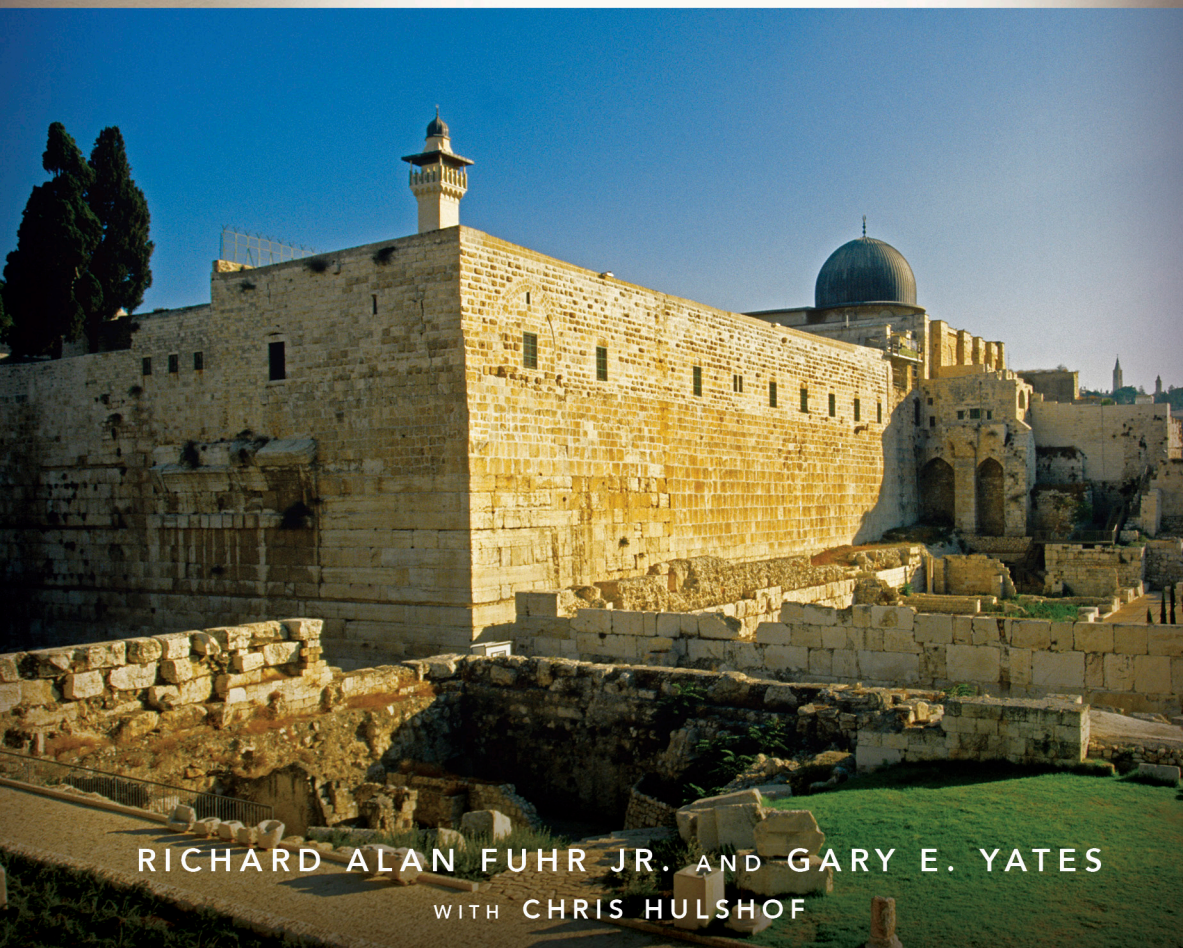


# APPROACHING THE OLD TESTAMENT

A GUIDE FOR STUDENTS



RICHARD ALAN FUHR JR. AND GARY E. YATES  
WITH CHRIS HULSHOF



“What a refreshingly helpful guide through the ‘wild world’ of the Old Testament! Each chapter connects this ancient text to our lives today, expertly summarizes the contents of these books, and even adds color with a wealth of pictures that visually enliven the biblical world. With this book in the hands of students of the Word, they can confidently and joyfully embark on an exploration of Genesis through Malachi.”

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“This one took me off guard . . . in a good way. The chapters on each book of the Old Testament do not end with personal application and relevance for today. They begin with it. Every main chapter of *Approaching the Old Testament* by Fuhr and Yates starts by showing students what this biblical book teaches and why we need it. These opening sections each conclude with a prayer. That’s right. A prayer. These on-ramps set the tone for students to study the background issues and highlights of each book of the Old Testament. I am learning from this faithful approach to studying the Old Testament.”

—**Gary Edward Schnittjer**, *distinguished professor of Old Testament at Cairn University*

“*Approaching the Old Testament* is perfectly crafted as an introductory survey. By leading each chapter with connections to contemporary life and ending with reflective questions, this survey leads the reader to engage God’s Word. To be clear, the connections and reflections are no mere veneer of relevancy; they are drawn from the literary and theological themes that distinctively mark each book. Faithful, devotional, well researched, and accessible, this is truly an excellent entry point for exploring the Old Testament.”

