

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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The primary audience of this commentary is, however, not the isolated scholar but the church. I am thankful for a father who loved the Bible and his children. I am equally grateful for supportive Christian communities in Toledo; Chicago; Niles, Michigan; Ancona, Illinois; Chester, England; and for the last dozen years our church family at Meridian Christian Church in Okemos, Michigan. I am

aware that these good Christian people will probably not agree with every idea expressed in this commentary, but I hope they will see my own passion for Genesis as Scripture for the church and catch a glimpse of its power to speak to us through the centuries.

I would not have been able to complete this work without the support of my family on both the Lantzer and Kissling sides. My sons, Joshua and Jeremiah, have made life full and rich. But my wife Cathy is owed debts of gratitude which I will never be able to repay. No one could have been a better or more supportive partner in ministry, in life, and in service to the church. I am still a little in awe of her Christian graciousness and servant's heart. Inadequate though the gift be, I dedicate this work to her.

# INTRODUCTION

Genesis is the first book of the Bible, the first book of the Christian Old Testament, and the first book of the Pentateuch. As such it provides the foundation upon which the rest of Scripture builds both historically and theologically. The interpretation of Genesis has been the subject of heated debate in the church throughout its history and for the last two centuries or so in particular. The questions of authorship, unity, and the authenticity of its depiction of creation and the early history of humanity are vexing questions that continue to divide Christians. While these questions are important to us, they were not the questions which Genesis was designed to answer. The author (or authors) does not identify himself. He tells us very little about how God created and never attempts to date creation. The author of Genesis, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, was not addressing the question of the theory of evolution in twenty-first-century Western culture. If Genesis is to speak to us, we must learn to put our questions on the sidelines and attempt to understand it on its own terms. If I have anything new to say about Genesis (it has been well served by commentators), it is based on a fundamental conviction that this wonderful book's message is best understood on its own terms. The recent history of the interpretation of Genesis has been noteworthy for the obviousness with which interpreters come to the text with their own contemporary agendas. I am not exempt from having agendas. I will, however, attempt to be forthright about them at the beginning of this commentary.

I write as a Christian Old Testament scholar, minister, and elder. For me Genesis is Scripture for the church. While the tools of critical scholarship are helpful and are used throughout this commentary, I deliberately choose to interpret the final, canonical form of the text. It is that canonical form which was accepted by God's

people as Scripture and as therefore useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness (2 Tim 3:16). The acceptance of Genesis as Scripture probably took place no earlier than the time of Ezra c. 458 B.C.<sup>1</sup> While much<sup>2</sup> of the Pentateuch was undoubtedly written much earlier, its widespread acceptance as Scripture for God's people evidently occurred only after the partial return from Babylonian exile.

The implied audience for the Pentateuch,<sup>3</sup> Israel newly in the promised land, was in remarkably parallel circumstances to the "original canonical audience," Israel recently returned to the promised land after exile. The Israel which publicly accepted the Pentateuch as Scripture in the time of Ezra had experienced the dispersion and exile of most of its people. Relatively speaking a small number had returned. Israel was a fledgling nation yet again. Israel was once again without a king. The priestly mediated worship at the sanctuary was vital to the unity and spiritual health of its people just as worship at the tabernacle had been for the nation at its beginnings. The danger of assimilating with those around them and thus compromising their loyalty to the one and only God was an ever-present danger.<sup>4</sup> The law, originally given to Israel at Mt. Sinai, was being reestablished as the norm for Israel's corporate life. By reading from the point of view of the original canonical audience it is as though we look over the shoulder of a postexilic Jew who is reading

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<sup>1</sup>While the Pentateuch had been available for some time, the fact that it (or at least a substantial part of it) had been lost prior to the time of Josiah (2 Kings 22:3-13) indicates that it did not at that time yet enjoy canonical status for most of the nation.

<sup>2</sup>For the evidence of updating in the Pentateuch see below.

<sup>3</sup>I am not suggesting that the Pentateuch in its final form is that early. See the discussion of date and authorship below.

<sup>4</sup>Notice how the problem of mixed marriages in Ezra 9 is described in terms which recall early Israel's temptation to intermarry with the original inhabitants of the land and thus adopt their gods: "The people of Israel, the priests, and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations, from the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. For they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and for their sons. Thus the holy seed has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands and in this faithlessness the officials and leaders have led the way." (Ezra 9:1b,2, NRSV).

the Pentateuch. He or she hears the narrative of Genesis and imagines himself or herself as a member of Israel just after entering the land. In a sense we are reading over the shoulder of someone (a post-exilic Jew) who is reading over the shoulder of someone else (a Jew recently come into the land under Joshua). We ask, "What would the Pentateuch mean for the postexilic Jew who is looking back on the original, founding events of the nation of Israel?" It is this "double reading over the shoulder" which I attempt in this commentary.

But I also read as a Christian who has "read the last chapter of the book." As a Christian I know how the story "turns out," and I cannot help but eventually read with the totality of Scripture in mind. In this commentary I will attempt to put this last stage of reading off until the text has been understood on its own terms in its final canonical form. I am also aware that I write as a white, American male and that sometimes my background, education, social class, gender, and race inevitably affect my reading. My only defense is that I have honestly tried to be aware of my own tendencies and not allow them to influence my interpretations.

My biggest agenda is my lifelong concern that the Old Testament actually speak to the Church today. While Christians of all sorts affirm the inspiration and authority of the Old Testament, in practice, most Christians ignore the Old Testament. My hope is that, as you read this commentary along with Scripture, you will catch some of the vitality and relevance that has been such a source of spiritual nourishment for me.

## **THE PURPOSES OF GENESIS**

Genesis functions as the introduction to the Pentateuch. As such it explains how it came about that the people of Israel arose and were called to be God's people. The nation to which the Pentateuch is addressed is about to enter the promised land. There they will face the culture and religion of the inhabitants of Canaan. The polytheistic nature religion of the Canaanites is a great temptation to Israel. The long stay in Egypt had had its impact on Israel. At the first sight of trouble they revert to polytheism. The plaster on the tablets of the Ten Commandments had not yet dried before Israel had broken several of them. The laws which Yahweh reveals to Israel

and which are recorded in the Pentateuch are designed to prevent Israel from falling into the destructive patterns of life present in Canaan. While Genesis certainly explains in historical terms how it came about that Israel arose and ended up in Egypt, it tells this story in a way that has particular relevance to its intended audience which is about to face the pressure of Canaan. For example, Genesis 1-11 functions to explain why the God who created the world ultimately began to work primarily through a single nation beginning with Abram. Moreover the way in which Genesis 1-11 describes creation, the Fall, and the Flood makes it obvious that the author has the needs of Israel in mind.

In ways that would have been obvious to the original audience, Genesis 1-11 tells its story of creation and flood as arguments against the creation and flood stories of the polytheistic world in which Israel lived. For example, the worship of the sun and moon as major deities in the ancient Near East and Egypt is well attested from the earliest times. The Hebrew words for “sun” (*šemeš*) and moon (*yārēah*) were often understood as the sun god and the moon god or goddess. Genesis, not wanting to suggest that God created the Sun god and the Moon god, used instead “the greater light” and “the lesser light” to refer to them. They are merely inanimate objects. They are not subordinate gods. In narrating the creation of the stars, which were widely believed to control the destiny of humankind, the author of Genesis 1 treats them as almost an afterthought. Unlike the myths with which Israel was familiar, creation is not portrayed as some sort of conflict between the high god and the natural world. There is no battle with the Sea. The “expanse” is not constructed from one half of the arched corpse of the goddess Tiamat. It merely separates the water in the clouds from the water in seas, lakes, and rivers. God has no resistance when creating. He merely speaks and it happens. Humankind is not created to provide the gods with food but to rule over creation as God’s vice-regent. The Flood is sent as a judgment on the violence and sexual immorality of the world, not because the noise of an overpopulating humanity disturbs the sleep of the gods! In Genesis matter is not eternal but is created “in the beginning.” It therefore has no power to rival the creator. The ancient myths envisioned creation as a battle with the forces of chaos. As a result, gradually, as chaos was defeated, things got better. An imperfect creation

improved over time. In Genesis the opposite is the case. A perfect (“very good”) creation is ruined by human sin and its consequences. Sin and its consequences get successively worse ultimately culminating in the universal judgment of the Flood. In all these ways (and in many others dealt with in the commentary) Genesis is critiquing the creation myths which were so much a part of the polytheistic worldview of the ancient Near East.

But Genesis also speaks to the situation of its implied audience by showing that the laws which the LORD gave Israel at Sinai were founded in creation and were operative in one form or another from the earliest times. Jacob and Abraham tithe even though they had not received the commandment to tithe, as Israel had. God ceases from creation and rests in chapter 2 and in so doing sanctifies the Sabbath. The law of the Sabbath originated in creation and is based on principles which are built into the nature of creation. The description of the garden of Eden reminds the intended audience of the recently constructed tabernacle, or to be more precise, vice versa. The offerings of Cain and Abel are described in terms reminiscent of the laws of sacrifice. The fact that Abel gave the firstborn while Cain merely gave some of his crops (and not the firstfruits) explains for the intended audience why Abel’s sacrifice is accepted and Cain’s is not. There is no record in Genesis of sacrifice being commanded or expected but Cain and Abel’s narrative seems to suggest that the laws of sacrifice are a natural response of humanity to God. Joseph has not received the commandment, “Thou shall not commit adultery,” and yet he knows it is a grievous sin against God. All of these examples (and there are numerous others) reassure the implied audience that God’s laws are based on universal principles.

