

## Genesis Introduction

The Book of Genesis tells the story first of humankind and then of the ancestors of Israel, from the creation down to the sojourn of the Israelites in Egypt. We may break it down into three large segments: the primeval history in Genesis 1-11; the stories of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in Genesis 12-36; and the Joseph story in chapters 37-50 (with an interlude about Judah in Genesis 38). The material in these three segments is of different kinds.

The primeval history tells the story of the beginnings, from Creation through the Flood, culminating with the tower of Babel. Much, perhaps all, of this material is pre-historic: it is material for which there is and can be no historical record. Most scholars nowadays characterize it as myth, and in fact it has numerous parallels with the myths of ancient Mesopotamia.

The stories of the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, in contrast, are set in historical time, but they hardly qualify as history by modern standards. They are made up of short episodes, which seem to have originated as folklore, but were edited over centuries and cast in the form of sequential history.

The story of Joseph differs from other material in the book because it is a developed story that runs over several chapters, and has the character of a novella.

These segments, however, did not circulate as separate stories, at least not in the form in which we have them. Here, as in the rest of the Pentateuch, we can distinguish different strands or sources, known as

the Yahwist (J for the German spelling Jahwist), Elohist (E) and Priestly (P) that run through the segments. Even if the segments we have distinguished were composed at different times, they were combined into these strands before they were woven together to form the text of Genesis as we have it.

Only two of these strands, the Yahwist and the Priestly, are found in the primeval history, and they are easily distinguished. The Yahwist source takes its name from the fact that God is called Yahweh from the beginning, whereas in the other sources the divine name is only revealed in Exodus. J is a good story-teller and the deity is represented in a colorful, anthropomorphic, form. The Priestly source, in contrast, is rather dry. It is greatly concerned with genealogies and with the origin of cultic and ritual observances, such as the Sabbath. The first account of creation, in Genesis 1:1 to 2:4a, is a classic P composition. The story of Adam and Eve is a Yahwist composition, although it is unusual insofar as it refers to God as Yahweh Elohim, (perhaps an editor's attempt to make clear the identity of Elohim from P in Genesis 1 and Yahweh from J in Genesis 2-3). The story of the Flood provides an exceptionally clear example of a case where these two stories have been woven together.

For a long time, the Yahwist source was thought to have been composed in Jerusalem early in the period of the monarchy, perhaps as early as the tenth century BCE. Nearly all scholars now think that date is too early. Some have gone to the other extreme and think it was composed during the Babylonian Exile, in the sixth century BCE. Others favor a date at some time during the monarchy (eighth or seventh century BCE). The main argument for a late date arises from the

primeval history, which is deeply influenced by Babylonian myths, such as the Atrahasis story and the Epic of Gilgamesh. The exiles of Judah were obviously exposed to Babylonian culture during the Exile, but Judean scribes may well have been acquainted with Mesopotamian literature long before that. At present, however, there is no consensus about the date of the J source. A stronger and clearer case can be made that the Priestly source took shape during the Exile or a little later, although it may have incorporated older traditions.

### *The Patriarchal Stories*

A new phase in biblical history is ushered in by the appearance of Abraham, or Abram as he is initially called. (His name is changed to Abraham in Gen 17:5; his wife is initially Sarai, but her name is changed to Sarah in 17:15.) Abram is first introduced in a genealogical list in chapter 11, which is part of the Priestly source. In 11:31 we are told that he departed from "Ur of the Chaldeans" with his father Terah and his wife Sarai, "to go into the land of Canaan," but settled in Haran on the way. This notice is also part of the Priestly source, but another reference to Ur of the Chaldeans in 15:7 is usually understood as non-priestly. The tradition that the ancestors of Israel came from Haran is also attested elsewhere in Genesis. Ur was a famous and ancient city in southern Mesopotamia that flourished in the third millennium BCE. It could be called "Ur of the Chaldeans," however, only after the rise of the Neo-Babylonian Empire, in the late seventh century BCE. The reference to Ur of the Chaldeans in 15:7, then, must be a secondary addition, unless we ascribe a very late date to J.

### *The Patriarchs and History*

The internal chronology of the Bible suggests a date around 2100 BCE for Abraham, and a time around 1876 BCE for the descent of his grandson Jacob into Egypt with his family. Only extremely conservative scholars would now take these dates at face value, in view of the prodigious life spans attributed to the patriarchs, but many have tried to set the stories of Genesis against the background of an historical era. It is not unreasonable to expect that even a work of fiction should provide clues as to the time of its composition. Unlike many biblical books, however, the patriarchal stories are practically void of reference to public events that might be known from other sources.