—**J. Michael Thigpen**, *professor of Old Testament, Phoenix Seminary*

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## *Dedication*



*(Al): For Jessil, Alex, and Max—that you may know the Scriptures and learn to read them well.*

*(Gary): Dedicated to my granddaughters, Andi and Aubrey, with the prayer that they will love the Lord their God with heart, mind, and strength.*

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# INTRODUCTION



## THE OLD TESTAMENT AS THE WORD OF GOD AND CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURE

**T***he foundational belief of this book is that the Old Testament is* the inspired, inerrant, and authoritative Word of God and God's own revelation of himself through the words of its human authors. The New Testament writers assert that the Scriptures were spoken by God ("God-breathed") (2 Tim 3:16 NIV) and that the Holy Spirit directed the human authors of Scripture in what they wrote (2 Pet 1:21). Jesus as the incarnate Word of God affirmed that the Scriptures as God's written Word had eternal validity, would be fulfilled in their totality, and had binding authority on all who belong to God's kingdom (Matt 5:17–20). Because of their divine origin, the Scriptures "cannot be broken" (John 10:35).

These statements from the New Testament align with the claims of the Old Testament as to its divine origins. The office of prophet in the Hebrew Bible is modeled after Moses. God communicated his laws and commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai and even wrote the Ten Commandments with his own finger (Exod 31:18). Similarly, the Lord would

place his own words within the mouth of the true prophet, and everything that the true prophet spoke in the name of the Lord would come to pass (Deut 18:15–22). David speaks prophetically when claiming “the Spirit of the LORD speaks by me” (2 Sam 23:2 ESV). The expressions “thus says the LORD” and “declares the LORD” appear hundreds of times in the Old Testament prophetic books because the prophets speak God’s words and not their own (cf. Isa 43:1; 44:2; Jer 29:11; Mic 3:5). The “word of the LORD” encounters or comes directly to the true prophet, and the words of a prophet like Jeremiah were equated with the word of the Lord (Jer 1:1–4; 26:1–2; 36:1–6). The Spirit also guided the writing and recording of the prophetic message as well. A uniquely Old Testament picture of the revelation and inspiration process behind the prophetic word occurs in the portrayal of the prophet as having access to the deliberations of the heavenly council, where the Lord expresses his decisions and decrees (cf. 1 Kgs 22:19–22; Jer 23:18–22). False prophets spoke the visions and dreams of their own imagination, but the true prophet declared the very word of God for his people (Jer 23:16, 21, 25–32).

Because of its divine origin, the Old Testament is an essential part of the Christian Scriptures. The Old Testament was the Bible of Jesus and the early church, with the early church using primarily the Greek translation of the Old Testament known as the Septuagint (LXX). The Old Testament had special value and significance for the early church because of how all parts of the Old Testament spoke prophetically of Christ and pointed forward to him (Luke 24:27, 46; John 5:39–46). As the faithful Son, Jesus ordered his life by the Old Testament commandments. When tempted by Satan in the wilderness, Jesus resisted the enemy by relying on the words of Scripture from Deuteronomy rather than giving some new form of divine communication (Matt 4:1–11). The identity of Jesus as Messiah, Servant of the Lord, heavenly Son of Man, and eschatological prophet was shaped by Old Testament revelation and prophecy. As God’s Word, the Old Testament has supernatural power to bring spiritual transformation in the lives of God’s people, and the Holy Spirit continues to speak through the Old Testament to instruct and edify the church today.

## **THE GOD OF THE OLD TESTAMENT**

While surveying each book of the Old Testament, the individual chapters of this survey also seek to help readers envision the big picture of reading the Old Testament as a unified composition. The entirety of the Old Testament provides a diverse but unified portrayal of the person and character

of God. In the second century AD, the theologian Marcion rejected the Old Testament as Christian Scripture and even argued that the angry and wrathful creator God of the Old Testament was not the same as the God of love and grace revealed in the New Testament. As with most ancient heresies, Marcion's ideas have resurfaced in contemporary culture and even within the church. The God of the Old Testament is commonly portrayed as a wrathful judge and vengeful God of war and violence. Skeptics have particularly targeted what they view as moral flaws in the character of the Old Testament God. The idea that the New Testament portrayal of God offers a corrective filter for the defective understanding of the Old Testament is even commonly asserted today by theologians within the church.

The problem with these misguided views is they do not reflect the perspective of the Old Testament writers themselves or the people of God in the Old Testament who worshipped Yahweh and lived in relationship with him. They saw a God who was holy in his judgments against sin but who also was a God of grace, mercy, and covenant faithfulness. They believed that God as the judge of the earth would always do what was just and righteous. The church needs a clear and fresh understanding of what the Old Testament teaches about the person and character of God. The God of Israel is the central figure of the Hebrew Bible. He is the creator of the universe and the sovereign Lord of history who works all things in accordance with his plans and purposes. He is not a distant deity represented by the forces of nature but a personal God who lovingly cares for his creation and is directly involved in the affairs of humanity.

God has a special covenant relationship with the people of Israel and has revealed himself to his people by his covenantal name Yahweh, but Israel's God also has a redemptive concern for all people. The story of God's creation of the world and his relationship with all of humanity in Genesis 1–11 is the starting point for God's relationship with Israel as his chosen people. The Lord works through Israel to restore his relational presence and to bring the blessings of salvation to sinful humanity. Unlike the polytheistic religions that surrounded ancient Israel, the Hebrew Bible is thoroughly and radically monotheistic in its portrayal of God. The Lord alone is the sovereign, eternal, and self-existent God. The gods of the nations may represent actual spiritual beings, but they are nothing like the Lord and rival him in no real way. The Lord declares: "I am Yahweh, and there is no other; there is no God but Me" (Isa 45:5 HCSB). Creation is not the work of many gods or the product of conflicts between the gods but rather is the work of one all-knowing and all-powerful God, who spoke



the cosmos into existence. Other ancient Near Eastern religions portrayed their gods with idols and images, but the Hebrew Bible prohibits the use of images to represent Yahweh, because there is no image that could properly represent his greatness and glory. The only proper image of God in Israelite belief is humanity (Gen 1:26–28). The Lord is transcendent and distinct from his creation, working his will from outside the cosmos and offering hope of a final and ultimate redemption of the creation. In contrast, the pagan gods are imminent and limited in their power as they merely represent the elements and forces of nature. The pagan world offered no real hope for the consummation of history and could only anticipate the perpetual continuation of the cycles of nature.