While the specific laws given to Israel fit Israel’s situation in the promised land, Genesis reassures them that they are not the arbitrary imposition of a despotic deity. From the earliest times humanity at its best was obedient to their underlying principles. A form of what theologians sometimes refer to as “natural law” is operative. Genesis 26:5 says that “Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws.” The promise is extended to Isaac because of Abraham’s obedience to God’s law. The words for law here are the specific words (מִשְׁמַרְתִּי מִצְוֹתַי חֻקֹּתַי וְתוֹרֹתַי, *mishmartī mišôthay huqqôthay w<sup>a</sup>thôrôthây*). While the specific regulations of the

law were not revealed until Sinai, Abraham obeys even some of the specifics of the law as later revealed. This seems most naturally explainable in terms that the laws of Sinai are based on fundamental and earlier principles which were available to people like Abraham without specific revelation from God. Noah even knows the difference between clean and unclean animals. The duty of levirate marriage is presumed in the story of Judah's sons in Genesis 38.

## HOW TO READ GENESIS

The approach that I have adopted to reading Genesis in this commentary is discussed in detail below.

### READING GENESIS CANONICALLY

Genesis is read in this commentary as part of the canon of Holy Scripture. As a result it should be read both inter- and intratextually. In practice this means that the reader should be sensitive to the repeated echoes of earlier parts of the canon. This inter- and intratextual echoing is so pervasive that it is hard to imagine that it is accidental. It begins within Genesis itself. For example, the Flood story is echoed in many ways in the Sodom and Gomorrah narrative. What God did on a worldwide basis in the Flood he also did at Sodom. It is no accident that the chief character in each narrative is a righteous person in the midst of a violent and sexually exploitative time. In each case there is cataclysmic judgment. Each cataclysm is followed by the fall of the righteous person into a drunken state during which he is sexually abused by one of his children. The upshot of that abuse is a people who ultimately fall under God's curse. The narratives of the Flood and Sodom and Gomorrah are constructed in such a way as to invite the reader to notice the commonality and differences between these parallel narratives.

This intertextual echoing also happens between Genesis and the rest of the Pentateuch. For example the use of the words, "image" and "likeness" in the creation of humanity as God's representative ruler over creation would probably be read as one part of the anti-

idolatry polemic of the Pentateuch. God already has an “image”; he does not need for humanity to misrepresent him by making one of inert wood or ivory or gold. Israel is not to make an image of God because he already has an image. This intertextual reading spares the interpreter from many anachronistic speculations about just what the image of God in humanity really consists of.

Intertextual reading does not stop with the Pentateuch but carries over into the rest of the Old Testament. The turning point of the book of Genesis is the decision by God to cease working with all nations and focus his efforts on a single family and its descendants. That theme is the theological center of the Pentateuch. But the theme does not stop at the end of Deuteronomy with Israel outside of the promised land. The story is continued in the former prophets and forms the theological backdrop to the rest of the Old Testament. In the time of Solomon the promise seems on the verge of fulfillment, only for the foolish decisions of Solomon later in life to result in the loss of each aspect of the promise. The kingdom of twelve tribes splits; the Assyrians and then the Babylonians conquer the resulting halves of the kingdom; the land is lost, the people are scattered; the idea that the descendants of Abraham will be the channel of blessing to the world is a fading hope. The prophets are sent initially to try to turn the nation back to faithfulness to Yahweh. When they are unsuccessful, they are sent to announce judgment: dispersion and exile. But they also give pictures to Israel of a hopeful future. The poetic and wisdom literature helps Israel to live “in the meantime” as they face the challenges of Diaspora living. Genesis is read as Scripture by the Diaspora nation. They quite naturally would see a parallel between their own exile and the exile of Adam and Eve, for example.

The book of Genesis, for Christians, should also be read as part of the entire Bible including the New Testament. I include this last because the tendency is for Christians to project the New Testament’s ideas back into the Old Testament without concern for its original context. But a Christian does and should read the Bible as a whole. We know, for example, from the book of Revelation and elsewhere that the serpent is a manifestation of the devil. We should not lose track of the fact that in Genesis the serpent is a creature who has gone against God’s will. He sets off a conflict between the

human family and the animal kingdom that will only be ultimately resolved when the “lion lies down with the lamb” and animals no longer run in fear of humans (Gen 9:2). But we should also use the fuller and clearer revelation about Satan in the New Testament to inform our reading of Genesis 3. This sort of reading backwards into the Old Testament from the New flows from the conviction of the dual authorship of Scripture. Holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. The Bible thus is authored both by the men and women of God and by God himself. It therefore takes on a fuller sense when read in light of the end.

Reading the book of Genesis within its canonical context involves a constant interplay between the narrow and successively wider contexts. In this commentary I attempt to keep the entire book of Genesis, the Pentateuch, the Old Testament, and the New Testament in view without suppressing any of the meanings derived from the preceding contexts.

### **READING GENESIS HISTORICALLY**

While this is not intended to be a historically oriented commentary, it is irresponsible in my judgment to pretend that the Bible can or should be read without an understanding of its historical contexts. Information gained from Ancient Near Eastern history and literature, Semitic languages related to Hebrew, archaeology, anthropology and sociology, and even the history of the transmission of the Massoretic text is essential if Genesis is to be understood well. The creation and flood stories of the polytheistic cultures which surround Israel teach us much about the questions and concerns of the original audience. Anthropological studies of genealogies in contemporary “primitive” societies help us not to misread the “genealogical” materials in Genesis 4, 5, 10 and 11. Comparative Semitic philology helps us to make “best guesses” on the meaning of rare words in Hebrew, and knowledge of Hebrew syntax is necessary for any careful study. While the focus of this commentary is not on these issues, they provide essential information which protects us from the tendency to project our own culture and experience onto the text rather than reading the text on its own terms.

**READING GENESIS SENSITIVELY**

Genesis is a surprisingly subtle text and can only be read well with a sensitivity to that subtlety. This shows up, for example, in the many wordplays in the Hebrew text (e.g., the “craftiness” of the serpent and the “nakedness” of the man and the woman [i.e., *naïveté*] are linked by a rhyme in the Hebrew words) and the careful intertextual echoing of earlier or later parts of the narrative. My biggest concern with the traditional historical-critical methods is that they are often based on a rather blunt-fisted handling of a text which requires a scalpel. The seeming tensions in the text that we have often stumbled over require a more subtle reading. Brichto comments:

All the problems of pointless repetition, inconsistency and discrepancy fall away when we pay close attention to the subtle resources of biblical Hebrew (in regard to diction and syntax) and the author’s masterful deployment of these resources in his poetic repertory of narrative and dialogue: direct and indirect discourse, actual and implied, strict and free; shifts in point of view and perspective; depiction of events in a seemingly direct time flow, and the ambiguation of both events and their chronological order in episodic techniques such as the synoptic-conclusive/resumptive-expansive.<sup>5</sup>

The three episodes in which the Patriarch lies about his wife being his sister serve very different functions in the narrative. Traditional scholarship has assumed that one original (oral?) story has been filtered through the conflicting sources to yield an implausible text in which the Patriarchs repeat the same mistakes. But a careful and sensitive reading of these texts in their narrative contexts makes it clear that it is precisely the repetition of mistakes that is at the center of the point the narrator is making. While the biblical narrators rarely give explicit moral evaluations, they often expect the reader to do so in a way that is consistent with the ideology (theology) of the text. The seeming tensions in the narrative are often better explained as subtle indicators of a different point than they are evidence of the use of sources which have been so poorly edited

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<sup>5</sup>Herbert C. Brichto, *The Names of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 204.

that the rough edges still show. These chapters are full of perplexing texts. Why did Noah curse Canaan for what Ham did? Where did Cain's wife come from? Does Genesis approve of polygamy?

In some cases modern translations such as the NIV attempt to harmonize texts which seem to be in tension by translating them in ways that are unusual and beg the question. In Genesis 2:8 the NIV translates, "Now the LORD God *had* planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed." This avoids the seeming difficulty of God creating plants first before humanity in Genesis 1 while the man is created first and then the garden is formed followed by the creation of the woman in Genesis 2. The verb translated "had planted"<sup>6</sup> is ordinarily translated as a simple past with the connotation of narrative sequence. The NIV adopts a forced translation for the verb in order to smooth over what seems to be a rough spot in the two creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2 respectively. A more sensitive reading looks for another explanation rather than retranslating a well-understood Hebrew construction. Perhaps this text is an indication that strict chronological sequence is not always the goal of the creation accounts. Perhaps our questions about how and when and in what sequence creation happened are of little interest to the author. Or perhaps there is some other explanation. A reading which grants the possibility of more subtlety to the author often bears interpretive fruit, as I hope to show in the body of this commentary.

