

Genesis

Introduction



Origin, Nature, and Destiny

From the beginning of time men have looked up to the heavens and asked: “Who are we?”, “Where do we come from?” and “Do we have a purpose?” In 1897 French painter Paul Gauguin finished a painting entitled *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Do We Go?* Gauguin posed these three fundamental questions visually from right to left and included a silly little white bird to represent the futility of language. However, he could not have been completely convinced that all language is futile, because, just to make sure everyone knew his title, he painted the words in the upper left corner of the canvas.



Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?
Paul Gauguin, 1897–1898
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Gauguin said his painting was a philosophical statement comparable to the Gospel, but his was quite the opposite of *good news*. Gauguin’s message was one of meaninglessness and absurdity. He was a modern man, a skeptic, and his “gospel” suggested there was no purpose or hope for mankind. From his perspective, we are alone in the universe, there will be no answer to these big questions and life will just end in a deafening silence. With this sort of outlook on life, it is not too surprising that when he finished painting his statement of anguish, he stuffed himself with arsenic in hopes of ending his life. As it turned out, he ate too much, vomited and was doomed to continue living.

It may also come as no surprise that Gauguin was a long-time sufferer of depression and alcoholism. Sadly, there are many people in our time who share his outlook and who suffer in the same ways: believing life to be totally devoid of meaning or direction. Like Gauguin, many people are haunted by these same questions, and they seek answers that provide some foundation for their origin, nature and destiny.

Genesis is an ancient book, but it contains the answers men seek in every age. In it we find that God has not only anticipated our questions from the beginning, but that he reveals that there is meaning and hope. We *can* know where we come from, who we are, and even begin to realize our destiny. We find that the answer to all these questions is not to be found in something, but in someone. We discover we are not alone in the universe; there is someone outside of our world whose image and likeness we alone bear. When we come to know this *other* as our Creator, we are able to define ourselves in relation to him. The revelation of God in Genesis is extremely important in our modern world; By understanding where we come from, what we are, and where we are bound, we discover fertile soil for the roots of our questioning souls.



Unlike false, pagan gods, the God of Genesis does not seek minions that he may exercise his power. The God of Genesis desires a family. He has a passionate love for his creation and for man, in particular, whom he made in his own image and likeness. God desires to draw man to himself and even give him a share in his divine nature. He reveal himself so that man may know and love him as “Father.”

Genesis is the beginning of this revelation from God. In it, he tells us things man could never know with just his five senses. Based on observation, science can devise theories about what things are made of and how they work; however, science can never go back and observe or recreate the beginning of all things. There is no data to explain why there is anything at all. Likewise, we will never find scientific data that reveals who, if anyone, is responsible for the existence of the physical world or for man’s presence in it. So while science can sometimes tell us the “what” and the “how,” only God can tell us the “who” and the “why.”

In Genesis, as in all of Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition, we have the Word of God, himself, giving us the answers we seek. What’s more, being a loving Father, he has a spectacular way of explaining things to his children so that they are captivated by stories that are as beautiful as the realities they reveal. What’s more his story is not mere words. For God’s words are creative, and his story is played out as the *his-story* of the created world. God is a true artist; and unlike the painting by Gauguin, God’s masterpiece of revelation is dripping with life, hope, truth and joy.

Title and Purpose

In addition to Genesis, two other biblical books open with the words “in the beginning,” the Gospel of Saint John and the First Epistle of John. Each refers to a different time frame. Genesis refers to the beginning of the physical universe, while St. John’s Gospel refers to eternity before the beginning of the physical universe. Lastly, the First Epistle of John refers to the eternal existence of God’s creative Word, both before creation and within space and time—as he is now seen and known, in the person of Jesus Christ.

The word *genesis* simply means “beginning”, which is how the book of Genesis got its name. The very first word of the Hebrew text is *bereshith*, which translates into English as “in the beginning” and into Latin as “genesis.” Additionally, the content is all about beginnings: the beginning of the universe and the earth, the beginning of Man, the beginning of sin and evil, and the beginning of God’s work of redemption through a series of *covenantal* relationships. The first three major covenants between God and man are revealed in Genesis starting with Adam, later with Noah and then with Abraham. It is the fulfillment of these covenants that comprises the remainder of Sacred Scripture, such that all that follows Genesis is built upon these beginnings. So how can man possibly understand his existence as revealed in the Bible without first understanding the foundational and seminal revelation from God in the book of Genesis?

