

GENESIS

Allen P. Ross

INTRODUCTION

Genesis is the book of beginnings; it provides a dramatic account of the origins of mankind and his universe, the intrusion of sin into the world, the catastrophic effects of its curse on the race, and the beginnings of God's plan to bless the nations through His seed.

Most of the books of the Bible draw on the contents of Genesis in one way or another. Apart from this, however, Genesis' subject matter and the unembellished way in which it is written have captivated the minds of biblical scholars for ages.

As with biblical truth in general, this book has been a stumbling block for many who have approached it with preconceived notions or antisupernatural biases. But for those who recognize it as the Word of God, whom they seek to serve, Genesis is a source of comfort and edification. And by them, the questions and difficulties of the book are approached differently.

The Titles of Genesis. The Hebrew title of the book is the initial word *b're'sit.*, translated "in the beginning." The English title "Genesis" was derived from the Greek translation of *tol' dot*, the key word of the book. In Genesis 2:4a, the Septuagint translation is, "This is the book of the *geneseos* of heaven and earth."

The Authorship of Genesis. Both Scripture and tradition attribute the Pentateuch to Moses. This was enough to satisfy most people in the synagogue and the church for ages that Genesis, the first book of the Pentateuch, could be safely ascribed to Moses.

Indeed no one would have been better qualified to write the book. Since "Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians" (Acts 7:22), his literary

skills would have enabled him to collect Israel's traditions and records and to compose the work. His communion with God at Horeb and throughout his life would have given him direction for this task. Genesis provided the theological and historical foundation for the Exodus and the covenant at Sinai.

Critical scholars, however, deny the Mosaic authorship of both Genesis and the rest of the Pentateuch. This is not a recent view; early in the Christian era theologians vacillated between Moses and Ezra as the author of the Pentateuch. But the modern view that the Pentateuch was compiled from various sources seems to be the product of rationalistic skepticism. Benedict Spinoza (A.D. 1632-1677) believed that the Pentateuch was written by Ezra, who utilized a mass of traditions (including some by Moses).

The first attempt at a documentary theory of Pentateuchal origins was made in 1753 by Jean Astruc (1684-1766). He promoted the idea that Genesis was composed from two major and several minor documents. Over the next 124 years scholars debated and developed that idea until finally Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918) restated the documentary approach forcefully and meticulously in 1877.

Wellhausen divided the Pentateuch into four literary sources, represented by the letters, J, E, D, and P. The "J" material (named because of its preference for the name Yahweh [Jehovah]) was supposedly written in the Southern Kingdom about 850 B.C. It was personal, biographical, and anthropomorphic. It included prophetic-like ethics and theological reflection. "E" (named because of its preference for Elohim [God]) was written in the Northern Kingdom about 750 B.C. It was more objective, less concerned with ethical and theological reflection, and given more to concrete particulars.

According to this view as elaborated by subsequent scholars these two docu-

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merits were combined around 650 B.C. by an unknown redactor or editor. The result was "JE."

The composition was completed by "D" and "P" material. "D" was composed under Hilkiah around 621 B.C. as part of Josiah's reforms. This Deuteronomistic school was also responsible for reworking the Books of Joshua through Kings. The "P" source (Ezra and the Holiness Code known as H), dated anywhere from 570 to 445 B.C., is said to be concerned with the origins and institutions of the theocracy, genealogies, rituals, and sacrifices.

What brought about this approach was an analytical study of the text that observed apparently irreconcilable difficulties. The critical scholars observed changes in the divine names (Yahweh vs. Elohim). They could not reconcile parallel stories (e.g., the endangering of Sarah told in Gen. 12:10-20 and chap. 20). Furthermore, linguistic differences showed up that seemed to coincide with other peculiarities of different sources (e.g., J might use Sinai, and E Horeb). Finally, diverse theological ideas seemed to harmonize with the various emerging sources.

This documentary theory, being highly developed and deceitfully plausible, has deceptively captured the scholarly world for decades. For further information, see R.K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1966; Umberto Cassuto, *The Documentary Hypothesis*; and H. Wouk, *This Is My God*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1959. pp. 312-20. J. Skinner's book, *Genesis* (International Critical Commentary. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1910), is an example of how this theory wrongly influences the exegesis of Genesis.