The God of Israel is righteous and loving in all that he does, unlike the depraved and violent pagan gods, who though powerful reflect the same moral and ethical flaws as their human followers. The Lord judges the wicked, rewards the righteous, and transforms the character of his people so that they might live in fellowship with him. The Lord enters into genuine personal relationships and engages with people based on their responses to his gracious initiatives and wise directives. The Lord answers prayer, relents from sending threatened judgment when sinners repent, and extends forgiveness to those who seek his mercy. He also inflicts punishments and withdraws his favor, blessing, and presence from those who continue in their wicked ways. He hardens the hearts of those who persist in their rebellion and unbelief. Following the ways of the Lord leads to life and blessing, while refusal to trust and obey the Lord brings cursing and death.

The central theological confession of the Hebrew Bible is the Lord's self-description of his character found in Exod 34:6–7: "The LORD—the LORD is a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in faithful love and truth, maintaining faithful love to a thousand generations, forgiving iniquity, rebellion, and sin. But he will not leave the guilty unpunished, bringing the consequences of the fathers' iniquity on the children and grandchildren to the third and fourth generation."

Various iterations of this confession appear throughout the Old Testament (cf. Num 14:18; 2 Chr 30:9; Neh 9:17; Pss 86:5; 103:8; 111:4; 145:8), and Israel had the assurance that God would consistently act in accordance with his unchanging character. Even when severely judging or disciplining his people for their sin, the Lord also provided forgiveness of sins and remained faithful to his covenant promises and commitments toward his wayward people. The Lord's consistency of character and covenant

fidelity contrasts to the capricious and arbitrary behavior of the false gods of the nations.

The Lord's righteousness places high ethical demands on his people. Those who know the Lord are to reflect his character in their own lives. The Lord commands Israel, "Be holy, for I am holy" (Lev 11:45 ESV). A life of holiness for the people of Israel included both love for God and love for neighbor. Love for God involved worship, exclusive devotion, and trusting obedience to his commands. Love for neighbor carried the moral and ethical responsibilities of justice, honesty, fair treatment, concern for the poor, and sexual purity. The people of Israel were to treat each other in accordance with how God had treated them. The Lord's rescue of Israel from bondage in Egypt placed upon his people a responsibility to treat the poor and needy with fairness and compassion. Micah 6:8 succinctly reminds the people that their primary responsibilities were "to act justly, to love faithfulness, and to walk humbly with your God." The pagan religions emphasized ritual, sacrifice, and service to the gods but often to the exclusion of moral and ethical conduct. Such standards were not acceptable to the God of Israel. The Lord also demanded proper worship and ritual observances from his people but prioritized ethical obedience over sacrifice and refused to accept worship practices that were not accompanied by an obedient lifestyle.

## THE REDEMPITIVE STORY OF OLD TESTAMENT HISTORY

Seeing the big picture of the Old Testament also requires an understanding of its history and storyline. The Old Testament is a historical book that tells the story of real people, places, and events; God reveals himself by his words and his acts in creation and history. Israel's history intersects with the peoples of the ancient Near East and the lands and cultures of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Syria-Palestine. God's dealings with Israel as his people cover more than 1,500 years in the Old Testament era and are ultimately linked to his creational purposes and designs. The six major epochs of Old Testament history are as follows:

- **The Primeval History:** Creation, fall, flood, and Tower of Babel
- **The Patriarchal History:** Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and his twelve sons
- **The Exodus and Conquest:** God leads Israel out of Egypt, through the wilderness, and into the Promised Land
- **The Time of the Judges:** Israel struggles in the land because of

religious apostasy and ineffective leadership

- **The Monarchy:** Israel under the leadership of Saul, David, and Solomon and then the divided kingdoms of Israel and Judah
- **Exile and Postexilic History:** The Babylonian exile and return from captivity

Old Testament history is the beginning of the story of redemptive history as God reveals himself through his saving acts, a story that carries over into the New Testament and finds its fulfillment in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The Lord as king restores his dominion over a fallen world and accomplishes his plan of salvation for sinful humanity through a series of covenants. These covenants between God and humans contain both divine promises and human obligations. These are the covenants we see in Scripture: (1) the Noahic/creational covenant, which guarantees the continuation of the earth and God's creation; (2) the Abrahamic covenant, which establishes a special relationship between God and Israel as his chosen people; (3) the Mosaic covenant, which instructs Israel how to live out its calling as God's people and to be a blessing to the nations; (4) the Davidic covenant, which establishes the throne of David for all time and provides leadership for Israel as God's people; and (5) the new covenant, which promises forgiveness and restoration for Israel as a reflection of God's enduring love and commitment to Israel.

All of God's covenantal promises and commitments find their fulfillment in Christ. The treatment of individual books of the Old Testament in this survey will seek to demonstrate how each book connects to the various epochs of Old Testament history and its contribution to the larger story of salvation history. Essential to a unified and canonical reading of the Old Testament is also an understanding of how each of the books of the Old Testament ultimately point forward to Christ. Jesus reminds us in Luke 24:27, 44–47 that all of the Old Testament ultimately leads us to him and his suffering, resurrection, and exaltation as the focal point of history.