### READING GENESIS POETICALLY

Genesis is written almost entirely<sup>7</sup> in prose, not poetry. But at times that prose is so highly structured that it takes on some of the characteristics of Hebrew poetry. Herder called it "narrative poetic." For example the Flood narrative has a palistropic<sup>8</sup> structure where the events leading up to the center point of the narrative are paralleled with corresponding events in reverse order after the center point. The chart below demonstrates this.

<sup>6</sup>*Waw*-consecutive with the imperfect.

<sup>7</sup>Genesis 49 (Jacob's Blessing) and 4:23,24 (Lamech's speech) are examples of poetic inserts into a prose account.

<sup>8</sup>"Palistrophe" is another term for chiasm.

The Flood Narrative has 7 stages:

- 1) 6:11,12 – Divine speech – the decision to send the Flood and rescue Noah;
- 2) 6:13-22 – the command to build the ark;
- 3) 7:1-5 – the command to enter the ark
- 4) 7:6-24 – the floods come;
- 5) 8:1-14 – the floods abate;
- 6) 8:15-19 – the command to exit the ark
- 7) 8:20–9:17 – the building of the altar and the covenant

### The Flood Narrative as a Palistrophe

1] 6:1-12	2'] 9:1-17
2] 6:13-22	1'] 8:20-22
3] 7:1-10	3'] 8:15-19
4] 7:11-16	4'] 8:6-14
5] 7:17-24	5'] 8:1-5
6] 8:1	

The center of the palistrophe is found in 8:1 where God remembers Noah and begins the process of reversing the Flood. Poetry-like structures such as chiasm, palistrophe, parallelism, etc. are common in the prose narrative sections of the Hebrew Bible and have often been documented by scholars, especially in the last 20 years.<sup>9</sup> Brichto comments helpfully:

The poetical approach exposes the similarity in the imaginative patterns of narrative and structure deployed by artists in different times and places; it reveals how parallelism in narrative and parataxis in syntax, how narrative in the frame of the prescriptive and the prescriptive imbedded in narrative, enrich or deepen the author's message; so, also, how apparently pointless repetition, inconsistencies, and contradictions are actually significant elements in a single coherent design.<sup>10</sup>

I am not saying that Genesis 1–11 is poetry. It is not. But the

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<sup>9</sup>See my *Reliable Characters in the Primary History: Profiles of Moses, Elijah and Elisha*, JSOTSup 224 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), pp. 155-167, for a discussion of chiastic structure in the Elijah-Elisha narratives.

<sup>10</sup>Brichto, *Names*, p. x.

narrative style of the Hebrew authors uses poetry-like conventions to which modern authors must be sensitive. It is historical narrative, but it does not share the interests of modern historians.

### READING GENESIS THEOLOGICALLY

The dominant concerns of Genesis 1–11 are theological (or ideological), not historical or scientific. It is written to provide guidance to God’s people about how to conduct their lives as they face the pressures of conformity to the culture and religion of Canaan. Its center of interest seems to be God’s creational intentions for humanity and what he does in response to humanity’s refusal to submit to those intentions and go his or her own way. Genesis 1–11 prepares the reader for the promise to Abraham, making clear why it became necessary for the God of all the peoples of the earth to choose one man and his descendants as the channel through which he would bring humanity back to their created purpose and relationship with him. Genesis is designed to be read theologically and I have attempted to keep the focus there in this commentary.

### THE THEOLOGY OF GENESIS

Genesis, as the first book of the Pentateuch, shares the latter’s theme which has been summarized by David Clines as “the partial fulfillment – which implies also the partial non-fulfillment – of the promise to or blessing of the Patriarchs. The promise or blessing is both the divine initiative in a world where human initiatives always lead to disaster, and a re-affirmation of the primal divine intentions for man.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, God’s initial intentions in creation were frustrated by sinful human attempts to make life work without God. In Genesis 12 the divine strategy moves from dealing with the world at large to dealing with a single, chosen individual, Abraham, and his descendants. The promise which God makes to Abraham (12:1-3) includes a great nation of descendants, a land stretching from the

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<sup>11</sup>David J.A. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch*, JSOTSup 10 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1978), p. 29.

Euphrates to the river of Egypt (Genesis 15:18), a promise to protect Abraham and his descendants through blessing and cursing others based on their treatment of his descendants, and (most theologically significant) the assurance that all nations will receive God's blessing through their relationship with the people of Abraham. Genesis 1-11 fits in with this theme by explaining why it became necessary for God to shift strategy from the entire world to a single man and his descendants. Genesis 12-50 explains the promise and the early threats to its fulfillment brought about by human choices (initiatives) which invariably put the promise in jeopardy.

The rest of the Pentateuch explains how the descendants of Abraham became a great nation, how they were protected by God despite threats, both external and internal, and how they came to the verge of taking possession of the promised land. The actual possession of that land and the use of the nation to begin channeling God's blessing to all other nations is narrated in the ensuing biblical books, Joshua through 1 Kings 11.<sup>12</sup> The rest of the narrative in Kings explains how Israel successively lost each of the elements of the promise which seemed so near to fulfillment in 1 Kings 11. The nation is split into two parts beginning in 1 Kings 12. The ten northern tribes survive little more than 200 years, and their land is conquered and their people scattered. The two remaining tribes last only another century or so when their land is also conquered and many of their people exiled to Babylon. After the exile the vast majority of Abraham's descendants remain dispersed. Except for one brief period the land is never really under their complete control, and they are certainly not the channel of God's blessing to the world. The Old Testament ends with the promise unfulfilled and its readers looking forward to some fulfillment which only God can bring about. The nation has proven itself to lack the faithful perseverance necessary for God's mission to be fulfilled except through some extraordinary set of circumstances. As Christians we realize that it would take God becoming human in Christ (extraordinary circumstances indeed) for the fulfillment to begin.

Genesis 3-11 is thus a prologue to the story of the promise of God to Abraham. God chooses one family out of all humanity as the

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<sup>12</sup>See the discussion in my *A Sketch of Old Testament Theology* (Lansing, MI: GLCC Publication, 1999), ch. 3.

channel of his blessing to the world. This is necessitated by the three “Falls” in these chapters: in the garden, in the time leading up to the Flood, and in the Babel episode. In each case God responds with judgment: expulsion from the garden, destruction of all humanity in the Flood, and the dispersal of all humanity into people with different languages and cultures following Babel. Genesis 1–2 describes creation, humanity’s role in creation, and God’s purposes for humankind within that creation. As such it functions as the introduction to the entire Bible. The promise to Abraham is God’s strategy to regain his purposes in creation which were lost in the Fall.

### **GOD IN GENESIS 1–11**

God is portrayed in Genesis 1–11 as the all-powerful creator. He speaks the world into existence, and there is not a hint of resistance by the creation. This point which seems so obvious to us was strikingly original in the ancient world where the forces of what we call nature were actually manifestations of various gods who were in tension with each other. The God of Genesis is also a God of order. His creation follows a sort of logic in which the environment is created before it is filled with those things which inhabit it. The creation is designed to work in harmony, and it is only the destructive results of human sin which cause the disorder that Israel experiences. The world God creates is good and, with humanity at its head, very good. He is a God of goodness. He is a God who desires fellowship with his creatures. He is also a God who gives responsibility and freedom to humanity, making genuine fellowship possible. Humanity is responsible to rule over the world God created as his representatives. They are also responsible to obey God’s boundaries. When they do not, God shows his unimaginable holiness by bringing judgment upon his perfect creation, focused particularly on humanity and the serpent, those creatures who violated his boundaries. While God is a God of grace and forgiveness, his holiness will not be disregarded. God is also portrayed as a God who cares. The sexual perversion and violence of humanity prior to the Flood hurts God deeply to the extent that he grieved ever having made humanity and his heart was full of pain (6:5). The blood of violence cries out to God from the ground (4:10). God is also a God who loves life and

graciously gives it. The command to procreate is a blessing from God (1:28). Violence which destroys the gift of life is not something which God will tolerate. This is evident in his interactions with Cain, his decision to judge the world because of its violence prior to the Flood, and his warning about violence to Noah after the Flood (9:4-6). God is thus a God who has particular concern for the vulnerable who may be victimized by others.

But above all God is a God who persists in his purposes, and he will accomplish them – the sinful choices of humanity notwithstanding. While we perhaps see this most easily when we take into account the “metanarrative” of the entire Bible, its roots are in these early chapters of Genesis. God’s blessing on humanity to be fruitful and multiply and thus be able to rule over the earth as God’s representatives is *temporarily* frustrated by the choices of humanity to live in ways contrary to his intended purposes. This purpose will be accomplished with or without the cooperation of the majority of humanity. Humanity will end up in a new creation, in a new Eden as the book of Revelation makes clear. Even if God is forced to start over with creation and with a new Adam as he does in the time of Noah, God will find a way to accomplish his purposes. Most of the Bible deals with the plan God designed because of these inevitable failings of humanity. Because humanity as a whole persists in resisting God’s purposes, there is what might be called a “shift in strategy” in the time of Abraham. From then on God works primarily through the descendants of Abraham (Israel) as a means of bringing his blessing to all the world. That blessing is directly related to God’s creational blessings referred to in Genesis 1!