Criticism of the documentary theory must certainly begin with its antisupernaturalist base. Proponents of the view subjected the Bible to criticism as if it were merely a human book and therefore unreliable. The approach of the theory was anthropomorphic and evolutionary (i.e., the monotheism seen in Gen. was of human origin and gradually evolved from primitive states). Hegelian dialecticism was employed to show how teaching evolved till it reached its final form of "truth."

Apart from its fundamental presuppositions that undermine revelation, the approach is fraught with problems. One is the lack of unanimity concerning the four sources (J, E, P, D) and which passages belong to each of them. Another problem is the subjectivity involved. Too often circular reasoning appears. For example, a passage would be assigned to J because it frequently used the Hebrew word *yalad* ("to bear, to generate"); therefore, it was argued, *yalad* is peculiar to J. Though the approach claimed to be analytical it too often evaded, emended, or deleted a text when it contradicted the system.

Archeological discoveries have contributed material that not only calls into question the criteria of the documentary hypothesis, but also lends coloring to the Pentateuchal literature in its early setting. In the land of Canaan, Ugaritic literature (ca. 1400 B.C.) shows widespread use of cultic terms (attributed to P), poetic cliches, rare words originally considered late "Aramaisms," a variety of divine names and compound names, as well as repetition in style. The recent discovery of the Ebla tablets in Syria also provides very early documentation of names, places, and ideas presented in the Pentateuch (cf. Giovanni Pettinato, *The Archives of Ebla*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1981).

Farther east the Nuzi tablets discovered in 1925 and the Mari tablets brought to light in 1933 record many customs and laws that are comparable to those reflected in the patriarchal narratives in Genesis.

Though these and many other contributions from archeology do not "prove" the existence of the patriarchs or the early date of the narratives, they do fit rather well with the Pentateuchal material and the manner in which the narratives are presented in Genesis. With the ever-increasing archeological finds there is less and less reason for a later date for the material.

Form criticism, pioneered in Old Testament studies by Hermann Gunkel, recognized the antiquity of the traditions (e.g., that Genesis 1-11 must be compared with the Sumerian-Akkadian literature of the third and second millennia B.C. and that the patriarchs would be strangely out of place against an Assyrian

background of the first half of the first millennium). Form criticism sought to determine the genre, structure, setting, and intention of each literary unit *behind* the extant material in order to reconstruct the original unit and to relate the texts to the people in ancient Israel.

This method isolates the literary units, often following the arrangement of the JEDP sources. It then identifies the form (or genre) of the unit (e.g., blessings, oaths, hymns, legends, etc.) and compares common motifs, common vocabulary, and common structure. It then seeks to state the setting for the unit in the life of ancient Israel in order to determine its original intent. In order to do this the form critic must often seek to determine how the unit was transmitted.

Gunkel listed six kinds of narratives in Genesis which reflected an early poetic, oral stage of the material (Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1922). They are: (a) etiological (e.g., a narrative explains why man is sinful), (b) ethnological (e.g., a narrative explains why Canaan was enslaved), (c) etymological (e.g., a narrative explains a well-known name such as Babel), (d) ceremonial (e.g., a narrative explains the Sabbath), (e) geological (e.g., a narrative explains salt near Sodom), and (f) a group of unclassified types.

Form criticism has produced much that is valuable in Old Testament studies. In general, it takes a more cautious view of the text, often being concerned with the final, fixed form of the text as a part of the study. Its emphasis on literary types and ancient oral tradition point out Israel's ancient literary development.

However, form-critical scholarship is often plagued with the same weaknesses as the documentary approach. The presupposition that the literature developed naturally rather than supernaturally leads to false conclusions: that Israel's monotheism developed out of polytheism, that miracles were later explanations of early events, and that the records may not tell the real history.

