

# INTRODUCTION

## THE AUTHORSHIP OF GENESIS

It is often asserted in popular-level communications, both written and oral, that Moses wrote the entire Pentateuch, including the book of Genesis. But no statement in the entire Bible makes such a claim. Jesus does say that Moses wrote of him (John 5:46) and the Pentateuch is sometimes called “the law of Moses.”<sup>1</sup> Certainly Moses did write some parts of the Pentateuch (Exod 34:27; 17:14; 24:4; Num 33:2; Exod 25:16,21-22; Deut 31:9,24), perhaps substantial portions of it. But the internal evidence of the Pentateuch itself does not suggest that Moses is responsible for writing the entirety of it. There are a series of texts within the Pentateuch itself which have been discussed at least since the early Middle Ages that make the theory of Mosaic authorship of the entire Pentateuch problematic. These texts are known as “Post-Mosaica” — texts which were written after the time of Moses and “A-Mosaica” — texts which may well have been written at the time of Moses but are unlikely to have been written by Moses himself. I have discussed some of these texts in the introduction to the first volume of this two-volume commentary.<sup>2</sup> There is no reason to believe that Moses wrote of himself, “Now the man Moses was very meek, more than all people who were on the face of the earth” (Num 12:3, ESV). Only a presupposition of Mosaic authorship would lead one to conclude that Moses wrote of his own death and burial (Deut 34:5-8) and that “no prophet ever arose like Moses whom the LORD knew face to face” (Deut 34:10).

But if Moses is not responsible for the final form of the Pentateuch, who is? The honest answer is that as regards authorship the Pentateuch and each of its five books are, strictly speaking, anonymous.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Kgs 2:3; 2 Kgs 14:6; 23:25; 2 Chr 23:18; 30:16; 35:12; Ezra 3:2; 6:18; Neh 8:1; 13:1; Dan 9:11,13; Mal 4:4; Mark 12:26; Luke 2:22; 16:29,31; 24:27,44; John 8:5; Acts 13:39; 15:5,21; 28:23; 1 Cor 9:9; 2 Cor 3:15. None of these texts claim that Moses wrote the entirety of the Pentateuch.

<sup>2</sup> Paul J. Kissling, *Genesis Volume 1*, College Press NIV Commentary Series (Joplin, MO: College Press, 2004), pp. 42-45.

## DATE AND HISTORICITY

On the theory that the earliest date for the writing of an historical document is sometime after the last event recorded in it, the book of Genesis must have been written sometime after the rise of a line of kings in the nation of Edom and the rise of the monarchy in Israel (Gen 36:31). If one presumes that Genesis was a part of the Pentateuch from its origins, the earliest date would probably be pushed into the postexilic era when prophecy had come and had either faded or was beginning to fade from the scene.<sup>3</sup>

This does not at all imply that the majority of the Pentateuch is late. A series of indirect indicators suggest that much of Genesis and the Pentateuch is quite early. In my judgment, Hoffmeier's groundbreaking works on the Egyptian background of the Exodus and Wilderness traditions have successfully rebutted so-called "minimalist" approaches to the historicity of Exodus through Numbers. If Israel has spent several centuries in Egypt, much of it as slaves, one would expect there to be numerous cultural effects on Israel. Hoffmeier carefully mines the evidence and finds precisely that to be the case. For example, one would expect that names for Hebrew children would be affected by the Egyptian environment. Hoffmeier<sup>4</sup> discusses eleven names within the Pentateuch and seven names outside it which have certain or likely Egyptian origin. Most of these names occur among the Levites. Hoffmeier plausibly explains the names outside of the Pentateuch as an indication of the conservatism characteristic of clergy which would keep alive ancient names.<sup>5</sup> A detailed study of the Tabernacle reveals numerous connections with Egypt. Hoffmeier gives detailed discussion of the Egyptian background for acacia wood, gold overlay, linen, and dolphin skin leather. He also notes striking Egyptian parallels with the ark of the covenant, the oil-holding cups in the menorah, the bronze altar, incense dishes, the gemstones in the High Priest's breastplate, silver trumpets,

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<sup>3</sup>Deut 34:10 "No prophet ever arose in Israel like Moses whom the LORD knew face to face" (my translation). This text assumes that a series of prophets have come and perhaps now gone. But none of them was the prophet like Moses which he had predicted would arise in Deuteronomy 18:15-18. Even if one accepts the rendering of the ESV ("And there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses") the implication seems to be the same. Prophets have arisen, but none of them ever equaled Moses.

