

Introduction to Genesis

by
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From: Chapter I, "Introduction," *Genesis I-XXV: A Devotional Commentary* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1909).

The first book of the Bible is for several reasons one of the most interesting and fascinating portions of Scripture. Its place in the Canon, its relation to the rest of the Bible, and the varied and striking character of its contents combine to make it one of the most prominent in Holy Writ. It is with a real spiritual insight, therefore, that the people of God in all ages have fastened upon this book, and given it their earnest attention. It is also a testimony to its value and importance that criticism of various kinds and degrees has also concentrated itself upon this first book of the Bible. Its substance and claim are far too important to be overlooked.

In the Hebrew the title of the book is taken from its first words, *Bereshith* ('In the beginning'). The title of the Authorised Version, following the Septuagint, refers to the contents of the book. It is a book of 'beginnings,' and is true to this idea throughout.

I. *Its Purpose.*--As the purpose is not definitely stated in any part of the book, it is, of course, necessary to read it through in order to gain an idea of the author's meaning and object. It should therefore be read through at one time, so as to gain an adequate idea both of its contents and proportion. Indeed, the oftener it can be read right through at once with this aim the better, more particularly as we are accustomed to read it merely in chapters or sections. It is only as the book is carefully read and pondered that its purpose becomes manifest.

The first thing that strikes us is the summary and fragmentary character of the first eleven chapters, and the fulness of detail in the remainder of the book, the latter chapters (12 to 50) dealing practically with only four men. Eleven chapters are thus concerned with the affairs of the human race, and thirty-nine chapters with one family. This, ordinarily, would seem very disproportionate, but in fact it is really an indication of the specific purpose of the book. The first eleven chapters are evidently introductory to the rest. Abraham is clearly the central figure of the book, chapters 12:1 to 25:10 being devoted to him; and all that follows is seen to be closely connected with, and to arise out of, the record of his life. If, then, we take our stand, as it were, at the beginning of chapter 12 and look backwards and forwards we can see (1) the descent of Abraham from Adam, and (2) the descendants of Abraham.

It must be evident from these simple facts that there was no intention of writing an universal history of man, but only of recording the development of the Divine will and purpose for and through Abraham. It is history written with a special purpose. The book might easily have begun with Abraham if the purpose had been to record the ordinary history of an ordinary people; yet inasmuch as Israel was not an ordinary people, but charged with God's purposes for the whole of mankind, it was necessary to show--at least in brief form--the connection between the progenitor of the human race and Abraham, in

whom and in whose descendants the Divine purpose was to be realised.

The two main divisions, therefore, are chapters 1 to 11 and chapters 12 to 50. The former section can be divided by the Flood, and the two parts referred respectively to Adam as the head of the original race, and to Noah as the head of the new race. Then follows the record of Abraham, the head of the family through which God's purposes for the race were to be fulfilled, and the story of his three great descendants--Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. Before proceeding to a more detailed consideration of the book it is essential that these main outlines should be clearly in view.

II. *Its Plan.*--Taking up the book again for the purpose of fuller study, as we look at it more closely we become conscious of the recurrence of a phrase, 'These are the generations,' or 'The book of the generations,' and we observe that it occurs no fewer than ten times. Inasmuch as nine of these are without doubt superscriptions, and are therefore closely connected with what follows, it is a strong argument in favour of the view that the first of these occurrences is to be interpreted in the same way: 'These are the generations of the heaven and the earth' (chap. 2:4). It refers, not to what precedes, but to what follows. This view is clearly borne out by the meaning of the word translated 'generations' (*Toledoth*), which comes from the Hebrew *Yalad* ('to beget'), and invariably refers to results, not causes; not to ancestry, but to descendants; not to origin, but to effects.

The book should therefore be analysed as follows:--

1. Introduction.--The Creation. (Chap. 1:1 to 2:3.)
2. The Generations of the Heaven and the Earth. (Chap. 2:4 to 4:26.)
3. The Generations of Adam. (Chap. 5:1 to 6:8.)
4. The Generations of Noah. (Chap. 6:9 to 9:29.)
5. The Generations of the Sons of Noah. (Chap. 10:1 to 11:9.)
6. The Generations of Shem. (Chap. 11:10-26.)
7. The Generations of Terah. (Chap. 11:27 to 25:11.)
8. The Generations of Ishmael. (Chap. 25:12-18.)
9. The Generations of Isaac. (Chap. 25:19 to 35:29.)
10. The Generations of Esau. (Chap. 36:1 to 37:1.)
11. The Generations of Jacob. (Chap. 37:2 to 50:26.)