The idea that sagas existed as distinct oral literary units before they were collected may be correct in some cases, but it would be difficult to prove. The idea that these oral traditions were edited and embellished as they reached their final form is problematic. Too often the

critical interpretation considers this embellishing to be an extensive reshaping and reinterpreting of the tradition. Consequently much of form-critical exegesis is concerned with reconstructing the original tradition—a procedure that is often quite subjective and probably impossible.

However, the emphasis in form criticism on the literary units, the types of literature, the structure, and the setting in the life of ancient Israel are important for exegesis. Exegesis is concerned with the final form of the biblical text, not with possibly preliterary stages of the traditions. (For further information, see Gene Tucker, *Form Criticism of the Old Testament*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971.)

Out of form criticism a number of emphases in the study of the Pentateuch developed. Most notable has been traditio-historical criticism. Several scholars criticized the old literary analytical approach (JEDP) from various perspectives. They believed that a complete analytical approach was needed—one that took into account oral tradition, comparative mythology, and Hebrew psychology—for the purposes of discovering the formation and transmission of Israelite tradition in its preliminary stage.

Though the subjectivity prompted by such an approach has led to a great diversity among the critics, the essential elements in the theory are as follows: The story was transmitted from memory at the preliterary stage; it was accompanied by an interpretation; it was reformulated in accordance with various forces (perhaps, e.g., a Canaanite etiology, or a redemptive motif in the period of the monarchy). The cycles of stories were next redacted into a literary unit by a creative editor. The collections of stories then became normative for faith in the postexilic period.

The two long-developing, contemporary tradition collections that traditio-historical criticism posits are the P and the D collections. The former is largely Genesis through Numbers; it centers on the Passover in which the Feast is historicized. The D work is Deuteronomy through 2 Kings. So even though literary sources of the old documentary approach are rejected, a similar source analysis is maintained. Too often the history of the

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tradition is considered more important than the tradition itself.

Traditio-historical criticism places too much emphasis on oral tradition. No doubt there was oral tradition, but it was usually accompanied by written documents (Kenneth A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament*, p. 136). Archeological evidence relevant to Palestine (E. Nielsen, e.g., draws also on Hindu and Old Icelandic materials [*Oral Tradition*. London: SCM Press, 1954]) emphasizes the great care taken in copying documents in the ancient world (see W.F. Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1957).

The emphasis on comparative mythology presupposes that Israel's religion was comparable to the pagan religions. Similarities exist, but essentially Yahwism (Israel's worship of the true God, Yahweh) is distinct. Following this approach, one is left without an explanation of the origin of the Hebrew faith.

Finally, concentration on the supposed reformation of traditions lacks scientific control, a fact evidenced by the lack of agreement over the reconstructions. Reconstructions indeed are often the products of critics' predispositions.

Though many contributions to the study of the Old Testament have been made by these approaches, they all fail to place a proper emphasis on the final form of the text, the canonical shape of the biblical material. If one could trace these levels of development with certainty—which he cannot—and if one used sources to explain difficulties, he would still be left with the question as to why the material was recorded in the form in which it now exists.

Consequently more emphasis is now being placed on the present shape of the text. Repetition, diversity of style, variation of vocabulary, and the like, are often considered proof of the unity of the text by scholars following a modified structuralism or rhetorical criticism.

The traditional view that Genesis (and the Pentateuch) possesses unity and is the work of Moses has not been destroyed. On the contrary, the evidence points more and more to the antiquity and unity of the work. This is not to say that the present form of the book has not been edited by subsequent writers whose

work was guided by the Holy Spirit's inspiration; it does affirm that widespread reshaping of the accounts is unfounded and unnecessary. Any reshaping of the traditions of Genesis would have been done by Moses under divine inspiration, with the result that the book reports actual events and gives correct theological interpretations of them.

The Nature of Genesis. Much of the discussion regarding the historicity and origin of Genesis is related to a consideration of the nature of its contents, especially the primordial events recorded in chapters 1-11.

1. Is Genesis myth? Many writers describe the contents of Genesis as myth or attribute its origin to myth. Mythological literature seeks to explain the origins of things in symbolic forms. Myth records so-called "sacred history" rather than actual history; it reports how reality came into existence through the deeds of gods and supernatural creatures. It purports to establish reality, the nature of the universe, the function of the state, and the values of life (cf. J.W. Rogerson, *Myth in Old Testament Interpretation*. New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1974).