Finally we cannot discuss the purpose of Genesis without noting the importance of approaching the text with an understanding that Genesis reveals the answers to *theological* questions about the origin, destiny and purpose of man. As mentioned previously, we cannot look to science to answer these types of questions, because that is not the intent or purpose of genuine scientific study. Science and Scripture both reveal truth, when rightly studied; however, they are distinct orders of knowledge: one reveals *scientific* truths *about* created, physical realities, the other reveals *theological* truths about the uncreated, invisible realities which give *meaning* to the physical. Therefore, we should not expect the text of Genesis to provide us with scientific explanations for the existence and workings of the physical universe—this is not the intent of its divine Author. In order to discover the truths revealed in Genesis, we must remember to ask the right questions.

Author and Date

Genesis is part of a larger work known as the *Pentateuch*, which comes from two Greek words: *five* and *scroll*, thus, a “book composed of five scrolls.” In Hebrew it is known as *Torah* meaning “the Law.” The Pentateuch is made up of the first 5 books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. This being the case, a question of authorship is not directed at any of the 5 books alone, but at the entire Pentateuch.

There is both external and internal evidence in support of Mosaic authorship. External evidence is based upon the knowledge that as far back as Jewish tradition can be traced, Moses is credited as the author

of the Pentateuch and therefore of Genesis. Additionally, the Fathers of the Church also maintained Mosaic authorship. Internal evidence comes from within Sacred Scripture: the Pentateuch, itself, affirms Moses as the author (Ex 17:14, 24:4, 34:27, Num 33:1-2, Deut 31:9) as does Jesus, who refers to the first five books of the Bible as the books of Moses (Lk 24:27, Jn 5:46). But, unlike St. Paul's epistles, which begin by identifying St. Paul as the author in the opening lines, Genesis contains no such internal witness or assertion of authorship.

At present, there are basically two schools of thought regarding the authorship of Genesis: One, Moses wrote it, or two, Moses didn't write it and someone else did. But until the 17th century, Mosaic authorship went unquestioned. Scholars who reject the authorship of Moses cannot come to any consensus on alternate theories, and it is interesting to note, that these same scholars also dispute that Paul wrote some of the New Testament books attributed to him, or that the Matthew, Mark, Luke and John actually wrote the gospels credited to them. It seems to have become popular in modern times to be skeptical and to question everything the ancients believed, as though we are two thousand years smarter than the brilliant patriarchs, prophets, apostles, saints and sages of the past, including Jesus himself. C. S. Lewis, a Christian apologist, referred to this way of thinking as "chronological snobbery" and wisely observed that instead of rejecting ancient philosophies, we should admit the help of past ages in order to see our own age more clearly. He advocated letting the "breezes of the centuries" blow through our minds.

Of the theories that have challenged Mosaic authorship, the most popular has been the "documentary theory." This theory proposes that multiple documents, written by a series of unknown authors, separated by many hundreds of years, were woven together by redactors (editors) at a later date to arrive at the finished product known as the Pentateuch. According to this hypothesis, variation in the names used in reference to God throughout the Pentateuch suggest that the alleged documents originated from one of 4 different sources: "J" (Yahwist source), "E" (Elohist source), "P" (priestly source), or "D" (deuteronomical source). Some, though not all, of the scholars who espouse this theory also deny the historicity and truth of Genesis. This "documentary theory", also known as the "JEPD theory" is being abandoned by some recent scholars.

The Fathers of the Church, along with Jesus and the apostles all refer to Genesis as the work of Moses. So, while both Tradition and documented history do not definitively prove that Moses was the author of the Pentateuch, their witness at the very least, places the burden of proof with any challenger. To date, there has been no proof that Moses was not the author of the Pentateuch in the ancient sense and therefore no convincing reason to abandon this theory.

We can also be assured that Moses, along with possible other secretaries or editors, were guided by the Holy Spirit to provide us today with the inerrant, infallible, and authoritative Word of God contained in the Pentateuch. The reality is that Genesis has an incredible internal consistency due to the fact that God himself is the chief author, who revealed the beginning of his work in the world among men. St. Theophilus of Antioch once wrote, "Moses... or rather, the Word of God, who used him as an instrument, said, 'In the beginning God made heaven and earth'."