<sup>4</sup>James K. Hoffmeier, *Ancient Israel in Sinai* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 223-228.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 229.

as well as weights and measures.<sup>6</sup> Hoffmeier also gives a careful, balanced discussion of the route of the Exodus,<sup>7</sup> the likely location of the crossing of the Reed Sea,<sup>8</sup> and the approximate location of Sinai. He debunks a current popular theory which would place Sinai in modern Arabia.<sup>9</sup> In each case he demonstrates the historical plausibility of the biblical narrative. Although this evidence does not prove that every word of the Pentateuch comes from the Mosaic period, it does argue strongly for the essential historicity of the Pentateuchal narrative.

The above evidence argues for the general historicity of the narrative structure of Exodus through Deuteronomy. But what of Genesis? Is there evidence which is specifically germane to the first book of the Bible? Once again Hoffmeier does not disappoint. He begins by noting the evidence for Semites in Egypt during the relevant period: "It has been well known for decades, however, that there were Semites in the Delta starting after the collapse of the Old Kingdom (ca. 2190) and reaching a zenith during the Hyksos or Second Intermediate Period (ca. 1700–1550 B.C.) and on into the New Kingdom (1550–1069 B.C.)."<sup>10</sup> The evidence for the enslavement of Semites and their work in the making of bricks for Egyptian construction projects during the period when the Bible claims that Israel was enslaved is even more striking.<sup>11</sup> He follows Kenneth Kitchen's observation that the price for which Joseph was sold into slavery, 20 shekels, indicates the period 2000–1500 B.C. Later in the second millennium (1500–1000) the price was 30 shekels and in the first millennium (1000–0 B.C.) 60 or 70 shekels.<sup>12</sup> Hoffmeier also notes that Joseph's title while serving Potiphar, "overseer of the house" (Gen 39:4) is a literal translation of an Egyptian expression.<sup>13</sup> More significantly Hoffmeier points to three Semites who obtained high office in Egypt, Bay, '3-m-mi-t-w, and the more recently uncovered name, Aper-el. The last of these men has many parallels to Joseph, including group burial, a similar sort of status in the government of Egypt and a wife with an Egyptian name.<sup>14</sup> Hoffmeier also notes that Joseph dies at the ideal age in Egypt, 110 years.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., pp. 209-221.

<sup>7</sup>James K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), chs. 7, 8.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., ch. 9. Also Hoffmeier, *Ancient Israel*, ch. 5.

<sup>9</sup>Hoffmeier, *Ancient Israel*, ch. 6.

<sup>10</sup>Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt*, p. 53.

<sup>11</sup>Note figures 8, 9, 11, and 12 and Hoffmeier's (*Israel in Egypt*) discussion in chs. 3, 4, and 5.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., pp. 83-84.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., pp. 93-95.

Although this evidence is indirect and suggestive rather than direct and definitive, it does argue that the author of Genesis or the sources used had a remarkable knowledge of Egypt in the period suggested by the book. A plausible case for historicity has been made. Those who would deny general historicity must now account for the evidence which Hoffmeier has so carefully assembled.<sup>15</sup>

Another indirect indication of the antiquity of the Patriarchal narratives or the sources behind them is the obvious differences between the Torah given to Israel at Mount Sinai (Exodus and Leviticus) and Mount Nebo (Deuteronomy) and the actual practices of the Patriarchs. If the Patriarchal narratives were created after the giving of the Torah one would expect that the forefathers of the nation would be depicted as being strictly obedient to that Torah. After all an author would not presume that the contemporary Israel would obey the law when the nation's spiritual forbearers disregarded it. The tendency would be to hide any violations of the law for fear that the contemporary audience would use this as justification for their own disobedience. They might say, "If father Abraham did that (or did not do this), why shouldn't I?" The reality is that the author of Genesis made no attempt to conform the actions of the patriarchs to the Torah which was later revealed at Sinai and after.<sup>16</sup> Jacob violates Israel's incest laws by marrying two sisters (Gen 29:21-30; Lev 18:9,11,18; 20:7). Judah and Simeon marry Canaanite women, something strictly prohibited in the law (Exod 34:16; Deut 7:3). Isaac and Jacob "violate" the later law by giving or intending to give a larger share to junior sons (Deut 21:15-17). The patriarchs erect pillars, pour libations over them, and plant trees which had the purpose of marking religious sites, all in "violation" of the later law (Deut 12:2-3). Longman helpfully concludes:

This list presents just a sample of serious incongruities between the picture of the patriarchs in Genesis and later beliefs, and we must ask: how likely is it that much later writers, writing purely out of their imagination, would paint a picture of their founding fathers that included such things. It is far more likely that this picture is as

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<sup>15</sup>Hoffmeier's books were published by a secular publisher with a high reputation in the academic community (Oxford University Press). His work is an example to other evangelicals of what is required if one wants to make apologetic arguments that are convincing to those not already convinced of the historicity of the Bible on theological grounds.