## THE ARRANGEMENT OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

The English Old Testament follows the order of the Greek Old Testament from ca. 250 BC that groups the books according to the types of literature—law, history, poetry, and prophecy. The Hebrew Old Testament contains the same books but arranges them differently in three major sections—Law (Torah), Prophets (Nebiim), and Writings (Ketuvim). This arrangement likely existed before 200 BC and is reflected in Jesus's



reference to the Law, Prophets, and Psalms in Luke 24:27, 44.<sup>1</sup> This survey will follow the English order of the Old Testament text because of its familiarity to English readers, but the Hebrew arrangement provides helpful theological perspectives for informed readers.

THE HEBREW CANON

Law	Prophets		Writings
Genesis Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy	Former Prophets Joshua Judges 1 and 2 Samuel 1 and 2 Kings	Latter Prophets Isaiah Jeremiah Ezekiel	Psalms Job Proverbs Ruth Song of Songs Ecclesiastes Lamentations Esther Daniel Ezra Nehemiah 1 and 2 Chronicles

The Torah is foundational to the rest of the Old Testament. Its stories tell of the beginning of God’s relationship with Israel, and its laws and commands define the nature of the relationship that is to exist between God and Israel and how Israel is to live out its calling as God’s chosen people. The law charges Israel to live and worship in a manner that honors the Lord and that reflects his holiness and love. The office of prophet in Israel is modeled after the ministry of Moses that is portrayed in the Torah.

<sup>1</sup> The Roman Catholic and Orthodox canons of the Old Testament share the apocryphal (“hidden”) books of Tobit, Judith, Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus (Sirach), and 1–2 Maccabees, along with supplementary material for the books of Jeremiah, Daniel, and Esther. The different Orthodox traditions have variations but have added works like 1 Esdras, Psalm 151, 3 and 4 Maccabees, and the Prayer of Manasseh. The apocryphal works were written in the intertestamental period and found in many of the early codices of the Septuagint. They were also widely used by the church fathers but never cited or quoted as Scripture in the New Testament. Several early Christian canonical lists include these books, but the church was divided over their status. Augustine, for example, accepted their canonical status, but Jerome did not. They were not officially accepted as Scripture for ecclesiastical use in the Roman Catholic Church until 1546 at the Council of Trent. The apocryphal books remained in the King James Bible for over 250 years.

In the Prophets, the Former Prophets as books of history reflect that the message of the prophets had a formative role in Israel's history. Prophets like Samuel, Nathan, Elijah, and Elisha had a larger impact on Israel's history than even its kings and military leaders. These books assess Israel's faithfulness to the standards of the Mosaic law, particularly as found in Deuteronomy, and explain that Israel and Judah went into exile because leaders and people alike repeatedly broke God's commandments and turned to other gods rather than serving and following the Lord.

The Latter Prophets record the enduring words of the prophets whom God raised up during the Assyrian and Babylonian crises and following their return to the land after the exile. More than simply clairvoyants gifted with predicting the future, the prophets were messengers of God's covenants in proclaiming both judgment and salvation. They confronted the sins of idolatry, corrupt worship, and social injustice in calling the people to repent of their evil ways and to return to the Lord. When repentance was not forthcoming, they warned of the coming covenant curses and judgments of military defeat and exile. The prophets also assured the people of God's enduring covenant faithfulness and promised that restoration and renewal would follow the coming judgment. God's judgments and salvation would also extend to the nations.

The Writings reflect the rich diversity of God's revelation and demonstrate that God's *torah* is a much broader "teaching" and "instruction" that extends beyond law and commands. The Psalms teach God's people how to worship in all the circumstances of life and link together the worship of Solomon's temple and the second temple built in the postexilic period. The Wisdom books of Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon teach God's people how to thrive and flourish in light of the moral laws God has built into his creation. They reflect how God's commands are grounded in ultimate reality. The stories of Ruth, Esther, and Daniel offer examples of how God's people are to live wise and faithful lives.<sup>2</sup> The books of Ruth, Esther, and Ezra-Nehemiah, along with the visions of Daniel, reveal God's continued involvement in the working out of salvation history and the ultimate triumph of his kingdom and people over all the kingdoms of this world. Chronicles, as the final book in the canon, provides an overview of Old Testament history extending back to Adam and concluding with the restoration and return of Israel to the land.

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel is included among the Writings rather than the Prophets because he was a political official rather than a commissioned prophet.

The Law, Prophets, and Writings each conclude with a message of eschatological hope and anticipation. The Law concludes in Deut 34:10–12 with the unrealized expectation of one who would completely fulfill the role of the “prophet like Moses.” The Prophets conclude in Mal 4:1–5 with the vision of a coming day of the Lord and a future restoration beyond the return from exile. The closing words of the Writings are the decree of Cyrus in 2 Chr 36:22–23 pointing to the hope of restoration and the complete fulfillment of all that God had promised for Israel’s future. The Old Testament begins a story that will find its completion in the story of Jesus as Israel’s promised Messiah and the new covenant people of God in the New Testament.

### **WHAT MAKES THIS OT SURVEY DISTINCTIVE?**

*Approaching the Old Testament* seeks to give a more condensed and focused treatment of each Old Testament book than what is found in standard surveys, and the main sections of each chapter have distinctive features. The “Connection Points” explore contemporary relevance and application, bringing a devotional focus to each chapter and helping to answer the question, “So what?” as readers work through the book. The “Setting” sections found in some chapters cover the background, authorship, and composition issues associated with each book but with technical details and the views of current scholarship covered more in the footnotes of the chapter. The “Highlights” portion of each chapter gives more of a highlight reel for each book rather than an exhaustive summary and overview. This approach allows the literary features and theological themes of each biblical book to stand out. This survey allows beginning students to see the big picture for each book and summarizes literary and theological issues for readers who desire to go further in their study of the Old Testament.