### HUMANITY IN GENESIS 1-11

The portrayal of humankind in Genesis 1-11 is supremely realistic and honest on the one hand and hopeful on the other. Humankind, male and female, is created to serve as God’s representative (his image) in ruling over creation on his behalf. To accomplish this they must be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. Humanity is the pinnacle of creation, and it is only after having created humankind that God’s evaluation elevates from “good” to “very good.” As the image of God, humanity is endowed with the capaci-

ties needed to fulfill their intended function in creation. They have the responsibility to guard and serve the creation (2:15) and the privilege to live in harmonious fellowship with the LORD and with the rest of creation, both animate and inanimate. The mental, physical, and spiritual capacities needed to live out their created purposes are graciously provided them by a good and gracious God. Among those gifts is the freedom to choose to respect or transgress God's boundaries.

But with the choice to stop trusting in the LORD's boundaries and to trespass those boundaries comes the destruction of the created harmony. Humanity now struggles with the terror of intimate fellowship with God. The unity of the original pair is turned to mutual blame. The first child of that marriage brutally and cynically murders the second child. Humanity's relationship with the physical creation changes from grateful and pleasant enjoyment to frustrating and difficult toil in order to eke out a living. The animal world is now in conflict with the world of man. While there is an attempt at restoring the relationship with the LORD (4:26) the general picture of humanity "east of Eden" is one of degenerating relationships with God, fellow humans, and creation. Murder is followed by polygamy and violence without consequences.<sup>13</sup> The escalating violence and sexual misconduct of humanity ultimately results in God's decision to send the Flood for "The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time" (Gen 6:5). Ironically while the Flood is designed to purge creation of the evil so bound up in the human heart, Genesis makes clear that nothing has fundamentally changed in humanity after the Flood: "Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done" (Gen 8:21b). Genesis views evil as bound up in the hearts of human beings. The problem of human sin and rebellion is so serious that not even a universal flood will stop it. Even after starting over with blameless Noah, there is another fall. Furthermore humanity, after being recommissioned at the end of the Flood, refuses to "fill the earth" in order to be able to represent God in ruling over the creation. Instead they gather to build the city

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<sup>13</sup>Cf. Lamech's distorted misuse of God's grace to Cain in Gen 4:24.

of Babel so as not to be scattered over the face of the ground in direct rebellion to God's expressed will. Humanity still bears the image of God (Gen 5:1-3) and has the same purpose (Gen 9:1,7). These chapters make clear that if God's ultimate intentions for humanity are to be realized, the strategy of commanding them and expecting obedience on a widespread scale will not work. Instead God's purposes will only be accomplished through chosen, faithful people who put their hope in God's Son.

### CREATION IN GENESIS 1-11

Genesis is positive about the material universe. It is "good" in God's estimation and with the addition of humanity to rule over it, "very good." Fruits and plants are readily available to feed animals and humans. Free access to sources of food which are both pleasing to the eye and good for food makes the process of "making a living" an enjoyable and pleasant one. In God's creation there is, prior to the Fall, no conflict between the human and animal kingdoms. Humanity's food and the food of animals are vegetarian in nature. There is no fear of wild beasts by humanity, nor are wild beasts afraid of humankind because they are not a food source. But ironically it is out of the animal kingdom itself (the serpent) that the decisions to rebel against God's boundaries come and with those decisions the consequent disruption of the created harmony. The decision of the original human pair to follow the serpent in direct disobedience to the Lord's expressed command and in cynical distrust of his motives results in distorted relationships of every sort. Humanity's relationship to the material universe is distorted. Instead of ruling over creation as God's representative and by God's standards, humanity will now only with great difficulty eke out a living. A weed is a useful plant in the wrong place, and the process of carefully managing plants in order to live will be complicated by many such useful plants in many wrong places. The original harmony of the human and animal kingdoms will be replaced by ongoing enmity between the descendants of the woman and the serpent. After the flood the animal kingdom is given as a potential regular<sup>14</sup> food source as a sort

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<sup>14</sup>The argument that humanity was entirely vegetarian (and not merely

of divine concession. But there is a compensating factor which prevents animals from being eaten into extinction; fish and animals will now fear humanity and respond by fleeing from or attacking them. The good creation of God, made to function harmoniously with humanity at its head, becomes the scene of great conflict and struggle. Serpent-inspired human rebellion against God and his standards results in a creation in which all of its parts are in conflict with the others, whether that be the physical creation, the animal kingdom, or humanity. The material creation itself is ultimately brought under God's judgment in the flood. The good gift of God is turned into the backdrop for conflict between God, the physical world, the animals, and man.

## THE STRUCTURE OF GENESIS

While modern scholars can and have speculated about the structure of Genesis, it is perhaps safest to use the structural markers given explicitly by the author. The phrase, “[these are] the generations of” (תּוֹלְדוֹת, *tôl<sup>o</sup>dôth*), is the most obvious structural marker in the book and (with the possible exception of 2:4a) is used as an introductory formula. Generally speaking there is alternation between narrative material and name list or genealogical material. This yields the following structure for the book:

1:1-2:4	Prologue (Narrative)
2:4-4:26	History of the Heavens and the Earth (Narrative with Genealogy)
5:1-6:8	Family History of Adam (Genealogy)
6:9-9:29	Family History of Noah (Narrative)
10:1-11:9	Family History of Noah's Sons (Genealogy with Narrative)
11:10-26	Family History of Shem (Genealogy)
11:27-25:11	Family History of Terah (Narrative)
25:12-18	Family History of Ishmael (Genealogy)
25:19-35:29	Family History of Isaac (Narrative)
36:1-37:1	Family History of Esau (Genealogy)
37:2-50:26	Family History of Jacob (Narrative)

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primarily so) prior to the flood is based on silence and disregards the fact that the first recorded descendants of humankind brought animal sacrifices.

Notice the following:

- 1) This is an introductory formula and only the dogmatic assertion of the Documentary Hypothesis would lead to fudging this in the single case of 2:4a. Further, having 2:4a refer exclusively back to 1:1–2:3 leaves 2:4b–4:26 without any introductory formula when the rest of the book is divided by the formula. Perhaps the safest conclusion is to regard 2:4 as a bridge backwards forming an inclusio with 1:1 to end the first major section *and* the introductory formula to the next section. While the documentary theory has traditionally regarded this formula as a characteristic of the putative Pentateuchal source P, it seems more likely that the author has used this formula intentionally to arrange his material.
- 2) Terah's family history is dominated by Abraham; Isaac's by Jacob; and Jacob's by Joseph. Why? Terah sets out for the land of Promise but never gets there, so the significant role that he could have played in the outworking of God's promise was given to his son who did have the faith to go to the promised land. Perhaps Isaac's role is taken by Jacob because he too is resistant to the promise to a degree (e.g., the attempt to bless Esau when he knew God had other plans). Perhaps Jacob's part is taken by Joseph because he was already the focus of the previous section and because the narrative is not just about Joseph, but about Jacob's sons and therefore it would be inappropriate to call it the family history of Joseph.
- 3) Notice that offshoots of the promise are written out by "mere" genealogies rather than narratives (Ishmael, Esau, Noah's sons).
- 4) Shem's genealogy also includes the narrative of Babel and is perhaps redundantly included because of the theme of the name [שֵׁם, *shēm*] in the Babel narrative and in the ensuing promise to Abraham.
- 5) Notice the alternation between genealogy with a few narrative comments and straight narrative with occasional genealogical information. Why? Certainly the "major" characters in the story are given narratives and the relatively speaking "minor" ones are given genealogies, but is there more? Perhaps the genealogies catch the narrative up, so to speak? They also by contrast give emphasis to the nonchosen sons of the Patriarchs (Ishmael, Esau) and Noah (Ham).

- 6) Genesis 36:1,9 repeats the phrase, “these are the generations of” for some reason which will be investigated later.
- 7) The genealogies are obviously crucial to the structuring of the book and we should expect to find good reasons for their existence other than an antiquarian interest on the part of the author of Genesis.
- 8) Cain’s line doesn’t even receive a genealogy that is a part of the structuring of the book and this fact may be an indication of the author’s negative evaluation of Cain and his line.
- 9) The genealogies are obviously written in light of the circumstances of Israel within the promised land. The origins of their neighbors and their enemies are explained, and this points forward to the later discussion in Numbers and Deuteronomy about “banned” and nonbanned peoples.