All thorough study of the Book of Genesis in the light of its structure, purpose, and plan should proceed along these lines. The book is thus seen to be in great measure a compilation of family documents; the author, whoever he was and whenever he wrote, made use of pre-existing materials, as was the case in the composition of the Gospels (Luke

1:1-4), and welded together the whole into a striking and beautiful unity. The record is thereby shown to partake of a genealogical character, and this is due to the author's purpose of tracing the fulfilments of God's purposes of redemption through the line of the chosen people. These genealogies are consequently an essential part of the book, and form a consecutive series from Adam to Jacob. Although, as it has been often pointed out, they are occasionally interrupted for the purpose of introducing collateral and connected facts, the thread is soon resumed and the main purpose never allowed to go out of sight.

We may therefore describe the present Book of Genesis as consisting of an introduction, and ten books representing ten sections or stages of history, each complete in itself. It is worth while noticing once again, that in the course of bringing forward these successive genealogies the plan is to deal with collateral branches first, before dwelling upon the main line of descent in regard to the purpose of redemption. Thus the genealogy of Cain comes before that of Seth, those of Ham and Canaan before Shem, that of Terah before Abraham, those of Ishmael and Esau before Isaac and Jacob. All the apparent deviations are strictly according to the idea of the book as a book of *beginnings*. As it has been well said, 'Genesis is full of geneses.'¹

III. *Its Unity*.--It is generally admitted, even by men of very different schools, that our present Book of Genesis is a unity, however that unity has been brought about. For this reason it should be studied as a whole, and allowed to make its own definite and deep impression upon the reader. As Dr. Whitelaw (*Pulpit Commentary*, p. 8) truly says, there is a chronological thread running through the entire book, and all its parts are so interdependent that if one were omitted it would create a gap, and entirely rob the book of its unity. There are few facts more certain than that of the literary unity of Genesis as it has come down to us, and no study of the book will arrive at right conclusions unless this fact is kept well in view.

IV. *Its Value*.--As the title clearly indicates, it is essentially and pre-eminently a book of origins; it deals with a number of characteristic 'beginnings.' It records the beginning of creation, of man, of woman, of the Sabbath, of marriage, of home, of childhood, of sin, of murder, of sacrifice, of grace, of trade, of agriculture, of city life, of races, of languages, and of the chosen people.

In the light of its title and evident purpose it is worthy of notice that there are in particular seven important 'beginnings' recorded and dealt with in this book:--

1. The beginning of the material universe, or the Sphere of the Divine revelation of grace.
2. The beginning of the human race, or the Subject of the Divine revelation of grace.
3. The beginning of human sin, or the Cause of the Divine revelation of grace.
4. The beginning of divine redemption, or the Character of the Divine revelation of grace.
5. The beginning of the nations of the earth, or the Scope of the Divine revelation of grace.
6. The beginning of the Hebrew nation, or the Channel of the Divine revelation of grace.

¹ Cf. Green's *Unity of the Book of Genesis*.

7. The beginning of the life of faith and consecration, or the Outcome of the Divine revelation of grace.

The first four words form the keynote of the book, which is struck again and again throughout the record--'In the beginning God.' It is essentially a book where God is prominent and predominant, notwithstanding human wilfulness, wandering, and wretchedness through sin.

God in Creation.--The outstanding impression derived from the story in chapter 1 is that the universe is not self-originated, but is the result of the Creator's handiwork. 'God saw,' 'God said,' 'God made,' are the prominent teachings.

God in History.--In this book we have the dawn of history and the earliest years of the life and progress of the human race; and although the narrative of the first eleven chapters takes various literary forms, and is only brought before us in very summary fashion, there is no doubt of the essential historical character of the events underlying the record. And when we come to the fuller details of the patriarchal narratives we can readily appreciate the truth of Dr. Driver's dictum with reference to the parts of 2 Samuel: 'The abundance and particularity of detail show that the narratives must date from a period very little later than that of the events related' (*Intro. O.T.*, p. 173). No student of history can afford to overlook the instructive and fascinating record contained in the first book of the Bible.