# 1

## GENESIS



### CONNECTION POINT

**H**ave you ever been lost? You started out on a trip that you had taken several times before and felt confident in your ability to get there. You were so confident you didn't bother to consider your need for guidance or directions. Yet, twenty-five minutes into your drive, you found yourself staring out the front window unsure of where you were or even if you were actually heading in the right direction. Nothing looked familiar and everything seemed out of place. You quickly pulled over, logged your location into your phone, and got a set of directions that helped you correct your course. What you needed was guidance that helped to reorient you. In some sense the book of Genesis is like this. In particular, the first eleven chapters of Genesis help to serve as a means of reorienting us when we get off track. These opening chapters show us something of God, something of the works he created, something of ourselves, and something of our sin against God and the effects of that rebellion. However, these chapters also introduce us to a God who pursues his people to restore the relationship he has with them. The promise of that renewed and restored relationship makes an early appearance in the opening chapters of Genesis.

These chapters will not only reorient us if we ever feel lost in our contemporary culture but also help set us on the right direction if we began with an incorrect confidence that the way we were going was correct.

**Consider making this your prayer as you read and study this chapter:**

*Heavenly Father, we are often overwhelmed by our cultural surrounding and inundated by ideas that can cause us to feel lost in this world you created. Help me to look to you for guidance and direction that I can follow with confidence and surety. Help me not to rely on my own understanding [Prov 3:5] but to find in you and your Word the wisdom that I so desperately need. Thank you for your promise that we can ask you for wisdom and you will give it generously and ungrudgingly [Jas 1:5]. Father, teach me to be wise as I study your word. Amen.*

## INTRODUCTION

Genesis is the book of “beginnings,” titled after the first word in the Hebrew text, *bereshith*, or “in the beginning.” The book narrates the history of creation’s beginnings, but it also sets in order those things most important in establishing a theological foundation for the fall and redemption of humankind, and indeed, of the entire cosmos. God is introduced as Creator—not detached from his creation, but very much involved, and in particular, with humankind. The narratives in Genesis tell of God’s program of redemption involving his choice of the man Abraham, through whom he would bring the promise of a Redeemer, Jesus Christ.

The book of Genesis involves two key divisions. Genesis 1–11 focuses on primeval history involving creation, the fall of humanity, the judgment of the world through a global flood, and the development and dispersion of the nations following the flood. Genesis 12–50 shifts to focus the attention on the family through which he would perform his redemptive program. With this, the narratives speak to the covenant relationship that God builds with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, otherwise known as the “patriarchs.” The “patriarchal narratives” demonstrate God’s commitment to the covenant that he makes with Abraham, even as the covenant is jeopardized repeatedly throughout the events of their lives.

A key structural marker within Genesis is the “*toledoth* formula,” which refers to the “records of” something or someone. The opening *toledoth*

concerns the “heavens and the earth” (Gen 2:4), while the other *toledoth* introductions involve people. These include the “records of” Adam (5:1), Noah (6:9), the “sons of Noah” (10:1 ESV), Shem (11:10), Terah (11:27), Ishmael (25:12), Isaac (25:19), Esau (36:1), and Jacob (37:2). These ten *toledoth* introductions form an internal structure to the book of Genesis.

## HIGHLIGHTS IN GENESIS

### Primeval History (Genesis 1–11)

The opening prologue to Genesis details the primeval history that forms the theological foundation for the entire Bible. In this historical account, Genesis 1–11 explains the origins of creation, the origins of sin, and the beginnings of God’s plan to redeem fallen creation.

### Creation (Genesis 1–2)

The first two chapters of Genesis describe God’s work of creation. The account begins with a formulaic summation of creation performed in seven days (Gen 1:1–2:3). Following the seven-day creation account, a more detailed account of God’s special creation of man and woman begins the “*toledoth* formula” that structures the rest of the book (2:4–4:26). The creation account is clearly theistic, assuming the existence of God. It is a description of material creation, separated from God but wholly dependent upon God. God speaks creation into existence; it is not a mere ordering of preexistent matter. Although design, suitability, and order are hallmarks of creation, these traits are only viable when functioning in a material world.

The seven-day creation account describes the creation of “light and darkness” (day 1; Gen 1:3–5), the separation of the waters above and below (day 2; Gen 1:6–8), and land producing vegetation (day 3; Gen 1:9–13). It continues to describe the creation of celestial bodies (day 4; Gen 1:14–19), sea and airborne creatures (day 5; Gen 1:20–23), and land-dwelling creatures (day 6; Gen 1:24–25). All of this was declared “good” (Gen 1:25).

On the sixth day, God also creates humankind in his own image, both “male and female” (1:27). He charges them to “be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth,” and gives them dominion over the earth to “subdue it” (1:28). God declared his creation “good” and “very good” in its original, pre-fall



condition (1:31). He then rested on the seventh day, blessed it, and made it holy (2:2–3).

The seven-day creation account raises multiple questions and points of interest. The nature of the “days” of creation is paramount in understanding both the message of the text along with the material substance of the events described during these “days” of creation. That the days equate to earth rotation days seems evident by the qualifier “evening came and then morning,” repeated throughout the creation days. There is nothing in the text to suggest that the “days” of creation equate to eons of time or unspecified units of time. Although the order of creation presents challenges (plant life created on the third day while celestial bodies are created on the fourth day), these are only exacerbated if the “days” are actual extended periods of time. What does seem clear from Genesis is that creation is a miracle that occurred through divine means, and not a natural process merely orchestrated by divine guidance.