### THE STRUCTURE OF GENESIS 1-11

While the *tōl’ dōth* formula is the most obvious structural marker for the entire book of Genesis there is evidence that Genesis 1-11 has a sort of dual structure. Hess comments:

[T]he intent of the writer was to weave together an account of the creation of the world and of humanity using as a major technique doublets of repetitive patterns which serve to focus on a particular theme of the narratives and to provide the major means of moving the events forward into the history of a world known to the early readers of the text. Such a technique suggests a distinct literary form to the first eleven chapters of Genesis.<sup>15</sup>

The Flood, for example, is portrayed as a sort of de-creation followed by a re-creation. Noah is recommissioned as a sort of “new Adam.” After each creation story there is a story of a fall. Gary Rendsburg in his book *The Redaction of Genesis*<sup>16</sup> suggests the following structure for Genesis 1-11:

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<sup>15</sup>Richard S. Hess, “Genesis 1-2 in its Literary Context,” *TynBul* 41.4 (1990): 143-152.

<sup>16</sup>Gary A. Rendsburg (*The Redaction of Genesis* [Winona Lake, IN: Eisen-

A Creation, God's Words to Adam (1:1-3:24)	A' Flood, God's Words to Noah (6:9-9:17)
B Adam's Sons (4:1-16)	B' Noah's Sons (9:18-29)
C Technological Development of Mankind (4:17-26)	C' Ethnic Development of Mankind (10:1-32)
D Ten Generations from Adam to Noah (5:1-32)	E' Downfall: Tower of Babel (11:1-9)
E Downfall: The Nephilim (6:1-8)	D' Ten Generations from Noah to Terah (11:10-32)

He assembles an impressive list of intertextual echoes between the corresponding parts of the outline. His list of parallels between A and A' is summarized below. While some of his observations could be questioned and others are based on particular interpretations (e.g., the meaning of the "sons of God"), his case is solid. I would only add that Genesis 1-11 is structured to describe the two hopes of God for humanity – both of which did not come to fruition due to mankind's sinful choices. The Garden Strategy was to allow humanity maximum freedom and access to the presence of God. It came to an end through human choices to stop trusting and obeying the LORD. The Flood Strategy did not drive evil from the heart of humanity (Gen. 6:5; 8:21) and resulted in the Babel episode where humanity tries to build its own life in direct rebellion against the LORD. These two strategies make sense of the LORD's choice to elect a faithful individual (Abram) and his descendants (Israel) as the channel for the LORD to accomplish his purposes with humankind.

#### **Rendberg's Parallels between Sections A and A':**

1. *Ruach Elohim*, "Spirit of God" or "Wind from God" in 1:2 and *ruach* in 8:1 with *Elohim* as the immediately preceding word
2. *Tehom* "the deep" in 1:2 and 7:11; 8:2
3. In 1:9 God gathers the waters together and dry land becomes visible; in 8:13 the waters recede and dry land again becomes visible
4. God says "be fruitful and multiply" to humans in 1:28 and in 9:1 and to animals in 1:22 and 8:17

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brauns, 1986]) drawing on J.M. Sasson, "The 'Tower of Babel' as a Clue to the Redactional Structuring of the Primeval History (Gen. 1-11:9)," in *The Bible World: Essays in Honor of Cyrus H. Gordon*, ed. by G. Rendburg (New York: KTAV, 1980), pp. 211-219.

5. Humans are given mastery over animals in 1:28 and 9:2
6. The root *shabat* = “rest, cease” closes one creation account (2:2-3), and the same root occurs at the end of the Flood in 8:22
7. “Every living thing which creeps . . . according to its kind” in 1:21; “every creeper of the earth according to its kind” are brought on board the ark in 6:20 (7:14)
8. “Every winged fowl according to its kind” created on the fifth day in 1:21, and “the fowl according to its kind” are brought onto the ark in 6:20; 7:14
9. “The beasts of the earth according to its kind” are created in 1:25 and board in 7:14
10. The last group of animals created on the sixth day and to board the ark are “the cattle according to its kind” in 1:25 and 6:20; 7:14
11. “In the image of God he created/made man” in 1:27 and 9:6
12. “Male and female” in 1:27 and 6:19; 7:3,9,16
13. “God blessed them and said to them” in 1:28 and 9:1
14. After 1:28 and 9:1 descriptions of food are given in 1:29 and 9:3
15. “Make” and “complete” are collocated in both 2:1-2 and 6:16
16. The seventh day climaxes creation in 2:2-3 and “seven day” periods punctuate the Flood in 7:10; 8:10,12
17. In 2:5 Yahweh had not yet brought rain upon the earth; in 7:4 God will bring rain upon the earth
18. “In his nostrils the breath of life” in 2:7 and “the breath of the spirit of life in its nostrils” in 8:21
19. *Yašar* “form” in 2:7-8 and cognate noun in 8:21
20. “He closed off” man’s flesh in 2:21 and identical verb of closing of ark in 7:16
21. *mithhallek*, “moving” and *hithallek*, “moving, walking” in 3:8 and 6:9
22. A weapon ends the creation story (cherub’s sword in 3:24) and the Flood (bow in 9:13-16)

## GENESIS 1–11 AND MODERN SCIENCE

Genesis is not a treatise on science. It was not primarily written to answer questions about the origin of the physical universe. Throughout history many well-meaning Christians have read the Bible, and Genesis in particular, as though it was intended to give

scientific information about the how and when of creation. Whatever the reigning cosmology of the day, Genesis has been read to support it (or contest it!) – from the flat earth and geocentric universe to the earth, air, wind, and fire of Greek cosmology to the Big Bang and evolution of contemporary scientific theory. In general these readings have been unsuccessful and problematic and have sometimes brought disrepute on the Bible and the church. Genesis is concerned with the who and why of creation.

Further, Genesis itself shows little interest in the date of creation. The first time the Bible adds up time periods to date an event chronologically is in 1 Kings 6:1 where Solomon is said to have begun building the temple 480 years after Israel came out of Egypt. The genealogies of Genesis should not be used to date creation or the Flood within the Bible. The story of the attempt to date creation from the Bible up to and including the time of Bishop Ussher is a classic example of trying to get answers from texts not designed to give them.<sup>1</sup>

It is, of course, natural for us to be curious about the when and how of creation. In approaching Scripture with such questions, however, several cautions are necessary. First we should be careful about reading the statements of Genesis about creation as though they were written by a contemporary who has our interests in mind. It is all too easy to twist the words of Genesis into scientific statements which support a theory that we are convinced is accurate. Hugh Ross's reading of Genesis 1 as an account of the Big Bang is one of several examples discussed below. Another example is the vapor canopy theory which reads Genesis 2:5 as though it actually said that there was no rain prior to the Flood. We should be cautious of reading scientific information "between the lines of" Genesis.

The history of the attempts at reconciling Genesis with current cosmology should also give us pause. Every generation is tempted to think that its cosmological theories are the final word. Every generation so far in human history has evidently been wrong about that! It borders on hubris to assume that our generation is any different.

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<sup>1</sup>For a sympathetic but realistic account of Ussher see, E.H. Merrill, "Chronology," *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. by T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), pp. 113-122 (especially p. 118).

Science is provisional. Like all human attempts at understanding any extremely complex system, it is prone to make mistakes. Since the famous work of Thomas Kuhn on the history of science and paradigm shifts, it has been obvious that scientists, like all other humans, tend to be swayed by currently popular theories and do not merely “weigh the facts.” The church should be careful of wedding itself too closely to any scientific theory about cosmology. Those theories keep changing. It should be even more careful of “finding” confirmation of such theories in the Bible.

We should also be careful of turning our own preferred harmonizations between science and Scripture into dogma or doctrine. Since Genesis does not give us dates for creation or detailed discussions of exactly how God created, those matters must remain in the realm of opinion and not be used to judge the Christian character or intelligence of those with whom we disagree. They certainly should not cause division in the church.

Perhaps most important of all, our interest in the questions of the when and how of creation must not prevent us from hearing the central concerns of the early chapters of Genesis. Discussions of, e.g., creation vs. evolution and the reliability of dating methods are not the concern of Genesis. Genesis is concerned with who God is and who we are as his creations.

There are several currently popular attempts to reconcile scientific knowledge with the account in the early chapters of Genesis. Some of these are somewhat forced, and I would conclude that ultimately none of them is without its problems. We must be careful not to allow our desire to have answers to our questions drown out the questions which this key portion of Scripture wants to ask and answer. At the end of the day it is perhaps preferable to say that Genesis does not address questions such as the exact “how” of creation nor the “when” of creation in scientific terms. In any case, we should, given the complexity of the issues, hold our opinions humbly.

### THE GAP THEORY

This theory, made famous in its popular version by the Schofield Reference Bible, argues that Genesis 1:2 ought to be translated, “The earth *became* formless and void.” The idea is that some unex-

plained event resulted in the earth, although created in perfection in verse 1, becoming empty (void) and without organization (formless). The speculation then follows that the implied event was the rebellion of Satan and his angels and the subsequent judgment of God against the creation because of that rebellion. This theory is convenient in that it allows for the fossil record. There was a world that lasted for untold ages prior to this one which the fossil record reflects. But this theory fails on several accounts. To begin with the Hebrew word *hāyāh* almost always is some form of the verb “to be.” The translation “to become” is rare at best with clear examples difficult to find, and none of the possible examples really parallels Genesis 1:2. Second, this requires one to read quite a lot into this passage. There is no mention of the fall of Satan and his angels or the resulting judgment of God upon creation. All of this is based on pure supposition. Third, interpretations which seem to be motivated by the desire to avoid conflict with contemporary views not addressed by the original author(s) are inherently suspect. The original audience had no concerns regarding the reconciling of the fossil record with the account of creation in Genesis 1. They knew nothing of the fossil record, of radiometric and other forms of dating, of Darwin and neo-Darwinian theories, etc. Fourth, this is not the natural way to understand the text, which makes perfect sense when translated in the traditional way.