In older textbooks and Study Bibles, the Patriarchs are often dated to the Second Millennium BCE, in the centuries prior to the Exodus, which was thought to have occurred in the thirteenth century BCE. But several considerations tell against such an early background. The Philistines, who are mentioned in Gen 21:32-34; 26:1, 8, 14-15, were one of the Sea Peoples who invaded the coastal plain in the twelfth century, and gave their name to "Palestine." The Arameans, who figure especially in the Jacob stories, are attested only from the end of the second millennium (eleventh century BCE). The earliest mention of the camel as a domesticated animal dates only from the eleventh century BCE, and its use became common only some centuries later. Archeological evidence suggests that Beersheba was not settled before the twelfth century BCE. Even if we allow that some references may have been added secondarily, this evidence makes it unlikely that these

stories originated earlier than the end of the second millennium BCE or the beginning of the first. The stories may still preserve reminiscences of an earlier time. The preference for names that end in *-el* (rather than *-yah*) in the patriarchal stories points to a time before the rise of YHWH as the god of Israel. But the stories cannot be taken as witnesses to pre-Israelite reality in any simple sense.

### *The Patriarchal Stories as Legends*

In fact, the stories of Genesis do not lend themselves easily to historical analysis. More than a hundred years ago, a German scholar named Hermann Gunkel showed they belong not to the genre of historiography but to that of legend. Legend, according to Gunkel, is originally oral tradition, while history is usually found in written form. Written material is more easily given a fixed form, whereas oral variants of the same tales tend to proliferate. History treats great public occurrences, while legend deals with more personal and private matters. The clearest criterion of legend, wrote Gunkel, is that it frequently reports things that are incredible. It is poetry rather than prose, and a different sort of plausibility applies. As poetry, legend aims to please, to elevate, to inspire, and to move. It does not tell "what actually happened" in a way that would satisfy a modern historian.

Gunkel went on to distinguish several kinds of legends in Genesis. Etiological legends claim to explain the cause or origin of a phenomenon (e.g., the story of Lot's wife explains the origin of a pillar of salt). Ethnological legends explain the origin of a people or of their customs (the story of Cain explains why Kenites are itinerant). Etymological

legends explain the origin of names (there are two accounts of the origin of the name of Beersheba: Gen 21:31; 26:33). Ceremonial legends explain the origin of a ritual (the story of the Passover is an obvious example; the covenant with Abraham in Genesis 17 explains why his descendants practice circumcision). Gunkel did not rule out the possibility that historical reminiscences might be preserved in such legends, but he changed the focus of inquiry, from the events behind the text to the function of the story and its setting in life, or *Sitz im Leben*. His question was, why, and in what kind of setting, was this story told? Many stories were presumably told in a cultic setting—for example, to explain why Bethel was a holy place (Genesis 28)—but some may also have been told simply for entertainment.

It is clear, however, that at some point these traditions were linked together to form a genealogy of the ancestors of Israel. Jacob is identified as the father of the people of Israel; his name is changed to Israel in Genesis 32. His twelve sons give their names to the tribes that constitute Israel. Moreover, he is associated with the central hill country, which was the heartland of Israel before the rise of the monarchy. Yet in Genesis priority is given to Abraham, who is associated with the area later known as Judah. There are two periods in biblical history when such a construction would have made sense. One was in the time of David and Solomon, when (at least according to the biblical account) all Israel was united under a Judean monarchy. The other was after the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BCE, when Judah had reason and opportunity to assert its leadership of all Israel, north and south, and this remained true into the postexilic period. Both J and

E, however, already assume the succession of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and so it is likely that the linkage of the patriarchs was already established at an early time, before these sources were compiled.

There is good reason to think that the linking of the patriarchs in a genealogical succession was an early attempt to define the people of Israel, by showing how the tribes were related to each other. It is important that the genealogical links bind Judah and Benjamin (the eventual southern kingdom) to the northern tribes, and so create a basis for regarding all Israel as a unity. It is also noteworthy that these stories insist that Abraham and his descendants were not Canaanites. They allegedly came from Mesopotamia, via Syria, and continued to go back to Syria to seek wives for some generations. The more recent archeological work in Israel rather suggests that the Israelites emerged out of Canaan. There is no evidence of the intrusion of a different material culture, such as we might expect if they had actually come from another country. The persistent attempt to deny Canaanite origins can be explained as a way of marking a boundary between Israel and Canaan. Since the Canaanites were the Israelites' nearest neighbors, this was the most necessary boundary if Israel were to have its own identity. The patriarchal stories viewed as a whole, then, can be understood as an attempt to define Israel over against its neighbors, by positing some relationships and denying others.

Many of the stories in Genesis are folkloric in character, and they surely evolved over centuries. A few features of these stories, however, are significant for their historical background, even if they do not suggest a specific date. There is no reference in Genesis to an Israelite or

Judean king. This fact lends some credibility to the view that the stories first took shape before the rise of the monarchy, although they must have been edited long after that. Also, the religion of the patriarchs is significantly different from that of Deuteronomy or the Priestly source.

