

1 The first chapters of everything

The opening chapters of Genesis interpret and account for universal human experience. They explain why life is such a strange mixture of the beautiful and the ugly, the happy and the tragic, the fulfilling and the frustrating. They show us why our world is orderly – the basic truth underpinning all science – and yet also strangely disordered. They dig into who we are, and what makes us distinctive as humans. They tell us what the good life is, and where to find it. Above all, they introduce us to God: not as a distant, hazy being but in breathtakingly sharp focus. Genesis shows how he made us to know him, but also how this most important of all relationships has gone wrong. And these chapters also hint of a solution which is more radical, intelligent and effective than we could ever have dreamt.

On the face of it, it would be a great surprise if anything so ancient (most likely over three thousand years old) could possibly speak usefully to us in the complexities of our lives. But we have it on the authority of Jesus Christ himself. His Hebrew Bible was the same as our Old Testament (the only difference being in the order of some books); it started with

the book of Genesis, already very ancient in his own day. And it is clear that he regarded Genesis not just as the word of man, but as the *Word* of God. For instance, on an occasion when he was asked a tough ethical question, he answered by quoting two verses from Genesis as if they were *the* definitive word on the subject, and the ultimate author God himself.¹ In the same way, the New Testament as a whole looks back to Genesis again and again as authoritative, assuming it to be God's present word: my own edition of the Greek New Testament suggests no fewer than fifty-four points at which the New Testament touches on Genesis 1–4. If Genesis needs commendation – of the kind books often have on their covers – this is it!

The right approach

We start, however, with a problem: these early chapters of Genesis are surrounded by questions and controversies. Have they not, at least since the middle of the nineteenth century, been disproved by science? Isn't the Genesis account what people used to think – but which only flat-earthers believe now? To make matters worse, Christians themselves have differed in their response to this challenge, and there have been heated debates (in churches, schools, books and articles) about how science and Genesis are to relate. Some have said we can trust mainstream science; others, not. Sometimes these arguments have so overshadowed our reading of Genesis that they are all thinking of them when we read it. Inevitably – and sadly – there will be some who read this book whose main interest is not the explanation of the passages but which side this author is on!

In any piece of literature, surely the key to grasping it lies in understanding its *purpose*. What was Genesis written to convey? But rather than answering that question now, it is

1.. See Matthew 19:4–6, quoting Genesis 2:24 and attributing the narrative to the Creator himself.

better to be inductive: to start with the text of Genesis and work through it. At the end, I have a postscript, part of which addresses this question. But please take the guided tour first!

There are some difficult questions which are best dealt with as we go along, and I have included some extra sections at the end of some chapters to provide some tentative answers. I hope these are helpful, but they are much less important than the sections which take us through the text.

About Genesis

Genesis does not itself say who wrote it, but at the time of Jesus in the first century A.D., all the first five books of the Bible – the Pentateuch – were understood to be from Moses. Indeed, Jesus himself referred to the books of Exodus and Genesis in these terms,² and *Moses* is used in the New Testament as a shorthand for this section of the Bible.³ This would locate its composition in the late Bronze Age, somewhere between the 1400s and 1200s B.C.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries A.D. this view was challenged, and the Pentateuch was widely held by scholars to be a later compilation of the work of various authors, some writing centuries after Moses. It might surprise a non-specialist, but these arguments were not based on dating ancient documents or tablets, but purely on aspects of literary style and vocabulary. For instance, it has been argued that Genesis 1:1–2:3 is a creation account by one author, and the account that begins in 2:4 is the work of another. The first calls God *Elohim*, and the second *Yahweh Elohim*. These, it is argued, reflect different eras and theological agendas. Based on the assumption that religion evolves through time, an attempt was then

2.. Mark 12:26; John 7:22

3.. Luke 24:27, 44

made to say which sections must have come earlier, and which later, in the history of Israel.

More recently, this view has itself been challenged, as it has been increasingly recognized that the criteria by which different bits of Genesis were assigned to different sources were in many cases subjective, with no hard external evidence; at the same time, a closer look at literary features of the account has demonstrated that it is indeed much more coherent than a multiple-source theory would suggest. We will see, as we go along, just how close that coherence is.

Moreover, it makes great sense that Genesis should have come from Moses' era. In later chapters of Genesis, customs are reported which make sense in the culture of the Bronze Age. The contents of Genesis are presupposed in other books of the Bible of great antiquity, such as Ezekiel and Micah.⁴ And if the Bronze Age seems a long time ago – which it is – it is worth mentioning that there already existed accounts of creation given by the pagan nations surrounding ancient Israel, such as the *Atrahasis Epic*, dating to at least the seventeenth century B.C. Old Testament scholar John Collins concludes a thorough discussion of the issue: 'We also need not doubt that Moses was the primary author of the Pentateuch as we have it.'⁵ That is not to say that Moses did not himself make use of even earlier source material.

Genesis was originally written in the Hebrew language. Contemporary translations such as the English Standard Version (the one in this book) are based on manuscripts dating from the medieval period, such as an important one in St Petersburg dating from the eleventh century A.D. Although this was a long time after the original documents, it has been

4. Ezekiel 33:24; Micah 7:20

5. C. J. Collins, *Genesis 1–4: A linguistic, literary and theological commentary* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2006), p. 235.

shown by comparing manuscripts that the Hebrew scribes copied with meticulous care. To take one striking example, in 1947 a shepherd boy looking in a cave found the documents we now call the Dead Sea Scrolls. These included fragments of fifteen manuscripts of Genesis dating from the first century B.C. – over a thousand years before the medieval manuscripts. How similar would they be? ‘These show few variants from the traditional text.’⁶ We may have confidence that what we have in front of us really is Genesis!

Genesis was not originally written in chapters and verses, as now: those were added in the medieval period. Instead, it is divided into sections marked by the words *These are the generations of*, which come ten times in the book (for instance, in 2:4 and 5:1). The opening section (1:1–2:3) can be seen as a kind of prologue. This book covers this and the next section, up to the end of Genesis 4.

About this book

As the nineteenth-century Cambridge preacher Charles Simeon wrote, ‘My endeavour is to bring out of Scripture what is there, and not to thrust in what I think might be there.’⁷ What is sometimes rather grandly called ‘interpretation’ is really just a question of listening properly to the text, in its context. If you find yourself saying, ‘that’s just his interpretation,’ please check Genesis for yourself – or the New Testament references which also help us understand it.

Following the convention of modern English translations, I have used the expression *the LORD* (capitalized) when reproducing the personal name of the God of the Bible, *Yahweh* in the Hebrew. Just remember that that is a name, not (as ‘Lord’ normally is in English) a title.

6. G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1987), xxv.

7. Quoted in Hugh Evan Hopkins, *Charles Simeon of Cambridge* (Sevenoaks: Hodder and Stoughton, 1977), p. 57.

GENESIS 1:1

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.