<sup>16</sup>See the discussion in Iain Provan, V. Philips Long, and Tremper Longman III, *A Biblical History of Israel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2003), pp. 115-116.

it is because the authors of Genesis had already inherited a firm patriarchal tradition that they had to accommodate, whatever their larger religious and social aims in telling their story.<sup>17</sup>

The case for general historicity must not, however, be used to claim more than is warranted. Genesis is not an attempt to write a history book in a modern sense. Genesis 11:27–50:26 is theological literature which draws lessons from events in the lives of the Patriarchs for Israel and through Israel for Christians of every age. There is no attempt to give a comprehensive biography of Abraham or Jacob. Only those events which have significance for the wider instructional purposes of the Pentateuch are included. Long stretches of time are routinely passed over without comment. What did Abraham do up until the age of 75 when he moved to Canaan? We are not told. What happened during the thirteen years between the move to Canaan and the birth of Ishmael? We know of only a few events. What happened between the birth of Ishmael and the birth of Isaac? We know next to nothing. The hero of the narrative is God, not Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, or Joseph. The narrative is held together by the promises of God, not by the actions of the patriarchs. The theme which drives the plot of the Pentateuch drives the plot of Genesis, the partial fulfillment and partial nonfulfillment of the promises of God to the Patriarchs.<sup>18</sup>

## THE AUDIENCES OF GENESIS

A book should ordinarily be read from front to back, not from back to front. It was certainly designed to be read that way. If we want to listen to the message of the book and not impose our own meaning on it, we should read it as it was intended to be read. This basic principle has several implications. One is that we should seek to understand a book in the order in which it is written. We should give a fair hearing to the reading which a first-time reader would be expected to discover.<sup>19</sup> For a book as familiar as Genesis, where we already know the story, or think we do, this can be a challenge. A second implication is that we seek to understand the book on its own terms and strive to genuinely seek the

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 116.

<sup>18</sup>On this see David J.A. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch*, JSOTSupp 10 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1978), p. 29.

<sup>19</sup>For the insights which such first-time reading provides see Laurence Turner's seminal work, *Announcements of Plot in Genesis*, JSOTSupp 96 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1990).

meaning intended for the original readers. This again presents challenges for the reader of Genesis. To begin with we are not entirely sure exactly when the book was written. Even if we could establish with confidence a date soon after the entrance into the land for the great majority of the book, we still would have the issue of the final updating and canonical editing. Who is the audience intended for this updating and editing? Because of this uncertainty I have chosen to systematically ask the question of what the probable meaning of Genesis would be for both the original and canonical audiences.

The original readers of Genesis are the nation of Israel relatively soon after they have entered the land of Canaan. They have been deeply impacted in negative ways by the experience of slavery in Egypt. One need only be reminded of the golden calf incident to recognize this. Only weeks from the plagues and the crossing of the Reed Sea, the nation all too easily reverts to the forms of worship and conceptions of God which they had acquired in Egypt. But there is a deeper problem. They are confronted by Canaanite culture and its alluring fertility religions. The LORD had warned Israel of these twin dangers in Leviticus 18:3: "You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. Do not follow their practices" (NIV). Genesis is written in light of this situation even though it records events in the lives of the Patriarchs who did not themselves face it in the same way. What happened at Sodom in an isolated way in the time of Abraham was common in the land of Canaan to which Israel had recently come. The Torah is a sort of instructional manual for Israel as the nation faces the new challenges of living in Canaan after having been slaves in Egypt for several centuries. As part of that Torah the book of Genesis, chapters 12-50 in particular, explains the origin of the nation of Israel and their transformation from a clan of wandering nomads into a great nation ready to take possession of the land which God had promised to them.

The canonical readers were in a very different and yet strikingly similar situation. They too had been enslaved in exile in a powerful empire, Babylon. They too faced the dangers of religious and cultural capitulation to the ways of the nations. They knew of the problem of syncretism. They faced it every day whether they were back in Palestine or still living in the Diaspora. They faced the problem of intermarriage and religious accommodation. But they also knew the lesson of the nation's history. Their unfaithfulness to the Torah throughout their time of independence had eventually brought God's judgment. Their internal divisions, anticipated in the book of Genesis, had resulted in a fractured nation which was scattered and exiled by the great powers of

the day, Assyria and Babylon. With the Persians now in control, the remnants of the nation had a new opportunity to return to the land and begin to rebuild the nation. For them the warnings against disobedience to the Torah were very real. The Torah was no longer a book for a faithful minority. It was the law for the entire community. They had publicly committed themselves to obeying it in the time of Ezra.