Pagan literature that records supernatural activities such as Creation, the Flood, and other divine interventions in man's world are often compared with Genesis. Some scholars envision a wholesale borrowing of such mythologies by Israel, with a subsequent demythologizing (removal of pagan elements) to make them satisfactory for Yahwism. But when Semitic mythology is correctly understood, it is clear that this was not possible.

Myths were not merely symbolic language or reflections of primitive mentality. They were ancient man's expression of his view of reality. At the center of a myth is its doctrine of correspondence (e.g., the god dies; therefore vegetation dies). Consequently ritual based on sympathetic magic was enacted to ensure the vital forces of life and fertility.

The Old Testament makes a radical break with this philosophy of the ancient world. One does not do justice to the Old Testament by saying that Israel borrowed myth, or used mythological language to describe its faith. To the Hebrew, an ab-

solutely sovereign God brought them into existence as a nation. Their concept of time was not cyclical but eschatological; their ritual at the temple was not cosmic and magical but an enactment of their redemption; and their concept of space was not limited to the primeval world but was actualized in history. In a word, reality to Israel was within her concept of history (Brevard S. Childs, *Myth and Reality in the Old Testament*. Naperville, Ill.: Alec R. Allenson, 1960, p. 13).

Therefore Genesis is not myth. The Hebrew faith was a radical departure from the characteristic mythical thought of the pagans. James Barr says, "The main battle of the Hebrew faith is fought against the confusion of human and divine, of God and nature" so prevalent in pagan myth ("The Meaning of 'Mythology' in Relation to the Old Testament," *Vetus Testamentum* 9. 1959:3). If the Old Testament preserves any vestiges of myth, it is to show that such were done away with in Yahwism. Gerhard Hasel says that Genesis employs certain terms and motifs, partly taken from theologically incompatible predecessors and partly chosen in deliberate contrast with comparable ancient Near Eastern concepts, and uses them with a meaning that is consonant with and expressive of faith in Yahweh. It represents a parting of the spiritual ways brought about by a deliberate antimythical polemic which undermined the prevailing mythological views ("The Polemic Nature of the Genesis Cosmology," *Evangelical Quarterly* 46. 1974: 81-102). Thus the Old Testament in general and Genesis in particular are a cemetery for lifeless myths and gods.

2. *Is Genesis etiology?* The narratives of Genesis have also been classified as etiologies, stories that explain some given phenomenon, a topographical, ethnological, cultic, or customary reality (see S. Mowinckel, *Tetrateuch-Pentateuch-Hexateuch*. Berlin: Verlag Alfred Toppelmann, 1964, p. 81; and Brevard S. Childs, "The Etiological Tale Re-examined," *Vetus Testamentum* 24. 1974:387-97).

If the etiological narrative is the tradition and not simply a motif, that is, if it is a primary etiology, then doubt is cast over the historicity of the event. John Bright correctly observes that it is impos-

sible to prove that an etiology is the creative force of the tradition (*Early Israel in Recent History Writing*. London: SCM Press, 1956, p. 90). The narratives no doubt record actual events. If there is an etiological element added in the use made of the tradition, it is usually responsible for a single detail or application of the story. To say a story explains why something exists is one thing; but to say a story employs some mythical episode to form the tradition is quite another.

Etiological motifs do occur in general in the Bible, especially in Genesis which explains the beginnings of many things. But these narratives cannot be referred to as etiological tales that came into being to answer certain questions.

3. *Is Genesis history?* All this raises the question of the historicity of the accounts. Scholars have been unwilling to use the term "history" unless it is adequately qualified as distinct from modern philosophies of history. Norman Porteous explains, "The fact that Israel's religious traditions made frequent reference to supernatural interventions is usually enough to make the historian look askance at them and assume that the actual course of events must have been very different" ("The Old Testament and History," *Annual of the Swedish Theological Institute* 8. 1972:22).