### **SAILHAMER ON THE CREATION OF THE SUN AND MOON<sup>18</sup>**

One of the seeming anomalies which contemporary readers see in Genesis 1 is the fact that light is created before the sun and moon. Since strong scientific evidence leads contemporary readers to assume that light on earth only comes from the sun (the moon reflects the sun’s light) and other stars, we wonder how there could be light on day 1 and not hear of the creation of the sun or moon until day 4. Sailhamer has suggested a way around this difficulty. He argues that Genesis 1:14 be translated, “Let the lights in the expanse of the heavens be to separate day from night, and let them be for

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<sup>18</sup>John H. Sailhamer, *Genesis*, Expositor's Bible Commentary, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), pp. 33-34.

signs and for seasons and for days and for years.” His suggestion is that the sun, moon, and stars were created on day 1 but only given their designated function within the created order on day 4. This purportedly resolves the anomaly. While this translation is possible syntactically in Hebrew, I see little reason to adopt it. The ordinary way to read the construction in Hebrew is in the traditional way. Unless there are compelling internal reasons for translating this construction in this unusual way, there is little to commend the suggestion. Once again this reading seems to be motivated by a desire to harmonize Genesis 1 with modern science. This desire, understandable though it be, results in readings that may be a little forced.

### **THE DAY-AGE THEORY**

This theory suggests that the days of Genesis 1 are not literal days but correspond to great epochs of time. While Genesis presents the acts of creation as occurring within a single week, in fact the word “day” is not to be taken literally. Thus the evidence for the great age of the universe is not in conflict with the biblical creation account. One potential problem with this view is that the scientific data for the age of the universe does not suggest uniform periods of time over which the physical universe develops whereas Genesis would seem to suggest six periods of equal time. But a bigger issue is the strained exegesis which must take place and the assumption, once again, that Genesis is even designed to answer questions about how the universe was created. The six days of creation along with the Sabbath rest are given to Israel to show them how to live their lives in the promised land. The recently released slaves of Egypt must learn to work and rest and to provide rest to those who depend upon them – animals, servants, hired workers, etc. The pattern of creation described in Genesis 1 is not designed to answer questions about how and when.

### **THEISTIC EVOLUTION**

Often related to the day-age theory is the concept of theistic evolution. This hypothesis suggests that God used the Big Bang and evolution to produce the world and that process is described in layman’s

terms in Genesis 1. Zimmer provides the following account of how he thinks the Evolutionary Periods correspond to the days of creation.<sup>19</sup>

Day	Corresponding Evolutionary Period
One	Formation of solar system and ignition of sun
Two	Accretion of planet earth
Three	Appearance of continents and the earliest life which was photosynthetic and propagated through DNA
Four	Reduction of greenhouse effect by weathering of continental rock and the transformation of the atmosphere by photosynthesis from anoxic to oxidative
Five	The beginning of the eukaryotes to the end of the age of dinosaurs
Six	The age of mammals

Zimmer further describes the correspondence between the account of the creation of humanity in Genesis 1 with the current account of human evolution:<sup>20</sup>

Verse	Action	Resemblance
26	declaration of intention	<i>Homo habilis</i> and <i>erectus</i>
	declaration of dominion	Oldowan and Acheulean stone tools used for scavenging
27	creation	Appearance of <i>Homo sapiens sapiens</i> and <i>neandertalis</i> in fossil record: single source evolution predicted by molecular biology
28	blessing and declaration of dominion	Late Paleolithic
29	plants given to humans	Epipaleolithic/Archaic Neolithic
30	fodder to the animals	Developed Neolithic: "Neolithic Agricultural Revolution"

But once again, we must be skeptical of such approaches. For example, day four is hardly a description of the reduction of the greenhouse effect and the transformation of the atmosphere from anoxic to oxidative. One arrives at such conclusions only by forced exegesis

<sup>19</sup>J. Raymond Zimmer, "The Creation of Man and the Evolutionary Record," *Perspectives of Science and the Christian Faith* (1996): 18.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 24.

which already has the desired results in mind. Genesis is turned into a science textbook instead of Scripture for God's people Israel.

### YOUNG EARTH CREATION

According to this view the Bible asserts that creation happened in a six-day period of time some four to ten thousand years ago. The genealogical materials in Genesis 5 and 11 can be used to reconstruct the age of the universe chronologically. While God created the world with the appearance of age,<sup>21</sup> in fact it is of very recent origin. Dating methods which suggest otherwise are fundamentally flawed by uniformitarian assumptions about physical processes and in other ways.

The primary strength of this view is that it seems to many readers (believers and nonbelievers) the natural way to read the text. If a text like this about creation were written today, it would certainly seem to imply a very young earth and a literal six-day creation. According to this view the doctrine of the Bible's infallibility must override any current scientific theory. Since history has taught us that such theories tend to be discarded over time, the church should listen to Scripture and not the current cosmological speculation. Those who have constructed such theories today were and are often suspicious of the miraculous and have allowed their antiscientific biases to affect their interpretations of the physical data.

A concern that I have with this view is not with the theory itself, but the fact that some forms of it are based on strained interpretations of the biblical text.<sup>22</sup> For example, the theory that the first rainbow that ever occurred happened only after the Flood is based on a questionable reading of the Genesis account. The vapor canopy which is supposed to have covered the earth prior to the Flood and affected the seeming ages of the physical universe is the product of what I believe to be a questionable exegesis of the Genesis account.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>For example, trees were full-grown, not seedlings. Adam was a grown man, not an embryo or infant.

<sup>22</sup>For a more thorough discussion of the concerns that Dr. Kissling has with this position, please feel free to request his contact information through the publisher's offices (1-800-289-3300).

<sup>23</sup>See my "The Rainbow in Genesis 9:12-17: A Triple Entendre?" *SCJ* 4 (2001): 249-261.

Is Genesis interested in scientific questions and descriptions? We must keep in mind that Genesis was primarily written to instruct Israel as they faced the challenges of living in faithfulness to Yahweh in the midst of the polytheistic temptations of Canaan. It was the creation myths of the Canaanites which it attacks, not contemporary theories about the origin of the universe.

### INTELLIGENT DESIGN

The most recent attempt to reconcile Christian faith and modern science is the intelligent design movement. While writers and thinkers with a variety of viewpoints have aligned themselves with “Intelligent Design Theory,” there are certain characteristic ideas. One key theme is that there is no attempt by most proponents to read Genesis as a science textbook, although the work of Hugh Ross would be an exception.<sup>24</sup> Buoyed by the Hubble Telescope confirmation that the Oscillating Universe theory is finally dead, intelligent design theorists contest the cogency of the current “scientific” creation story, the Big Bang followed by evolution. Instead, intelligent design thinkers challenge contemporary science at the level of its underlying naturalistic presuppositions. Accepting the typical 13-14-billion-year age for the universe, intelligent design thinkers argue that there is simply not enough time for the universe to have evolved by chance and mere naturalistic processes given the complexity of life and the mathematical odds of so many factors necessary for the emergence of life as we know it actually coming together to produce

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<sup>24</sup>Hugh Ross (*The Creator and the Cosmos*, 2nd ed. [Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1993], p. 15) tells of his own experience of reading Genesis 1 in an attempt to prove it to be myth, only to come to the opposite conclusion: “Instead of another bizarre creation myth, here was a journal-like record of the earth’s initial conditions – correctly described from the standpoint of astrophysics and geophysics – followed by a summary of the sequence of changes through which Earth came to be inhabited by living things and ultimately by humans. The account was simple, elegant and scientifically accurate. From what I understood to be the stated viewpoint of an observer on Earth’s surface, both the order and the description of creation events perfectly matched the established record of nature. I was amazed.” I don’t see how someone could be “on Earth’s surface” observing the Big Bang when there would be no earth to stand on at that time.

it. I am no scientist and therefore have no expertise to evaluate the many arguments for intelligent design in the material universe. Certainly a Christian does not easily recognize a God who winds the universe up and leaves it to evolve in and of itself. Chance, time, genetic mutations, etc. are not, in my judgment, adequate explanations by themselves for the universe we currently inhabit. If intelligent design leads thoughtful people to consider the reasonableness of faith, I am in favor of it. When, however, there is an attempt (as in Ross's case) to find the story of the Big Bang followed by evolution in Genesis 1, I must object. It hardly seems plausible that the original audience would have read the words in the way that Ross does. Genesis 1 made sense to the original audience. That sense was not a disguised description of the Big Bang followed by evolution.