Moses was raised in a royal family, presumably with the best education. He would certainly have been keen to record the history of his people. Moses would have gleaned that history from some written documents but primarily from stories he had been told. In ancient cultures, the primary means of passing on the history and genealogy of a people from generation to generation was through the art of storytelling, or *oral tradition*. Genesis is most likely a collection of stories, compiled by Moses, that relate his people's history before his own time. The remaining books of the Pentateuch reflect contemporary history that he actually lived and wrote about. An editor, possibly Joshua, added the end of Deuteronomy which details the death of Moses. It should be noted that by allowing later edits such as this, in no way discredits Mosaic authorship in the ancient sense. In ancient times, rights of authorship were not treated as they are today; it was not uncommon for someone to edit or add to content without noting any change in original authorship.

In response to questions about Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, the Pontifical Biblical Commission said on June 27, 1906 that Mosaic authorship does not "necessarily imply a production of the whole work of such a character as to impose the belief that each and every word was written by Moses' own hand or was by him dictated to secretaries." They said further that it is

A legitimate hypothesis that he [Moses] conceived the work himself under the guidance of divine inspiration and then entrusted the writing of it to one or more persons, with the understanding that they reproduced his thoughts with fidelity and neither wrote nor omitted anything contrary to his will, and that finally the work composed after this fashion was approved by Moses, its principal and inspired author, and was published under his name. (Pontifical Biblical Commission, June 27, 1906)

Although Moses was the author, the date when the stories in Genesis actually came to be is unknown since much of the material would have been passed on through oral tradition. Abraham and his descendants would have been the primary sources. Abraham probably lived around the year 1850 BC and it is believed that Moses led the exodus from Egypt somewhere around 1250 BC. There were likely some edits and finishing touches after that time.

General Outline

The structure of Genesis can be approached in one of two ways: according to its subject matter or according to its external form. The subject matter is presented in two basic sections: Primeval History (Genesis 1-11) and Patriarchal History (Genesis 12-50). Each section can be further subdivided by subject matter as follows:

I. Primeval History

- A. Cosmological creation account (Gen 1:1-2:4a)
- B. Anthropological creation account (Gen 2:4b-25)
- C. Fall of Adam and Eve (Gen 3:1-24)
- D. Cain and Abel (Gen 4:1-26)
- E. Descendants of Adam (Gen 5:1-32)
- F. Wickedness of the World and the Flood (Gen 6:1-9:29)
- G. Table of Nations (Gen 10:1-32)
- H. Tower of Babel (Gen 11:1-9)
- I. Genealogy of Abraham (Gen 11:10-32)

II. Patriarchal History

- A. Abraham (Gen 12:1-25:18)
- B. Isaac (Gen 25:19-26:35)
- C. Jacob (Gen 27:1-36:43)
- D. Joseph (Gen 37:1-50:26)

The external form of Genesis is based upon divisions of the text into a framework of “generations” - Hebrew: *tôledôth*. Each generation contains the phrase: “These are the generations of ...” and can be found in the following verses:

Gen 2:4	“These are the generations of the heavens and the earth.”
Gen 5:1	“These are the generations of Adam.”
Gen 6:9	“These are the generations of Noah.”
Gen 10:1	“These are the generations of the sons of Noah.”
Gen 11:10	“These are the generations of Shem.”
Gen 11:27	“These are the generations of Terah.”
Gen 25:12	“These are the generations of Ishmael.”
Gen 25:12	“These are the generations of Issac.”
Gen 36:1	“These are the generations of Esau.”
Gen 37:2	“These are the generations of Jacob.”

Themes of Genesis

We often refer to Genesis as the “story” of creation and the patriarchs; in doing so, we do not imply it is a fiction. Rather, Genesis is the true saga of God’s work with men in the world. It is a story much like any human father would tell of his own family. The story of Genesis makes it very clear that God, like your earthly family, is not distant or disinterested in his people. He is constantly at work in the world bringing salvation to his people that they might share in his divine life.