For many, the evidence of events from Genesis is not reliable as history. Without outside sources to verify the events, historians must depend on the biblical records themselves. Even the many findings of archeology, though confirming the cultural setting of the events, do not actually *prove* the existence of an Abraham or a Joseph. So critical scholars hesitate to designate Genesis as factual history.

However, one must remember that the Bible is a unique Book. Genesis was not intended to be a mere chronicle of events, a history for history's sake, or even a complete biography of the nation. It is a theological interpretation of selected records of the ancestors of Israel. As with all histories, Genesis explains the causes behind the events—but its causes are divine as well as human. Because it is part of the revealed Word of God, and not merely human history comparable to ancient pagan mythologies, both the

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events and the explanations are true.

For the Israelites some of the basic questions about life were answered within this theological interpretation of the events of their history. These events were recognized as integral parts of the God-planned and God-directed course of history, extending from Creation to the last days. In between this starting point and finishing point is biblical history. Thus faith was an essential part of understanding national and international events.

At the heart of this biblical history was God's covenant. It began with election—God chose Israel through Abram. God's people could look back and see what God had done, and on the basis of that they could look forward to the fulfillment of the promises. Even though promise and fulfillment were predominant motifs of the biblical history, obedience to the covenant was uppermost in the minds of the narrators. So the events of the past were recounted for apologetic, polemic, and didactic reasons.

The fact that Genesis is a theological interpretation of ancient events does not destroy its historicity. As Porteous says, "It would seem reasonable to suppose that interpretation is a response to something that demands interpretation" ("The Old Testament and History," p. 107). E.A. Speiser says that while the material may not be history in the conventional sense of the term, "it cannot be set down as fancy. The author retells the events in his own inimitable way; he does not invent them. What is thus committed to writing is tradition, in the reverent care of literary genius. Where the tradition can be independently checked, it proves to be authentic. This much has been evident for some time in respect to a number of incidental details. It now turns out that the main framework of the patriarchal account has been accurately presented" ("The Biblical Idea of History in the Common Near Eastern Setting," *Israel Exploration Journal* 7. 1957:202). For evangelicals, of course, it comes as no surprise that the biblical narratives prove to be authentic.

4. *Is Genesis tradition?* Many biblical scholars prefer to describe the Genesis narratives as "traditions" or "sagas" (which should have been used instead of

"legends" in translating Gunkel's book *The Legends of Genesis*). By these terms they mean the people's recollections of historical events. In this view historicity is not endangered; it is just not assured. Gerhard von Rad says that saga is more than history because God, not man, is the subject (*Genesis*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961, p. 31).

Conservative scholars do not share this hesitancy to regard the narratives as true. Certainly the primeval accounts and genealogies could have been brought from Mesopotamia by the ancestors. To these would have been added the family records of the patriarchs. All the traditions—oral and written—could have been preserved in Egypt by Joseph along with his own records. Moses could then have compiled the work in essentially the form in which it exists today, being preserved from error and guided in truth by the divine inspiration of the Holy Spirit (Kenneth A. Kitchen, "The Old Testament in Its Context: 1," *Theological Students Fellowship Bulletin* 59. 1971:1-9). So whether the narratives are called traditions or history, they record God's true revelation and therefore correspond with what actually happened.

Genesis is the first book of the Torah, the five Books of the Law. It may be best to classify the work as "Torah literature." It may not be legal literature specifically, that is, laws and commandments, but it lays the foundation for the Law. It is a theological interpretation of the historical traditions behind the formation of the covenant with Israel at Sinai. Throughout Genesis one may discern that Moses was preparing his readers for the revelation of the Law. It is in this that Genesis conveys its didactic nature.

But the material in Genesis is closely related to wisdom literature as well, especially in the Joseph narratives. The emphasis in the book on God's blessing for those who walk in faithful obedience suggests many parallels with the Books of Wisdom, as will be observed. Genesis, then, is a unique book but it is also a book that is like the rest of the Bible in many ways. It is here that theology and history begin.

The Literary Composition of Genesis. Genesis is a literary unity, arranging the