But Genesis is not merely an Old Testament book. The book of Genesis is one book in a multibook collection which we call the Christian Bible. The Bible contains the New Testament and its witness to Jesus Christ as the ultimate fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham (2 Cor 1:20). Genesis is the beginning of the Bible's macronarrative, the overarching narrative which stretches from the creation in Genesis 1 and 2 to the new creation in Revelation 21 and 22. To read Genesis as Christian Scripture requires that we also read Genesis in light of its meaning for Christians who know Jesus Christ to be the ultimate seed of Abraham (Gal 3:16). As in the case of the original and canonical readers, I have tried to systematically ask the question of what the meaning of Genesis might be for Christian readers. But I have done so with a particular qualification in mind. Given the tendency among popular Bible interpreters to over-Christianize the Old Testament without regard for its original context, I have usually limited my interpretations for Christian readers to meanings which flow directly from the original and canonical meanings.

## A GUIDE TO READING GENESIS 11:27–50:26

I have described my approach to reading Genesis in the first volume of this two-volume commentary.<sup>20</sup> Here I would merely add a few comments of special relevance to Genesis 11:27–50:26. This section of Genesis differs from chapters 1–11 in two main ways. First it deals with the chosen family, the precursor to the nation of Israel. Second it focuses much more on the lives of individual characters, who come to life on its pages.

The concept of election or "chosenness" refers to God's choice of particular individuals as the human channels of his blessing to the entire world. Often God's choice runs counter to the human choice. Isaac is chosen over Lot and Ishmael; Jacob over Esau; Judah over his older brothers Reuben, Simeon, and Levi. Joseph, the tenth son, is elevated

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<sup>20</sup>Paul J. Kissling, *Genesis Volume 1*, pp. 18-24. I read Genesis canonically, historically, sensitively, poetically, and theologically.

above his brothers. The chosen nation descends from a series of individuals chosen for other reasons than their order of birth or expected social status. Israel is a chosen nation descended from the unlikely and improbable choices that God made of individuals. This theme of God's surprising choices binds the narratives of Genesis together and hints at the humility that the chosen nation Israel must have toward their own election. Moses later warned the nation of taking pride in their election, "[It is] not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart that you are going in to possess this land. . . . Know, therefore, that the LORD your God is not giving you this good land to possess because of your righteousness, for you are a stubborn people" (Deut 9:5,6 ESV).

But Genesis 11:27–50:26 is even more notable for the striking portraits of individuals who emerge. Unlike the earlier section of Genesis where human characters are little more than types, in this section of Genesis we have full-fledged characters such as Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob, Joseph, and Judah. With full-fledged characters comes the complexity and ambiguity of such characters. The traditional approach to the characters of Genesis has been to make heroes out of those characters which seem to be on God's side and villains out of those who are not. But this hardly does justice to the complexity of such characters as Jacob and Esau, for example. A test case for this tendency to make heroes is the claim that Abraham makes that Sarah is actually his half sister (Gen 20:12). The narrator makes no such statement. The narrator merely records Abraham as saying it. Further, when the narrator provides Abraham's genealogy, he or she does not mention this (Gen 11:27-30). Further, when Abram suggested that Sarai portray herself as his sister the first time, there is no indication that it was even a half-truth (Gen 12:13). Abraham only comes up with this explanation when confronted by Abimelech about his lie. While the narrator does not explicitly rule out the possibility that Abraham and Sarah were actually half brother and sister, there seems little reason to believe this other than a preconception that Abraham is a godly man who would not lie! This assumption overrides the evidence, and Abraham is assumed to be telling the truth even though it seems more likely that he is making up another lie to cover the first lie! The characters in Genesis are not portrayed as good Christian people! They were not Christians, and their narrative portrayals are not simplistic. The lessons we learn from them come as much from their weaknesses and mistakes as they do from their moral examples. Is Esau the nonchosen that much worse, morally speaking, than Jacob the chosen? Not in the text of Genesis. Is Ishmael morally deficient in comparison with Isaac? That would be difficult to prove

from the text of Genesis. If there is a hero in the narrative of Genesis, it is the God who persists in relationship with chosen people who are far from examples of faith or moral rectitude. The characters of Genesis are not white-hatted heroes riding white horses or black-hatted villains riding black ones. The message of Genesis is elsewhere than in simplistic moralizing.

## THE STRUCTURE OF GENESIS 11:27–50:26

Although modern scholars can and have speculated about the structure of Genesis, it is safest to use the structural markers given explicitly by the author. The phrase, “[these are] the generations of” (אֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדוֹתַי, *w<sup>a</sup>’elleh tôl<sup>a</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:<sup>21</sup>

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)

Notice the following:

- 1) 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

<sup>21</sup>I have adapted this section from my *Genesis Volume 1*, pp. 30-31.

(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. I will argue in the commentary that, although the section seems to be dominated by the figure of Joseph, in fact something more subtle is happening. Judah's status rises throughout the narrative until he equals, and in some senses even surpasses, Joseph. The narrative is not about Joseph at all but about how Judah rises to eclipse even Joseph.