### **CONCLUSION ON GENESIS AND SCIENCE**

Genesis is not a scientific treatise and does not attempt to describe how or when the universe was created. The narrative of creation was designed to contest the polytheistic creation (and flood) stories of Israel's neighbors. To read the words as some sort of disguised scientific account is to read in a forced and perhaps question-begging way. Worse, it is a reading that brings our questions to the forefront before it has humbly asked of this marvelous text what questions are important! The answers to those questions is the purpose of Genesis. We miss its teaching when our questions drown out the questions and answers of the text in its original setting.

### **THE AUTHORSHIP OF GENESIS**

Traditionally Jews and Christians have regarded the Pentateuch as authored by Moses. It was certainly called the "Torah (or Law) of Moses" or even just "Moses" within the time of the Old Testament itself (Mal 4:4; Neh 8:1) as well as in the New Testament (Luke 24:44; John 7:19). Jesus even explicitly says that Moses (the person) wrote about him (John 5:46). But nowhere does the Pentateuch nor other Scripture identify Moses as its author. Certainly Moses would have been capable of writing and is said to have actually written sig-

nificant sections of the Pentateuch (Exod 34:27; 17:14; 24:4; Deut 31:9,24; Num 33:2; Exod 25:16,21-22). But there are a series of texts within the Pentateuch itself which makes Mosaic authorship of the entire Pentateuch problematic. These passages have been discussed throughout the history of the church and can be categorized as *post-Mosaica* (things written after the time of Moses) and *a-Mosaica* (things which may or may not be contemporary with Moses but could not have been written by him).

### POST-MOSAICA

To begin with, the death and burial of Moses are recorded at the end of Deuteronomy. While it is theoretically possible that God could inspire Moses to write prophetically of his death, there seems to be no reason to suppose this other than the desire to support a theory of authorship which Scripture never explicitly affirms. Furthermore the evaluation of Moses' life immediately after the record of his death and burial seems to reflect a time long after the death of Moses: "No prophet like Moses ever arose in Israel whom the LORD knew face to face" (Deut 34:10). This text seems to come from a period long after the death of Moses and perhaps even after the end of the era of prophecy. It seems to assume that prophets have come (and are no longer coming?), but none of them was like Moses. Moses in Deuteronomy 18:15-18 prophesied that a prophet like him would arise. Deuteronomy 34:10 says that no such prophet ever arose in Israel. This seems to suggest a period after the cessation of prophecy in the postexilic period and calls upon the reader to look to the future messianic era when prophecy would return and Moses' prophecy of a prophet like him would be fulfilled.<sup>25</sup> Even if we do not assume a setting after the cessation of prophecy for this text, it clearly indicates a time long after the death of Moses and after the sending of at least some prophets. Clearly Moses did not write at least this section of the Pentateuch.

Another example of *post-Mosaica* is found in Genesis 14:14 which describes Abram's pursuit of the northern coalition of armies

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<sup>25</sup>Cf. 1 Macc. 9:27. I am aware that not all Jews accepted the idea of the cessation of prophecy.

which had taken Lot, his nephew, as a captive. Abram is said to have pursued them “as far as Dan.” Dan is one of Jacob’s sons, the great-grandson of Abram. The Danites have no place in the promised land until after the time of the conquest under Joshua. Furthermore the northern location of Dan does not come about until long after the conquest. The tribe of Dan was initially given an allotment in the southern portion of Israel near the Philistine coastal strip (Josh 19:40-46). Unable to control that allotment they moved to the extreme northern boundary of the land and conquered a northern city called Laish and renamed it Dan (Josh 19:47; Judg 18). It is to this northern city that Abram pursued Lot’s captors. This could only be written by someone well after the time of Moses since he died before the initial conquest of the land when the Danites had neither received an initial inheritance nor moved to a northern location.

In Genesis 36:31 we read, “These are the kings who reigned in Edom before any Israelite king reigned.” Since Israel had no kings until at least 200 years<sup>26</sup> after the death of Moses this passage is post-Moses. Genesis 11:28,31 refer to the city of Ur as “of the Chaldeans.” A Chaldean dynasty came to power over Babylonia in 626 B.C. and the Chaldeans did not even begin to penetrate Babylonia until c. 1000 B.C. Clearly this is post-Moses. In fact this comment was probably added at a later time to clarify to postexilic readers that the Ur in southern Mesopotamia was meant, not the possible northern Ur.<sup>27</sup>

### A-MOSAICA

The evaluation of Moses’ life in Deuteronomy 34 is not only post-Moses; it is also not something Moses would have written about himself, thus the term *a-Mosaica*. The most famous example of a-Mosaica is Numbers 12:3, “Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth.” Humble men do not brag about their humility! This does not seem to be something which Moses would have written, although a contemporary could have.

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<sup>26</sup>Or 400 years if one subscribes to the early date for the Exodus and Conquest. See J.J. Bimson, *Redating the Exodus and Conquest*, JSOTSup 5 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1978).

<sup>27</sup>K.A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), p. 316.

Three times in the opening chapters of Deuteronomy Moses lays responsibility for God's refusal to allow him into the promised land at the feet of Israel. "Because of [Israel] the LORD became angry with [Moses] and said, You shall not enter it, either" (1:37). Although Moses pleaded with the LORD (3:23) "because of [Israel] the Lord was angry with [Moses] and would not listen to him" (3:26). "The LORD was angry with [Moses] because of [Israel], and he solemnly swore that [Moses] would not cross the Jordan" (4:21). The author/final editor of Deuteronomy sees it differently:

On that same day the LORD told Moses, "Go up into the Abarim Range to Mount Nebo in Moab across from Jericho and view Canaan. . . . There on the mountain that you have climbed you will die and be gathered to your people . . . This is because you broke faith with me in the presence of the Israelites at the waters of Meribah Kadesh in the Desert of Zin and because you did not uphold my holiness among the Israelites. Therefore you will see the land only from a distance; you will not enter the land I am giving to the people of Israel" (Deut 32:48-52).

This does not seem to have been written by Moses who blames the nation for his own personal destiny.

It seems clear that, at least in its final form, Moses did not write the entire Pentateuch. This, however, does not mean that the bulk of the Pentateuch comes from later editors. Certainly there was updating of place names and a few explanatory comments similar to the updating of contemporary Bible translations.<sup>28</sup> But that is very different from suggesting that the bulk of Genesis is written more than a millennium after the events which it records.

## THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF GENESIS

If Moses did not write all of the Pentateuch, does that mean that it does not reflect accurately upon the times it writes about? Is the Pentateuch a retrojection of very late traditions onto the past which

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<sup>28</sup>The revision in 1995 of the New American Standard Bible comes to mind as a parallel.

cannot be trusted to give us reliable information about that past? For a variety of reasons I would argue that the answer to this question is “no.” While the Pentateuch (Genesis included) was certainly updated, there is evidence that it relies on very ancient sources which do reflect the time period described.

Sarna, for example, has assembled a long list of details from Genesis which ill fit later times in the history of Israel and argue strongly for the authenticity of at least the traditions lying behind the text of Genesis. If Genesis is a *de novo* creation of a much later time period, the author has a remarkable ability to present the past in a way that seems authentic. For example, after the revelation of God’s name, Yahweh, during the call of Moses, the people of Israel begin to give names to their children which have Yahweh’s name as a part of them (Yahu names). Sarna: “Of 38 names for the Patriarchs and family members, 27 are never found elsewhere in the Bible and most are compounds of El; there are no Yahu names, consistent with Exod 6:2-3.”<sup>29</sup> Prior to Exodus 3:6 Israel’s deity is referred to as the “God of your (singular) or his father.” After this time “he is God of your (plural) or their fathers” consistent with the fact that God is making explicit his covenant with the nation as a whole. Genesis has several unique or rare names for God prior to the revelation of Yahweh’s name in the time of Moses — El Elyon, El Shaddai, El-Roi, El Olam, El Bethel, El-elohe-Israel, Elohe-ha-shamayim, etc. Since El is the short form of the more generic (and not specifically Israelite) word for God, this is what one would expect in an era prior to the revelation of Yahweh’s name.

There are also a series of practices in which the Patriarchs of Genesis participate which are later prohibited by the law. One wonders why a late author of Genesis would not try to cover up these rather embarrassing facts. Sarna (p. xv) notes,

The matsevah [sacred stone] is sternly forbidden in Lev 26:1 and Deut 16:21-22, yet the Genesis narratives do not hesitate to ascribe its use to Jacob. Similarly Abraham planted a tamarisk tree and worshiped there (Gen 21:33). It seems odd that this would not be altered in a later age. The Patriarchs never do so

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<sup>29</sup>Nahum Sarna, *Genesis*, JPS Torah Commentary (Jerusalem: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), p. xvi.

at Jerusalem, which is odd if the authors/sources of Genesis come from the time of the monarchy. . . . Jacob was married to two sisters even though this is outlawed in Lev 18:18. The illicit union of Judah and Tamar leads directly to David; again something one would assume would be covered up by later authors. Intermarriage by Judah, Simeon, and Joseph brings no approbation as in Deut 7:3; Exod 34:16.<sup>30</sup>

Further, using a concubine when the legitimate wife was barren and the passing over of the firstborn is illegal according to Deuteronomy 21:15-17, but these actions are recorded as done by the Patriarchs.