There are three basic themes that permeate the “generations” in the book of Genesis: God works from within history according to his will, God is intimately involved with his people, and God draws straight with crooked lines.

As God begins the process of forming his people, he works from within the history of particular families and he continually narrows down the family line through whom he chooses to work. For example, of Adam’s sons, Cain is set aside for Seth. Later, Shem is chosen from among the three sons of Noah, and from Shem’s family line Abraham is called from the pagan lands to be God’s friend. With Abraham’s descendants we see that the oldest son, Ishmael, does not receive his birthright and blessing, instead it is given to the younger son, Isaac, according to the promise of God. With Isaac’s descendants, we again see the younger son winning out over the elder as Jacob receives the birthright that should have gone to Esau. This process of election and selection continues through the course of salvation history according to the will of God. What’s more, he conducts this process while allowing for man’s free will.

The second theme is God’s intimate involvement with his people, even to the point of coming down to visit them, to swear oaths and form covenants with them, and to even define himself in relation to them: “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Ex 3:6). God created Man in his image in order to relate to him personally. He walked and talked with Adam and Eve in the garden and sought them out when they hid from him. Enoch and Noah both “walked with God and was taken into heaven body and soul. Noah, who was saved because he was righteous, and God formed a covenant with Noah. Abraham believed and obeyed God and was called “friend of God.” As with Noah, God also formed a covenant with Abraham which was renewed, with Isaac and later with Jacob. God intervened repeatedly in the life of Jacob, bailing him out of every difficulty, disciplining him and ultimately giving him a new name, Israel, the name by which God’s people would be known. Even when least expected, God was behind the scenes directing the steps of his people, and blessing those who were called according to his will. God makes covenants with men, bringing them into his very family, and as we shall discover through the course of this study, covenants are key to understanding Genesis, along with the rest of salvation history.

Third, God draws straight with crooked lines. As a result of Adam and Eve bringing sin into the world men and women became weak, selfish, and sinful. Despite man’s failings, in the generations of Genesis, we see God work through flawed men over and over again to fulfill his divine purposes. He even uses man’s evil deeds to his advantage. A good example of such action occurs toward the end of Genesis when Joseph’s brothers do a wicked thing out of jealousy and greed; They sell their younger brother, Joseph, into slavery in Egypt. But once there, Joseph is made the vizier of Egypt. Instead of being angry with his brothers, Joseph sees the mighty hand of God and exclaims, “As for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good ... ,” for through the misfortune experienced by Joseph at the hands of his brothers, his family would be saved during a seven year famine (Gen 50:20). St. Paul summed this up very well when he stated, “We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose” (Rom 8:28).

New Testament Concealed in the Old—Typology

Understanding typology is crucial to understanding the Old Testament and its relationship to the New Testament. A “type” is a person, event or thing in the Old Testament that prefigures or points forward to the fulfillment of God’s promises in the New Testament. The story of Noah’s ark is a good example of typology, The ark being a “type” of the Church. The event of passing through the waters of the flood coupled with the returning dove prefigures the sacrament of Baptism—new life through water and Spirit (1 Pet 3:18-21; Jn 3:3-5).

Typology is contingent upon studying Scripture as a whole and not as a series of isolated and unrelated books. All the various writings contained in Bible, together, by virtue of their one, divine author, form a single continuity of unity. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI) illustrated this when he said, every individual part derives its meaning from the whole, and the whole derives its meaning from its end” (Ratzinger, *In the Beginning*). In Genesis man begins in a garden, at the culmination of time, as recorded in the book of Revelation, man dwells in a city. In the beginning man is naked, and in the end he is clothed with royal garments. In Genesis man is driven from an earthly paradise, but in the book of Revelation he enters the heavenly paradise forever. The beginning and the end call back and forth to each other to

illustrate the whole epic of salvation history. By realizing the interconnectedness of Sacred Scripture, man can see that there is indeed a plan, and history is the fulfillment of that plan. Everything will be consummated on the last day, and Genesis is where it all begins.

Genesis, along with the rest of the Old Testament, is literally loaded with types, so much so, that St. Augustine said the New Testament lies hidden in the Old and the Old Testament is unveiled in the New. We will be watching for and highlight Old Testament types as we progress through this study.

