought by human sin. The flood presents God's punishment of sin but his preservation of a faithful remnant. The Babel narrative establishes the need for special revelation, which God provides through the family of Abraham.

The patriarchal narratives of Genesis 12–50, though not intended to be journalistic history, still contain genuine historical information. Our examination of the archeological evidence from the period corroborates much of the information about lands, culture, and lifestyle in the biblical narratives. The purpose of the narratives in 12–50 is to introduce obstacles to the covenant, caused by circumstances or human sin, which God subsequently overcomes. Obstacles arise primarily in challenges to the survival and propagation of the covenant family.

The establishment of the covenant introduces several themes which run throughout the Scriptures. One such theme is election, whereby God enters into relationship with a people simply because of his grace. The OT concept of election differs from that of the NT, however, for the Israelites were primarily elected as the medium of revelation, not for salvation.

The theme of monotheism also pervades the Genesis narratives. We see the practical monotheism of the patriarchs, whose loyalty was reserved for the God who entered into covenant with them. Their exclusive worship of the OT God, however, does not mean that they believed their God was the only God. There is some question as to how the patriarchs would have identified their God; the narratives in Genesis describe God using several different epithets, only one of which is Yahweh—the name primarily used in the later biblical narratives of Israel's covenant God. The authors of this text assert that the patriarchs knew God by the name Yahweh, but primarily thought of him as El Shaddai.

Genesis deals with the introduction of sin into the world through the actions of Adam and Eve. Their desire for independence led to separation, establishing a cycle of sin and punishment that is repeated throughout the narratives. The narratives illustrate, however, that even through his punitive actions, God continually manifests his mercy and grace.

Most of the biblical information about origins is contained in Genesis; in asking our scientific questions, however, we must remember that the point of Genesis is to reveal God, not the origins of the universe.