Additionally, what it means to be God’s “image bearer” is critical to a theological understanding of humanity. Humankind is the pinnacle of God’s creation, distinguished from other living creatures. No other aspect of creation bears the “image of God.” Nevertheless, what does it mean to be an “image bearer”? The text itself does not define what it *means* to be created in the image of God. It simply states that man and woman *are* created in the image of God. This possibly means that multiple aspects are involved, including the traits of personhood, responsibility as stewards over creation, and having a special familial relationship with the Creator. The implication of Col 3:10 (“You are being renewed in knowledge according to the image of your Creator”) is that the image of God entails some aspect of the immaterial nature rather than the physical nature of humankind. Whatever the specifics, there appears to be a spiritual aspect linked to “image bearing.”

In Gen 2:4, the creation account resets with specific attention given to the creation of humankind. Genesis 2:4 also begins the *toledoth* formula, which structures the narratives and genealogies throughout the rest of the book. In this account, it is specified that man was created from the dust of the ground (Gen 2:7) and that woman was created from the side of the man (2:21–24). Man and woman live in “Eden,” and here in the middle of the garden were two specified trees: the “tree of life” and the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (2:9). Man was commanded to not eat fruit from the second of these (2:15–17). The idyllic setting of the garden provided the first man and woman with the opportunity to flourish

without stress, toil, and frustration. They could bear the image of God without usurping that which belonged only to God, control over life and the knowledge of good and evil. If they were to usurp that which they were forbidden to control, they would die (2:17).

### Fall (Genesis 3–5)

Genesis 3 continues the narrative of the first couple in the garden of Eden. The reader is introduced to “the serpent,” who tempts the woman to eat of the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil,” an action that will result in her being “like God, knowing good and evil” (3:5). The deceiving serpent (revealed later in Scripture as Satan) succeeds in his plot, and the woman eats of the fruit, as does the man. Thus, the fall of humankind commences, with programmatic curses being the consequence. To the woman, pain would come in childbearing—the charge to “be fruitful and multiply” would still occur, but now with pain and trouble (3:16a). To the man, his stewardship over the earth would still occupy him, but it would now come with toil and frustration (3:17–19, outside of his onetime home, the perfect garden of Eden). For the couple, the perfect complementary union between husband and wife was from that point onward subject to conflict and strife (3:16b). Moreover, for all humankind, physical and spiritual death would now reign (3:19, 23).



Adam and Eve Expelled from Paradise (Gen 3:24)

In the fall of man, the whole of creation was subject to corruption. What God had made “good” and “very good” was no longer such. But

Fig. 1.2 Tablet V of the Gilgamesh Epic



Tablet V of the Epic of Gilgamesh, Old-Babylonian Period, 2003–1595 BCE. Believed to mirror the Eden expulsion.

from the very beginning of this new reality, the program for God’s eventual redemption of creation was set in order. Genesis 3:15 speaks not only of a curse placed upon the serpent but of the eventual demise of Satan himself. It is the promise of the “seed of woman” who would crush the head of the serpent, Satan. It is the “*protoevangelium*,” the first glimpse of the gospel in Scripture.

Chapter 4 narrates the history of Cain and Abel, followed by a genealogical account of Adam’s line from Seth to Noah (Genesis 5). The reality of the fall and the anticipation of redemption through sacrifice is clear from the events that take place between the two brothers. Abel is the first recorded individual to experience physical death. However, his death does not come by natural means, but through the hand of his brother, Cain. In the fallen world, not only would death become the common experience of all, but murder and strife and jealousy would corrupt even the most naturally amicable relationships. Interestingly, the name “Abel” is a transliterated form of the Hebrew word *hevel*, the key word used throughout the book of Ecclesiastes to describe the realities of life lived in a fallen

world.<sup>1</sup> The situation right after the fall demonstrates just how disastrous the consequences of sin were. The dire state of the world would continue to escalate unabated until God judged the world through a global flood.

### Noahic Flood (Genesis 6–9)

As humanity flourished, so did sin. With this, the Lord regretted that he had made humanity on the earth, so he determined to judge humankind with a global flood (Gen 6:5–7). Everyone on the earth would perish in the flood, except one man (and his family) who was righteous: Noah (6:9–10). God would preserve Noah in an ark that he commanded him to build, and through Noah would repopulate the earth. Additionally, God would direct two of every kind of living creature onto the ark so that they, too, would repopulate the earth after the flood (6:14–19).

The text of Genesis describes the flood as covering the high mountains (7:19), destroying all living land creatures (7:21), and lasting 371 days. The New Testament verifies this, as Peter described the judgment of the flood as global in extent (2 Pet 3:3–7). The Noahic flood was not a localized, natural phenomenon. The testimony of Scripture indicates that this was a unique global catastrophe of special design and purpose.

After the flood subsided, God promised to restore the earth through the Noahic covenant, which reinstitutes God’s original intentions that man and woman flourish on the earth and have stewardship over it (Gen 9:1–17). Also, God promised to never again destroy the earth by flood and sets the rainbow as a sign of that covenant. From Noah, the repopulation of the earth begins, but clearly, sin was still on the earth, and even manifests in the affairs of Noah and his sons. Sin had not been washed away by the waters of the flood (9:18–29).