- 2) Notice that offshoots of the promise are written out by genealogies rather than narratives (Ishmael, Esau, Noah's sons). For the author of Genesis these nonchosen relatives of Israel are, nevertheless, still under God's blessing.
- 3) 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).
- 4) Genesis 36:1,9 repeats the phrase, "these are the generations of." Esau is thus given a sort of double genealogy. This seems to be part of a significant theme in Genesis 11:27–50:26 concerning the importance of the nonchosen branches of the family of Abraham.
- 5) 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.
- 6) The genealogies are written in light of the circumstances of Israel within the Promised Land. The origins of Israel's neighbors and enemies is explained, and this points forward to the later discussion in Numbers and Deuteronomy about "banned" and nonbanned peoples.

## **THE THEOLOGY OF GENESIS 11:27–50:26**

Genesis 11:27–50:26 is not theology per se. It is narrative. Deriving theology from narrative can be a tricky business. What is merely descriptive? What is intended to be read prescriptively? How does one know the difference? While one must proceed cautiously, Genesis screams to be read theologically. In this section I will briefly introduce the central implications of Genesis 11:27–50:26 about God, humanity, and creation.

**GOD IN GENESIS 11:27–50:26**

In this section of Genesis we see the creator God of Genesis 1:1–11:26 turn into a God who chooses a single family and focuses his attention on them. The God of creation and world history becomes an electing God. This indicates a shift in strategy by God in light of the persistent rebellion of humanity culminating in the episode at Babel in Genesis 11:1-9. God's purposes in creating humanity in the first place are to find fulfillment through his chosen people, the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. While God has not given up on his concern for the world, his universal blessing at creation (Gen 1:26-28) is now to be channeled primarily through a single human family.

God's universal judgment also changes. After the Flood God had promised to never again allow the evil in the human family to result in the wholesale destruction of creation through a de-creating flood (Gen 8:21-22). But since evil in the human family was not stopped by the flood (Gen 6:5; 8:21) what could God do? He does not give up on justice, for this is against his very nature. God could no more become unjust and ignore the injustices of the human family than he could give up on his love and faithfulness. Instead God chooses to intervene with his purgative justice before the evil of violence has had a chance to spread to the rest of the human family. Just as the surgeon cuts away the cancer, so God in his judgment removes the cancerous evil of violence before it has a chance to spread to the rest of the creation as happened prior to the flood. The chief example of this change of strategy is the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19. The numerous echoes of the Flood narrative in Genesis 19 demonstrate that for the author of Genesis the behavior of the residents of Sodom and its environs is strikingly similar to the universal behavior which brought God's judgment on the generation of the flood. The violence, particularly sexual violence, which brought on the flood calls forth God's judgment on Sodom. The destruction of creation, both human and nonhuman, is thus localized.

But it is not only God's judgment which is localized after the flood. God also comes to "localize" his relationship with the human family. Up until the Babel episode God had chosen to work through all humankind without distinction. There is no sense of election of a chosen people prior to Genesis 11. In lieu of the Babel episode we see a shift in God's strategy. The builders of Babel seek to make a name for themselves and explicitly reject God's commission to spread out and fill the earth so that they could rule as God's representatives over creation. In light of

that rejection of God's creation commission God decides to choose a particular family and use them as the channels of his blessing to all the rest of humankind. At first it seems that Terah, Abram's father will be that chosen person. But when Terah decides to stop halfway to the Promised Land in Haran, God calls his son, Abram to leave his father's house and go all the way to Canaan. Genesis 11:27-50:26 tells the story of God's relationship to a particular elect family. Its plot is driven by the twists and turns of human interference in the working out of God's plan. But God is a God who persists with his chosen people despite their tendency to take matters into their own hands and complicate the fulfillment of the promises to Abram in Genesis 12. Sometimes he works overtly; at other times his work is behind the scenes in what theologians often term providence. All along he grants the chosen family remarkable freedom, for good and for ill, to participate with him in faith in the outworking of his purpose to bless all the families of the earth through Abraham's descendants.

God is also a God who chooses to work through the unexpected and the unlikely. We see this in the pattern of choosing the younger son, not the firstborn. Isaac the younger, not Ishmael the firstborn, will be Abraham's heir. Jacob, not his older brother Esau, will inherit the promises. Equally surprising is the case of Judah. With three older brothers who disqualify themselves, it is left to Judah, the fourth son, to receive the mantle of leadership from his father. What is even more surprising, however, is that Judah is given this honor despite Jacob's obvious favoritism for his son Joseph. Judah, not Joseph, is given the highest place within the family that turns into the twelve-tribe nation of Israel.