God in Providence.--No book in the world shows so clearly the truth that 'There's a Divinity that shapes our ends, rough hew them how we will.' From the time that man was created, God's providence is seen watching over him, warning him, checking him, overruling his mistakes, and, in spite of his wilfulness, carrying out the Divine purpose. In the record of the ages before the Flood and of the time of the Deluge, in the stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, we see step by step the working of that 'never-failing providence that ordereth all things in heaven and earth.'

God in Redemption.--This is the most important, even though it is not the most prominent, feature on the surface of the book. Genesis has been well summed up in three words--generation, degeneration, regeneration. The great promise of redemption recorded in chapter 3 is taken up and gradually prepared for through a long line from Seth through Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In this connection, too, we must not overlook the typological value of Genesis, for it is a book of type as well as of prophecy, of picture as well as of promise. From the sacrifice of Abel straight onward to the sacrifice of Isaac, the vision of Jacob at Bethel, and the story of Joseph, we have picture after picture of redemption, which find their full meaning, vividness, and glory, in the New Testament revelation, until at length in Jacob's benediction we have a striking reference to the primeval fact of sin and the primeval promise of salvation (chap. 49:17, 18). The red thread of redemption binds every chapter together, and gives the book one of its essential marks of unity.

God in Human Life.--Not the least interesting and valuable feature of this most remarkable book is its record of human life in relation to God. As we read the stories from Adam to Joseph, we see various aspects of the Divine revelation in regard to personal life, and the various attitudes of human response to that revelation. The book is of pre-eminent value, because it has to do with the essential and abiding elements of God's relation to man, and

man's relation to God. As we study point after point in individual history and character, we see abundant proofs of spiritual guidance, warning, encouragement, and cheer, and we become more and more convinced of the truth of the Apostolic word, that 'Whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning.'

In the foregoing remarks critical questions have been deliberately avoided, in order to concentrate attention on the importance of a study of the book itself. It is to be feared that there is often a good deal of knowledge about Genesis without too much knowledge of the book itself. If only we would allow it to make its own impression by direct and prolonged study, apart from all authorities, it would go far to instruct us as to its own real character. Even so extreme a critic as Kuenen bears witness to the value of direct Bible study when he says:--

The Bible is in every one's hand. The critic has no other Bible than the public. He does not profess to have any other documents inaccessible to the laity, nor does he profess to see anything in the Bible that the ordinary reader cannot see. It is true that here and there he improves the common translation, but this is the exception, and not the rule.

And that great scholar, Dr .M'Caul, gives a very valuable reminder to all Bible readers in the following words:--

No reader of the Authorised Version ought to allow himself to be mystified or silenced by an appeal to foreign critics, much less to be disturbed in his faith, as if he could not apprehend the general teaching of the Bible without profound knowledge of the Semitic dialects and the latest results of German criticism.

We cannot do better than close with a striking testimony to the value of Genesis from a scholar whose books on the Old Testament have proved so valuable and convincing during recent years, Professor James Robertson, of Glasgow:--

It may be a matter of criticism to discover the joinings of the narratives, and to trace the literary process by which the book took its present shape; but it is of far deeper interest to note the existence of a pure light in the midst of the world's darkness. It is our familiarity with it that makes us overlook the significance of the early testimony of the Hebrew people to the truth of the one God. But when we reflect that, at a time when the great nations of antiquity were stumbling in the dark on this subject, or groping their way towards it, the Hebrew race had it as their oldest tradition, we cannot but acknowledge that they received it from God Himself. And of far higher importance is it to our faith than the anticipation of the results of modern science would have been, to be assured that from hoary antiquity the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has been guiding our race and preparing it for the fulness of the times.

For the purpose of general study as distinct from critical questions two works may be mentioned: *How to Read the Bible*, vols. i and ii., by the Rev. J. Urquhart, and *Genesis*, in the *Pulpit Commentary*, by Dr. Whitelaw. Critical questions can be most conveniently studied in the following works: (1) From the standpoint of modern criticism, in Dr. Driver's

Commentary. (2) From the conservative side, in Green's *Unity of the Book of Genesis*, Dr. Redpath's *Modern Criticism and Genesis* (a criticism of Dr. Driver), and Dr. Orr's *Problem of the Old Testament* (see Index s.v. Genesis).