### Dispersion of the Nations (Genesis 10–11)

The sin of Adam and Eve’s eating of the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil” to be “like God” is replicated in essence as the repopulation of the earth takes hold and nations develop from the offspring of the sons of Noah. Following the flood, the whole world had one language. As they

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<sup>1</sup> The Hebrew word *hevel* literally means “vapor,” but it is used as a metaphor in Ecclesiastes to describe multiple aspects of life lived in a fallen, mortal world, including “vanity,” “fleetingness,” and “absurdity.” It is not just that Abel experiences death (a “fleeting” existence), but it is the absurdity that the first recorded death in history comes through murder at the hand of “Abel’s” brother. Abel truly encapsulates what is described in Ecclesiastes as *hevel*.



spread eastward, they sought to build a tower to the heavens, striving to ascend and become like God. Seeing this, the Lord scattered the population of the earth and confused their languages, so that they would inhabit the earth as separated people groups (Gen 11:1–9). This results in the imposition of limitations upon humanity so that it could not have that which belongs only to God. Although humans may try, God does not allow them to have their “tower of Babel” moment. However, God would still provide a pathway to redemption. Although the nations were scattered at the Tower of Babel event, God would use separated people to call out for himself a man who would become a nation through which redemption would come. That man was Abram, son of Terah (11:27–32).

Fig. 1.3 Tower of Babel



Artwork depicting the construction of the Tower of Babel (Gen 11:1–9)

### **Patriarchal Narratives (Genesis 12–50)**

With the introduction of Abram to the Genesis narrative, the attention shifts from primeval history and the origins of creation to patriarchal history and the origins of the nation of Israel. The primary theological focus in these narratives is the establishment of a covenant that God made with Abram, whose name is later changed to Abraham. After God establishes the covenant with Abram (Genesis 12), virtually all of the narratives describe aspects of how the covenant is verified, even as it is called into

question on multiple occasions. The patriarchal narratives describe the historical events relevant to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph (although the messianic line would come through Judah). But more important, they establish the theological point that God would enact his program of redemption through a covenant he makes with Abram, a covenant that not even the patriarchs themselves could foil.

**Abram (Genesis 12:1–25:12).** Genesis chapter 12 begins with the call of Abram, and thus the trajectory of God's redemptive program begins through an individual. God calls Abram out of his country to a land he did not know. The basis of this calling is a promise; a covenant promise to make of Abram a great nation. This covenant promise is introduced in Gen 12:2–3, composed of multiple aspects, including that God would give Abram land, offspring, and blessing (ultimately, the Seed of redemption promised in Gen 3:15 would come from the seed of Abram).

Abram's name means "great father," but in the process of enacting the covenant, God changes his name to "Abraham," meaning "father of a multitude" (17:5–8). The promise that he would make of Abram a great nation was an unconditional (or unilateral), one-sided covenant promise (meaning that its fulfillment was contingent on God alone). It was received by Abram in faith, and God "credited it to him as righteousness" (15:6).

God's special relationship with Abraham is sure, even when the circumstances of Abraham's life seem to run counter to the expectations of covenant promise. Instead of separating from his family, Abraham takes Lot with him to Canaan, compromising aspects of the promise made to give Abraham and his offspring the land (12:4; 19:30–37). From Lot come the Moabites and the Ammonites, perpetual enemies of Israel. Instead of dwelling in the land of Canaan, Abraham departs to Egypt when a famine strikes the land, setting the stage for later departures to Egypt, eventually resulting in enslavement (12:10–20). Despite God's promise that Abraham would have descendants through Sarah (17:15–16), Abraham circumvented that promise through Hagar, Sarah's servant, and Ishmael was born, the father of the Arab nations (16:15). Ishmael was Abraham's descendant, but not the one of promise.

In time, Abraham and Sarah are promised a son in their old age (despite an apparent lack of faith on Sarah's part; Gen 18:1–15). Due to Abraham's fear, the birth of this child is again jeopardized in the events that unfold with Abimelech, but God intercedes to keep the bloodline clear (Gen 20). The circumstances involving Abraham seem to jeopardize aspects of the covenant, but God is faithful to his commitment in spite of the odds.



**THE MIGRATION OF ABRAHAM**

GEN. 11:27-12:9

- City
- City (uncertain location)
- ▲ Mountain peak
- ➔ Abraham's migration route
- ➔➔ Abraham's alternative migration route

Map 1.1 The Migration of Abraham



After Isaac, the son of promise, is born, God then tests Abraham by commanding him to offer Isaac up on the altar of sacrifice. At this point, God himself seems to place the covenant in jeopardy, but Abraham's faith is vindicated when he believes that God could even "raise [Isaac] from the dead" to preserve the line through his son (Heb 11:19). At the time when Abraham was lowering the knife to Isaac, the angel of the Lord called on him to stop, and God provided a ram instead. Abraham passed the test of faith, and the Lord Himself provided the sacrifice. The Lord reiterates the promises of the covenant as he speaks to Abraham once again (Gen 22:17–18).

**Isaac (Genesis 25:13–26).** After Isaac marries Rebekah (Genesis 24) and Abraham dies at the age of 175 years (25:1–11), the text quickly shifts to the conflict between Isaac's twin sons, Jacob and Esau. Because Esau sold his birthright as the elder son for a meal, the covenant line would run through Jacob, the younger. This confirmed the prophecy to Rebekah that two nations were in her womb, and that the "older would serve the younger" (25:23).

The account of Isaac's life is brief compared with that of the other patriarchs. However, there are some interesting parallels between his life and that of the others. Genesis 26 contains the account of Isaac's deception of Abimelech, echoing two earlier situations involving his father and mother (12:10–20; 20). Here the line that would come through Abraham is jeopardized in a most shocking and repeated manner, yet God preserves the line even through the weaknesses of the patriarchs.