In Genesis 11:27-50:26 God is also a God who blesses and protects his people. The concept of blessing first occurs in the Bible in the creation commission in Genesis 1. But the concept blossoms and flourishes in the promises of God to the Patriarchs and in his tangible actions of blessing them and protecting them from the harm of their potential enemies. God blesses Abram and Lot with material possessions while they are in Egypt as he does Jacob while in the employ of Laban. He also blesses Esau. He blesses Joseph and all that is placed under his authority in Egypt so that even as a slave he is elevated to second in command under Pharaoh. The LORD blesses Ishmael, Esau, and Jacob with large families, which in time result in entire nations who claim them as their forefathers. Sarah and Rebekah are protected from harm when taken into the harems of foreign kings. God protects Abram in a battle with a coalition of five kings who have taken Lot captive.

In Genesis 11:27-50:26 God is also a God who reveals himself to his

chosen people. He speaks to Abram, calling him to participate in God's blessing for the entire world. He explicitly identifies Canaan as the Promised Land (Gen 12:7), even expanding its ideal borders to the Euphrates and the border with Egypt (Gen 15:18-20). He reassures Abram about the number of his descendants (Gen 15:5; 17:2-7) and clarifies that only a son born through his direct action would be Abram's heir (Gen 17:15-19). He ultimately makes an unalterable promise that Abraham would indeed be the channel of his blessing to all the nations of the earth (Gen 22:18). God also reveals himself to Isaac (Gen 26:3-4,24) and to Jacob (Gen 28:13-14; 35:11-12) reaffirming the promise. His final revelation is given to Jacob reassuring him that moving his family to Egypt is part of God's plan to make a great nation out of his descendants (Gen 46:3). Somewhat surprisingly God is silent while the family is in Egypt, working behind the scenes, but not overtly revealing himself. Nevertheless, his providential care of the chosen family is obvious even when it is behind the scenes (Gen 45:5-10; 50:20).

### **HUMANITY IN GENESIS 11:27–50:26**

The strikingly similar divine statements about humanity before and after the flood (6:5; 8:22) make it clear that humanity's sinfulness since being expelled from the garden had become a pattern which was repeated generation after generation. The Babel incident is a sort of last straw for humanity. The question of Genesis 11:27–50:26 is, Will a chosen family do any better? The answer is "no and yes," rather than "yes and no." To begin with the positive, the chosen family is concerned about the promise and works (and schemes) to try to ensure its fulfillment. Even though such scheming is misguided, it does indicate a level of faith and determination that the promises come to fruition. Abraham at first assumes Lot will be his heir. Later he and Sarai scheme to produce a son, Ishmael, through Sarai's handmaiden Hagar. Jacob and Rebekah scheme to swindle Esau out of birthright and blessing. Jacob is willing to wrestle with a divine person who has divine power in order to secure the blessing. Abraham and Isaac are willing to sacrifice their wives to see the promises come to fruition. Whatever weaknesses these actions imply, they also imply a genuine confidence in the reality of God's promises and a commitment to do whatever is necessary to ensure that those promises come true.

But Genesis' dominant message about the elect family is how flawed they are. Were it not for God's commitment to his promises, the patriarchs would have forfeited them on numerous occasions. In a

sense Abraham seems to unintentionally endanger the promises whether by risking Sarah's being taken into a foreign king's harem or by offering Lot the rights to the Promised Land. All of the patriarchs complicate the fulfillment of the promise and show striking weaknesses. This all points to the fact that, at some level, the promises belong to God. They are his to make, and they are ultimately his to fulfill. The promises cannot depend upon human faithfulness, even from the chosen family, for their fulfillment. If they are to find fulfillment, it will only be through God's grace and mercy.

What is initially surprising about Genesis' message about humanity is its portrayal of those who are not in the chosen line. Ishmael and Esau, though not chosen, are still blessed. Melchizedek is a priest of God Most High even though he has no direct connection to the chosen family. Abimelech, though a pagan king, is still concerned about righteousness. Tamar, though a Canaanite, is more righteous than Judah, by Judah's own admission. Even the Pharaoh in Joseph's time shows some level of openness to God by accepting God's revelation of the meaning of his troubling dreams. There are many people outside of the chosen line who nevertheless desire to be faithful to God. Of course there are plenty of other humans who display no inclination to be godly and fall under God's judgment. The most obvious example of this is the king of Sodom and the men of Sodom who seek to rape the angelic visitors. In Genesis humanity is full of both weakness and evil, but also at times shows remarkable capacity to respond to God.