Genesis also has unique features which are hard to explain on a late date. Oath-taking symbolized by placing a hand under the thigh (Gen 24:2,3,9; 47:29) is unique to Genesis. Only in Genesis is Hebron called Mamre, and Paddan Aram rather than Aram used. In fact the Arameans were later enemies of Israel, but are friends and family in Genesis. Writing is altogether absent even in the purchase of the cave of Machpelah (Genesis 23), unlike later practice (Jer 32:10-14). Genesis 15:19-21 lists ten nations in Canaan which are to be displaced, but the Philistines are left out. This may well reflect the fact that the later Philistines had not yet migrated from Caphtor (Amos 9:7) in the thirteenth century B.C. By the time of the conquest the Kenites and Kennizites are not conquered but are friends and are absorbed into Israel even though they were initially listed. Caleb was a Kennizite. Esau (also called Edom) as the brother of Jacob (also called Israel) seems odd if invented at a later time in light of the long hostility between the two nations during the exile and after (cf. Obad). The story of Simeon's participation with Levi in deceiving the Shechemites (Genesis 34) and their consequent curse by Jacob (Gen 49:5-7) precede Simeon's absorption into Judah soon after the conquest (Josh 19:9). And why would later authors invent Reuben and Manasseh, the firstborn sons of Jacob and Joseph, who nevertheless serve a more marginal role in the history of the nation? Sarna's conclusion is persuasive:

The cumulative effect of all this internal evidence leads to the decisive conclusion that the patriarchal traditions in the Book of Genesis are of great antiquity. This assertion is quite inde-

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<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. xv.

pendent of the external material culled from thousands of documents uncovered in the towns of Mari, Nuzi, Alalakh, and Ugarit, as well as in other ancient sites in the Near East. These texts issue from the second millennium B.C.E. and provide numerous parallels with patriarchal traditions. . . . The many different kinds of internal biblical evidence cited above reinforce the case viewing Genesis as an authentic mirror of early historical tradition and weaken a claim of later inventiveness.<sup>31</sup>

Kenneth Kitchen's recent work, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, gives even more evidence for the plausibility of the setting of Genesis. While most of this is of more direct relevance for the next volume of this commentary, what he notes for Genesis 12–50 applies to the book as a whole. He notes that such facts as long-distance marriages (Genesis 24), east delta residences of Pharaohs, eastern alliances of kings and Elamite intervention west of the Euphrates (Genesis 14), and the price of male slaves being 20 shekels all occurred specifically in the early second millennium, during the time of the Patriarchs and not in other periods.<sup>32</sup> He concludes:

It should be clear . . . that the main features of the patriarchal narratives either fit specifically into the first half of the second millennium [2000–1500 BC] or are consistent with such a dating; some features common to that epoch and to later periods clearly must be taken with the early-second-millennium horizon. In contrast to this, data in these narratives that do clearly originate from well after circa 1600 are relatively few and are merely late updates.<sup>33</sup>

Genesis is no attempt to write a history book in anything like a modern sense. This does not mean that it has no interest in what actually happened. Like all pieces of literature it must be evaluated on its own terms with its own purposes in mind, not in ours. Merrill helpfully comments (p. 9):

It is therefore appropriate to describe Genesis as “sacred history” or an account of history with a preeminently theological slant and agenda. This by no means undercuts its reliability as “real”

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., xvii.

<sup>32</sup>Kitchen, *Reliability*, Ch. 7.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 372.

history but it does necessitate a sensitive hermeneutic, one that takes account of the human author's own special objectives and perspectives as he, led by the Holy Spirit, addressed his own generation about the meaning of their current situation and the historical events that brought them to where they are.<sup>34</sup>

## THE DOCUMENTARY HYPOTHESIS<sup>35</sup>

Since the time of French court physician Jean Astruc, western critical biblical scholarship has been engaged in an ongoing debate regarding the unity and authorship of the Pentateuch. Astruc noticed that Genesis seemed to begin with two creation accounts. The first (Genesis 1:1-24a) used the Hebrew word Elohim (God) for deity and described how the transcendent creator spoke the world into existence in an orderly fashion. The second account (Genesis 2:4b-24) referred to deity as Yahweh Elohim (LORD God) and spoke in anthropomorphic terms of God creating the male from the dust of the ground and breathing into his nostrils the breath of life. He then realizes that the male is lonely and creates the woman from the side of the man. Astruc argued that these differences indicated that Moses used sources in the composition of the book of Genesis.

Eichhorn, however, built upon Astruc's work to argue against the unity of Genesis suggesting that it was composed of multiple conflicting sources which were pasted together late in Israel's history. The first of these sources (later known as 'P' for priestly) was found in the first creation account and particularly in the book of Leviticus. The second source (known as 'J' for Jahwist) was famous for using the special covenant name for Israel's God prior to its revelation to Moses in Exodus 6. J was believed to have come from the southern kingdom of Judah. The third source (later known as 'E') used Elohim to refer to deity prior to the Exodus and derived from the northern kingdom of Israel. The fourth source ('D') was found mainly in the book of Deuteronomy.

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<sup>34</sup>Eugene H. Merrill, "The Peoples of the Old Testament according to Genesis 10," *BibSac* 154 (Jan-Mar 1997): 9.

<sup>35</sup>See the fuller account in Ronald E. Clements, *One Hundred Years of Old Testament Interpretation* (Guildford, UK: Lutterworth, 1976).

DeWette helped supply a chronological framework for the authorship of the putative sources by noticing that the book of the law found in Josiah's day seemed remarkably like the book of Deuteronomy and not like Exodus, Leviticus, or Numbers. DeWette suggested that Deuteronomy was not just discovered in 622 B.C. but was actually written as a sort of pious fraud to support the revival of Josiah. With the source 'D' now having a secure date, critical scholars began the business of hypothesizing about the possible dates for the other three sources of the Pentateuch.

At first it was suggested that the four sources be arranged PJED. But the work of Graf and Wellhausen moved P to the end of the sequence yielding JEDP. Adopting the evolutionary thought of the last half of the nineteenth century with an almost anti-Semitic<sup>36</sup> distaste for anything priestly and ritualistic and a rather naïve acceptance of the theory of the golden age, Wellhausen portrayed the growth of the Pentateuch as mirroring the experiences of the nation throughout its history. Beginning with polytheism Israel's religion evolved through henotheism (the worship of one god without denying the existence of others) to monotheism, reaching its spiritual and intellectual peak in the time of David and Solomon. This golden era was represented in the Pentateuch by the source J. After the split of the kingdom the northern source E followed in the 8/9th century B.C. D, which was authored to support Josiah's reform, followed in the late 7th century. D, with its theology of blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience, is the first indication of a sort of spiritual degeneration from the grace-oriented traditions of J and E. But it was in the postexilic period, when the priests were in control, that the legalism of late Judaism began to develop. The source P purportedly comes from this time and represents a serious decline from the golden age. This view of Pentateuchal origins was the consensus view of critical scholarship until the 1970s and is still dominant in many scholarly circles.

More recent Pentateuchal scholarship has attacked this consensus on a number of fronts. To begin with, recent scholarship has asked, So what? Even if the documentary hypothesis or something

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<sup>36</sup>I am not suggesting that Wellhausen himself was anti-Semitic or that he would have supported the development in Germany of Nazism. But he, like all of us, was a child of his times and his background.

like it were proven to be true, the text which was accepted as Scripture is the text we have. Certainly sources were used but that does not preclude inspiration nor even historical reliability. Secondly, recent scholarship has questioned the certainty with which earlier scholarship has argued for the documentary hypothesis. For example, how can one be so certain about a theory which presumes simplistic evolutionary progress? Such confidence in smooth progress is understandable in the late nineteenth century when evolution as an idea was at its heyday, but today evolution, if it takes place at all, is known to occur in a very irregular fashion. Also, the Lutheran dichotomy between grace and works and gospel and law which so influenced Wellhausen in the late nineteenth century is no longer regarded as tenable.

From within the critical consensus such works as Whybray's *The Making of the Pentateuch* have questioned the criteria for distinguishing between sources. While his work is limited to the narrative portions of the Pentateuch and not the legal materials, Whybray demonstrates the inconsistencies, inaccuracies and other errors of logic in the criteria used to distinguish sources by the classical documentary hypothesis. Detailed studies such as McConville's work, *Law and Theology in Deuteronomy*, and Sprinkle's *The Book of the Covenant: A Literary Approach* suggest that the criteria as typically applied fare no better when applied to the legal materials. Recent approaches drawing on insights from the study of literature more generally have argued that many of the supposed contradictions between the sources are actually better explained by assuming a more sophisticated literary technique by the authors of biblical narratives. While the author of the Pentateuch undoubtedly used sources, what we have is a carefully crafted literary unity. Attempts to uncover the supposed sources and then date them have proven to be ultimately unsuccessful in sustaining a scholarly consensus. Even if we could identify the sources with confidence, they would only be of historical interest. They would not be considered authoritative outside of their canonical context. In this commentary I will focus on the final form of the text and not on speculation about the possible underlying sources.