Additionally, Isaac is deceived into blessing his younger son Jacob before his death (27; 35:28–29). Interestingly, throughout the patriarchal narratives, there is a motif of blessing going to the younger over the older. Isaac is given preference over Ishmael, Jacob is blessed over Esau (Genesis 27), Joseph excelled over Reuben (49:3–4, 22–26), and Ephraim was put ahead of Manasseh (Genesis 48).

**Jacob (Genesis 27–36).** The patriarch Jacob is the key figure in the narratives from Genesis 27 through 36. Although Jacob's life is characterized by deceit, God chooses him to be the person through whom the Abrahamic covenant would be fulfilled. Jacob steals the birthright of his older twin brother, Esau, deceiving his father Isaac in the process (Genesis 27). However, this continues the theme of God's election of the younger, and despite the circumstances, God's unconditional promises made to Abraham are reaffirmed (27:28–29; 28:3–4).

Having stolen the birthright of his brother Esau, Jacob flees to his mother's ancestral home in Haran, where he encounters his uncle Laban. It is here that he marries the daughters of Laban, Leah and Rachel. Ironically, Jacob's desire is for Rachel, the younger daughter, but he is deceived into marrying Leah, the older daughter, first. Jacob's marriages to Leah and Rachel are detailed in the narrative because through those marriages (to the sisters as well as their maidservants) would come the twelve tribes of Israel (Genesis 29–30). Interestingly, it is through Leah that Judah is born, from whom the Messiah would eventually come.

In time, God tells Jacob to leave Haran and return to Bethel in the land of Canaan, a place where he had an earlier encounter with God (28:16–21). Upon the return to the land of promise, Jacob calls upon the “God of Bethel.” He purges his family of household gods that they had brought with them from Haran, committing himself to the worship of the one true God in that place. It is there that God changes his name to “Israel” (35:10). Here God stresses again the covenant commitment that he made to Abraham to make from him a nation that would inhabit the land of Canaan. In reaffirming the covenant, God promises to Israel the blessings of the covenant, fulfilled in the manner that even “kings will descend from you” (35:11).

**Joseph (Genesis 37–50).** The final narrative unit of Genesis concerns the relocation of God's people into Egypt. The promise that God would give Abraham the land of Canaan seemed lost, but God uses Joseph as his instrument to place his people in a land where they would grow into a multitude. Once again, God selects the youngest to accomplish his will, demonstrating that Jacob's favor for his son Joseph was in alignment with God's plan for his people.

God reveals his plan to Joseph in a dream when Joseph is just seventeen (Gen 37:2). Joseph dreams that he will prosper and reign over his family. When he shares his dream with his family, his father Jacob rebukes him, but his brothers have a far more nefarious reaction; they conspire to kill him (Gen 37:18). At the behest of his brother Reuben, Joseph was spared from bloodshed, but nevertheless they rid themselves of Joseph by selling him to Midianite traders, who in turn sell him into slavery in Egypt (Gen 37:36).

Despite the evil intentions of Joseph's brothers, Joseph prospers in Egypt. Due to his faithfulness to God amid temptations and dire circumstances, God exalts Joseph to second in command in all of Egypt. As a famine plagues the land of Canaan, Jacob's family seeks sustenance from

Fig. 1.4 Pyramids of Giza



Joseph would have seen the Great Pyramids of the Giza Necropolis.

Egypt, and in this context, Joseph's brothers once again come to face their younger brother, but this time in a posture of servitude. In time, Joseph reveals his identity to his brothers, and Jacob's family settles in Goshen, in the fertile delta region of the Nile River. Here, they grow in numbers while maintaining their distinction as God's chosen people (Genesis 47).

Genesis 49 concludes the patriarchal narratives with Jacob's (that is, Israel's) blessings to his sons. These blessings speak cryptically and prophetically of what would occur in the "days to come" (Gen 49:1). Of special note is the promise to Judah that through him would come one from whom the scepter would "not depart" and to whom the "obedience of the peoples belongs" (Gen 49:10). This cryptic promise is messianic in nature, indicating that through Judah the Messiah would come, the one who would one day reign. Although Judah receives the messianic blessing, Joseph is given a double blessing through the adoption of his sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, as "sons of Israel." The narrative closes with the expectation that the people would return to Canaan one day as a nation (Gen 50:24), indicating that God would indeed stand faithful to the covenant that he established with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

## CONCLUSION

Genesis is not just a book of beginnings; it is a book that lays the foundation for the rest of Scripture and sets the trajectory for God's redemptive program. Genesis describes the world that we live in and how it came to be, and without Genesis, it is difficult to make any sense of the human condition or the world that surrounds us. The beauty of Genesis is that it not only describes the distant past, but it also describes the present state of the world. Furthermore, Genesis provides a glimpse into the future based

on God's promises from the past. The world as we know it is not the final state. There is coming a day when God will set that which is wrong right, and the world will return to creation as it was meant to be.

### REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How do the patriarchal narratives (Genesis 12–50) reenforce and remind the reader of the covenant that God made with Abraham?
2. What is the significance of Gen 3:15 in establishing the hope of redemption even amid the proclamation of curses resulting from the fall?
3. What evidence from the text of Genesis, and from the rest of Scripture, supports a global flood?
4. In what manner does Joseph provide a positive model of faithfulness that can be replicated by God's people today?
5. What does Genesis 1–2 teach concerning the uniqueness of humankind in God's creation?

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