### **CREATION IN GENESIS 11:27-50:26**

Following the flood God makes a decision to sever the close relationship between the destiny of the entire earth and his relationship to humanity. He solemnly promises never again to destroy the entire physical system with a flood. The problem for God was that even the flood did not drive evil from the human heart (Gen 8:21). Had he continued to destroy the system every time human evil reared its ugly head, there would be a never-ending cycle of creation, rebellion, and de-creation. Instead when human evil begins to rise to the horrendous level it reached before the flood, God determines to step in with localized judgment to stop that evil from spreading. The narrative of the destruction of Sodom with its numerous echoes of the Flood narrative makes this clear. God still allows humanity enormous freedom, for good and ill. He is patient with human weakness, sin, and wickedness (Gen 15:13-16). But he will not allow the violence and sexual licentiousness of Sodom to

spread without judgment. The sulfuric deposits in and around the Dead Sea served as a reminder and a warning to the chosen nation of the consequences of a radical departure from God's will in human society.

But there is another side to the story. The world which God had made was a fruitful world that God had blessed with the capacity to regenerate itself. The earth's fertility as exemplified in the Promised Land was a perpetual sign of God's blessing. God had created a good world which had ample capacity to feed humanity and all of God's creatures. But even that fruitful world displayed the brokenness of the fall. The famines of Genesis remind us that while God created the world with beauty and goodness, human rebellion resulted in a cursed creation. Even the Promised Land experienced the distortions of such a cursed creation from time to time.

### **GENESIS 11:27–50:26 AND THE REST OF THE BIBLE**

Genesis 11:27–50:26 is the continuation of Genesis 1:1–11:26. The book of Genesis is part of the Pentateuch. The Pentateuch is part of the Old Testament. The Old Testament is the first three quarters of the Christian Bible. These simple facts must always be kept in mind when interpreting Genesis 11:27–50:26. The relationship between this section of Genesis and the rest of the Bible is a theological one, but it is theology expressed in narrative. Genesis 11:27–50:26 is a crucial link in the Bible's macronarrative.

### **THEOLOGICAL RELATIONSHIP WITH GENESIS 1:1–11:26**

Genesis 11:27 marks the turning point in the book of Genesis and the turning point in the macronarrative of the Bible. Up until this time God has chosen to work through the entirety of humankind. There is no chosen nation among the nations of the world. In part this is because up until the Babel episode in Genesis 11:1-9<sup>22</sup> there were no nations with differing cultures and languages. But there is another reason. The Babel narrative marks the end of a strategy which God had used up until that time in relating to humanity. From creation to the fall to the flood to the post-Flood expansion of human population, God had worked directly with humanity as a whole. There was no elect or chosen

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<sup>22</sup>The nations mentioned in Genesis 10 arise after the events at Babel in Genesis 11:1-9. On this chronological disruption see Kissling, *Genesis Volume 1* at Genesis 10.

people. But with the call of Abram the focus of God's work in the world is narrowed to one man and his descendants. God's blessing that was given to all humanity at creation (Gen 1:26-28) will now flow through Abram and his descendants; through Abram's descendants all the families of the earth will be blessed (Gen 12:3). The promise of God is thus not the center of the Bible to which creation is merely the prologue. Instead the promise to Abram is a continuation of God's creational purposes, but with a new strategy. One can speculate on the reasons for a shift in strategy. God's early attempts to deal with humanity as a whole have been repeatedly frustrated by human rebellion. The original human pair rejected the conditions for life lived in the immediate presence of God in Eden. The post-Eden generations degenerated into systemic violence which demanded God's cosmic judgment. The post-Flood generations deliberately rebelled against the Noachic commission to fill the earth and brought judgment yet again. It is only after this third judgment at Babel that the divine strategy changes. God's creational intention to bless humanity as they rule over all the earth is focused to the promises to Abram. He will both receive God's blessing and channel that blessing to the entire human family. He and his descendants will experience the blessings of a Promised Land until such time as God's blessings can spread to the entire earth.<sup>23</sup>

### **THEOLOGICAL RELATIONSHIP WITH THE PENTATEUCH**

Genesis is not a stand-alone book. From our earliest knowledge of it, it is the first and foundational book of the Torah or Pentateuch. All of Genesis is written with the assumption that the exodus has already occurred and that the laws have been revealed to Israel through Moses at Mount Sinai, in the wilderness, and at Mount Nebo. As such Genesis is related narratively and theologically to the rest of the Torah. Genesis is written for the nation of Israel in the Promised Land. The narratives of Genesis 11:27–50:26 are especially relevant for the nation because they describe its creation from the calling of Abram until the family of Jacob moves to Egypt. The name Israel is first of all the name given to Jacob. The "children of Israel" are first mentioned in relation to Jacob in Genesis 32:32. The relationships between the twelve tribes of Israel are founded on the relationships between the twelve sons of Jacob as are the tensions between them.

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<sup>23</sup>In Hebrew the word for "land" and the word for "earth" are the same (אֶרֶץ, *hā'āreṣ*). For the original readers there would be a natural connection between the "land" of Canaan and the entire "earth."