Abraham, Father of Faith and Works

Genesis introduces us to many memorable people such as Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah, Sarah, Ishmael, Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, Rachel and Joseph, just to mention a few. But there is no question that the key figure towering above the rest in Genesis is Abraham, the father of faith and works. St. Paul would later emphasize Abraham's "obedience of faith" (Rom 16:26; cf. Rom 1:5; 2 Cor 10:5-6), and St. James would relate how Abraham's faith was perfected by his works: "a man is justified by works and not by faith alone" (Jas 2:24).

Jesus confers elevated dignity to this patriarch by referring to him as "Father Abraham" (Lk 16:24). St. Paul also refers to Abraham as "Father Abraham" and the "Father of us all" (Rom 4:12, 16). This designation of "Father" is appropriate as Israel was a name given to Abraham's grandson Jacob, whose 12 sons constitute the heads of the 12 tribes of Israel. The Jews derive their name from Judah, Abraham's great-grandson and one of the 12. Abraham was not an Israelite, a Jew or a Christian, none existed during his lifetime. He was a Hebrew and a pagan from Ur of the Chaldees far to the east. Abram was his name when God first called him. But in virtue of his special selection to be "father of the nations," his name was later changed by God to Abraham. He is the father of the Jews through his son, Isaac, and the father of the Arabs through his son, Ishmael. He is ultimately the father of the Christians as well because it is through his descendants that Jesus Christ enters history. (Gal 3:16).

Clearly, it would be impossible to overestimate the importance and profound significance of this wrinkled old shepherd with sandaled feet. Abraham traveled over 1600 miles in obedience to God without knowing where he was going. He never owned the land that had been promised to him and he did not even have the son God promised until he was 100 years old, but Abraham never wavered in his trust in God or in obedience to God's commands. This why he is the foundation of the nation of Israel and of the Church and why we refer to him today as "Father Abraham."

Now we will embark on an exploration of the most important book in the world, the book that is so much more than letters on a page. The words of Genesis are living, powerful, inspired and true. Genesis is the Word of God, who is revealed in order to tell us who we are, where we come from, and where we are bound. These words should be a source of great hope in that they point back to the love God demonstrated when he made us and to the final salvation he will bring us through his own Son. This is Genesis and we have been blessed by God to hold his divine Word in our human hands. The words contained in this treasure are sweeter than honey. Blessed be God forever.

Catechism Connections

- **In the whole of Sacred Scripture, the first 3 chapters of Genesis are unique. -CCC 289**
- **Typology has been understood and applied to the study of Sacred Scripture since apostolic times. -CCC 128-130**
- **Read more on the Church's teachings about the creation of the visible world. -CCC 337-349**
- **The Church recognizes the value of science but also notes its limitations. -CCC 284, 2293-4**



Rome To Home

During his pontificate, Pope John Paul II's weekly general audiences from September 1979 to November 1984 comprise a catechesis on the body of the human person in light of Biblical revelation. During one such address, on January 2, 1980, he spoke of creation as a fundamental and original gift:

The Creator is he who "calls to existence from nothingness," and who establishes the world in existence and man in the world, because he "is love" (1 Jn 4:8). Actually, we do not find this word in the narrative of creation. However, this narrative often repeats: "God saw what he had made, and behold, it was very good." Through these words we are led to glimpse in love the divine motive of creation, the source from which it springs. Only love gives a beginning to good and delights in good (cf. 1 Cor 13). As the action of God, the creation signifies not only calling from nothingness to existence and establishing the existence of the world and of man in the world. It also signifies, according to the first narrative, *beresit bara*, giving. It is a fundamental and "radical" giving, that is, a giving in which the gift comes into being precisely from nothingness.

The reading of the first chapters of Genesis introduces us to the mystery of creation, that is, the beginning of the world by the will of God, who is omnipotence and love. Consequently, every creature bears within it the sign of the original and fundamental gift

~ His Holiness Pope John Paul II
Theology of the Body, 59

Voices of the Saints

"Saint Paul tells us, "The letter kills, but the spirit gives life" [2 Cor 3:6]. A man has been killed by the letter of the Sacred Scripture when he wants to quote it only so that people will think him to be very learned, ... when he has no desire to follow the spirit of Sacred Scripture, but wants to know what it says only so he can explain it to others."

~ St. Francis of Assisi