### *Patriarchal Religion*

The patriarchs also worship God in specific places, as manifestations of the God El. *El* was the common Hebrew, and Northwest Semitic, word for “god,” but it was also the name of the high god in the Canaanite myths from Ugarit, an ancient port city in today’s northern Syria. In Genesis 14 Abraham gives a tithe to Melchizedek, king of Salem (presumably Jerusalem), priest of El Elyon (God Most High). By so doing he recognizes, and lends legitimacy to, an established Canaanite cult. In fact, El and YHWH are recognized as one and the same god in biblical religion. According to the Elohist and Priestly strands of the Pentateuch, the name YHWH was not revealed until Exodus, and so the patriarchs worshiped El in his various manifestations. In contrast, the Canaanite god Baal is not mentioned at all in Genesis, and the patriarchs are never said to worship a goddess. So the patriarchs appear to participate in Canaanite religion in a modified form, or to appropriate it in a selective way. It is possible, of course, that the selectivity is due to later editors, who edited out of the tradition religious observances that might be deemed offensive.

There is a striking discrepancy between the manner of worship practiced by the patriarchs and that which is commanded later in the Bible. Wherever the patriarchs go, they build altars to the Lord. Abram

builds an altar by the oak of Mamre, and again between Bethel and Ai. Later he plants a tamarisk tree at Beersheba, and calls there on the name of the Lord. Isaac builds an altar in Beersheba, and Jacob at Bethel and Shechem. At Bethel, Jacob takes the stone he had used as a pillow and sets it up as a pillar, and pours oil on it. Later, in Deuteronomy 12, Israel is commanded to restrict sacrificial worship to the one "place which the Lord your God shall choose." Then: "you must demolish completely all the places where the nations whom you are about to dispossess served their gods on the mountain heights, on the hills, and under every leafy tree. Break down their altars, smash their pillars, burn their sacred poles with fire, and hew down the idols of their gods" (Deut 12:2-3).

Deuteronomic law did not apply to the patriarchs, who were supposed to have lived before Moses. Nonetheless, the association of the patriarchs with a given shrine marked it as a holy place, and gave it legitimacy in the eyes of later tradition. In fact, several stories in Genesis seem to have been preserved in order to legitimate, or establish the holiness of, specific sites. In the books of Kings, and sometimes in the prophets, great scorn is poured on the rival sanctuary of Bethel, which was one of two state temples erected by King Jeroboam I, when the northern kingdom of Israel seceded from Jerusalem (1 Kgs 12:25-33; the other one was at Dan, on the northern border of Israel). Yet in Genesis 28 we read how Jacob discovered that Bethel was "none other than the house of God and gate of heaven" (28:17). This would seem to establish that Bethel was a holy place, and so lend credibility to Jeroboam's sanctuary.

It is at least clear that the stories of Genesis were not the work of the Deuteronomistic school, which made the centralization of religion into a criterion for true religion. In part, at least, the religion of the patriarchs was the kind of observance that the Deuteronomists sought to suppress. The stories about the patriarchs must have been established as part of Israel's heritage too strongly for the Deuteronomists to repudiate them. It is reasonable then to conclude that Genesis reflects a form of popular, family religion that flourished before the Deuteronomic reform. One cannot, however, take these stories as a reliable or full account of Israelite religion in any period. They are stories about a past, which was always idealized to some extent, and may have been edited to some degree besides. They are of some value to the historian of religion, but that value is limited by the lack of explicit historical data.

Regardless of their historical value, the tales of the patriarchs remain powerful as stories. In large part this is because, like all good folklore, they touch on perennial issues, such as jealousy between a woman and her rival (Sarah and Hagar) or rivalry between brothers (Jacob and Esau). Many of the stories are entertaining—Abraham's ability to outwit the pharaoh or the gentle story of Isaac and Rebekah in Genesis 24. Others are tales of terror, in the phrase of Phyllis Tribble, a modern biblical scholar—the command to Abraham to sacrifice his only son, or Lot's willingness to sacrifice his daughters to the men of Sodom (Genesis 19). When the stories are read as Scripture, they become more problematic, because of a common but ill-founded assumption that all Scripture should be edifying. The stories of Genesis are often

challenging and stimulating, but they seldom if ever propose simple models to be imitated.

**Questions for discussion:**

1. Where is the line between the stories in Genesis that we more readily accept as non-historical ancient myth and those stories that we begin to read as historically plausible? Why do we draw the line where we do?
2. How many different genres, or types of literature, are represented in Genesis? What might this tell us about the origins of the book?
3. Why does Genesis hold such appeal for the modern reader? Is it simply because it comes first?

**Reading:**

Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York: Schocken, 1966), xvii-xxx.

**Further Reading:**

Ronald Hendel, *The Book of Genesis. A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).