There is no doubt that for the original audience of Genesis the patriarchal era was very different from their own era. Although the patriarchs sometimes obey the law before the law is given, they also sometimes disobey that same law. Abram tithes before he was required to do so, and ensures that his son Isaac does not marry a Canaanite woman. But he also is willing to sacrifice his child to his god and planted a tree as a marker of a place of worship, both things forbidden in the law (Deut 12:2-3; Lev 20:1-5). The patriarchs were not pure monotheists in the modern sense but traveled a path that led to monotheism. The audience is expected to make allowances for the fact that Abraham and his earliest descendants were originally polytheists who came to a more accurate understanding of God over time. What does connect the patriarchs more directly to the rest of the Torah are the promises of God which were originally given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and were beginning to find fulfillment in the generations which departed from Egypt and entered the Promised Land. What Abraham and his descendants did in accepting the importance of the promise and seeking its fulfillment prepared the ground for the nation of Israel to take that promise several steps further.

## THEOLOGICAL RELATIONSHIP WITH THE OLD TESTAMENT

While the Pentateuch prepares for the fulfillment of the promises to Abraham, the rest of the Old Testament tells the tragic story of how his descendants nearly saw its fulfillment only to see it lost through persistent disobedience and outright rebellion. They had the land promised to Abraham even in its ideal form only to see foreign armies conquer it all (cp. Gen 15:18-20 and 1 Kgs 4:21). They became a great nation only to be scattered and exiled throughout the ancient Near East by the Assyrians and Babylonians. They had received abundant material blessings only to see those blessings turn to curses. They were attracting the nations to the LORD, only to see the nations mock them derisively as they were humiliated by their enemies (1 Kgs 10:1-13; 24). N.T. Wright perceptively comments: "Israel, the children of Abraham, may be the carriers of the promise, but they turn out to be part of the problem themselves. This unwinds through a massive and epic narrative, from the patriarchs to the exodus, from Moses to David, through the twists and turns of the Israelite monarchy, ending finally with Israel in exile."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>N.T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), p. 46.

Genesis 11:27–50:26 details what God promised. The remainder of the Old Testament tells the tragic story of how Israel had it all within their grasp only to see it slip through their fingers and end up a broken and scattered nation. As the Old Testament ends, the promises are still in effect, but their fulfillment is beyond Israel's capacity. Only God can fulfill the promises through a broken and scattered and chastened nation.

### **THEOLOGICAL RELATIONSHIP WITH THE ENTIRE BIBLE**

The rest of the Bible tells the story of how it eventually was left to one truly faithful descendant of Abraham to bring the promises to fulfillment. His name was Joshua; in Greek, Jesus. He descended from the tribe of Judah to take over the leadership of the nation. He is the ultimate “descendant” or “seed” of Abraham (Gal 3:16), and those who belong to him by faith are children of Abraham (Gal 3:6,7), the true circumcision (Rom 2:28-29), and even the true Israel (Gal 6:16). What the nation of Israel could not do because of their persistent unfaithfulness, Jesus, the new Israel incarnate, did. The faith of the patriarchs kept the promises alive. The unfaithfulness of the patriarchs and especially of their descendants made it clear that if God's promises were to come to fruition, it would only be by more direct action of God. He would have to intervene; the descendants of the patriarchs could not be trusted to do it with their own resources. The sinfulness of all humanity was narrated in Genesis 1–11. Genesis 12–50 makes clear that even the chosen family is itself significantly sinful. This prepares the ground for the Bible's great surprise ending. God himself, in his son Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham, took on flesh and brought the answer “Yes” to all God's promises (1 Cor 1:20).

### **HISTORICAL-CRITICAL APPROACHES TO GENESIS**

It is not the purpose of a commentary like this one to engage with traditional historical-critical approaches to the patriarchal narratives in Genesis. Bible-believing Christians must not, however, put their heads in the sand in regard to the way critical scholarship has interpreted these narratives. Although I will not systematically engage with historical-critical approaches (Source Criticism, Form Criticism, Tradition History, etc.) in the verse-by-verse commentary, I have attempted to do three things. First, in the Introduction to volume 1 I have addressed

these approaches in general terms.<sup>25</sup> Second, in this volume I include an excursus on the historical-critical approach to the story of Jacob's dream at Bethel (Gen 28:10-22) as a sort of test case for these sorts of methods. This passage is often used as a prime example of the value of source criticism and the necessity of some such explanation for the writing of the Pentateuch. Genesis 28 will thus receive more sustained and detailed interaction with historical-critical approaches than other texts. Third, I will from time to time use the footnotes in the verse-by-verse commentary to interact with especially noteworthy passages which have traditionally been highlighted by those scholars interpreting Genesis through traditional historical-critical methods.

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<sup>25</sup>Kissling, *Genesis Volume 1*, pp. 42-51.