

BOOK OF GENESIS

Approximate date: 1440-1400 B.C.E. (Right); 1300-1200 B.C.E. (conservative-moderate); 500s B.C.E. (Left)

Time period: the Creation of the world to Israel in Egypt

Author: Moses exclusively (Right); Moses, Joshua, and later editors (conservative-moderate); compiled traditions and mythologies (Left)

Location of author: wilderness journey after the Exodus (Right, conservative-moderate); Babylon and/or Land of Israel (Left)

Target audience and their location: wilderness journey after the Exodus (Right, conservative-moderate); Babylon and/or Land of Israel (Left)

People:

Adam, Eve, the serpent, Cain, Abel, Cain's descendants, Seth, pre-diluvian people from Adam to Noah (5:1-32), the Nephilim, Noah, Shem, Ham, Japheth, post-diluvian descendants from Noah to Abraham (11:10-27), Terah, Abram/Abraham, Sarai/Sarah, Lot, Canaanites, Perizzites, Amraphel (king of Shinar), Arioch (king of Ellasar), Kedorlaomer (king of Elam), Tidal (king of Goiim), Bela (king of Sodom), Zuzites, Emites, Horites, Amalekites, Amorites, Melchizedek, Eliezer of Damascus, Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Rephaites, Girgashites, Jebusites, Hagar, Ishmael, Isaac, Moab, Ben-Ammi, Abimelech, Phicol, Philistines, Nahor's sons (22:20-24), Ephron (son of Zoar), Rebekah, Bethuel (son of Milcah), Laban, Keturah, sons born to Keturah (25:2-4), Ishmael's sons (25:13-15), Esau, Jacob, Ahuzzath, Judith (daughter of Beeri the Hittite), Basemath (daughter of Elon the Hittite), Mahalath (sister of Nebaioth), Rachel, Leah, Zilpah, Bilhah, Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, Dinah, Joseph, Israel (Jacob), Hamor, Shechem, Deborah (Rebekah's nurse), Benjamin (Ben-Oni), Esau's descendants (ch. 36), Ishmaelites, Midianite merchants, Potiphar, Pharaoh, Hiram, Shua, Er, Onan, Shelah, Kezib, Tamar, Perez, Zerah, Zaphenath-Paneah (Joseph's Egyptian name), Asenath (daughter of Potiphera, priest of On), Manasseh, Ephraim, descendants of Israel who go to Egypt (46:8-27), Makir (son of Manasseh)

Places:

Garden of Eden, Pishon, Havilah, Gihon, Cush, Tigris, Asshur, Euphrates, Nod, Ararat, plains of Shinar, Babel, Ur (of the Chaldeans), Haran, Canaan, Moreh, Shechem, Bethel, Ai, Negev, Egypt, Jordan, Zoar, Sodom, Hebron, Mamre, Valley of Siddim, Ashteroth Karnaim, Ham, Shaveh Kiriathaim, Seir, El Paran, En Mishpat (Kadesh), Hazazon Tamar, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboiim, Bela, Zoar, Elam, Goiim, Ellasar, Dan, Hobah, Damascus, Salem, Kadesh, Shur, Gerar, Beersheba, Desert of Paran, Machpelah, Aram Naharaim, Nahor, Beer Lahai Roi, Paddan Aram, Valley of Gerar, Esek (well), Sitnah (well), Rehoboth (well), Shibah (well), Bethel (Luz), Gilead, Jegar Sahadutha/Galeed (heap/pillar), Mahanaim (camp of God's angels), Jabbok, Peniel, Succoth, El Elohe Israel (altar), Allon Bacuth, Ephratah (Bethlehem), Migdal Eder, Kiriath Arba, Dothan, Adullam, Timnah, Enaim, Nile, Goshen, Ramses, Atad, Abel Mizraim

Key Themes and Events:

creation of the cosmos, followed by the Earth / God makes the first human beings (male and female) / God places Adam in the Garden of Eden / Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit and are cast outside of the Garden / Cain kills his brother Abel / the Nephilim have relations with (human) females / great sin on the Earth causes God to send a flood to eliminate life / Noah is called by God to build an ark and collect pairs of animals / floodwaters sent by God eliminate life on Earth / the human survivors of the Flood are given the command to repopulate / God confuses the languages of humanity at Babel / God calls Abram out of Ur / Abram goes to Egypt because of a famine / Abram and Lot separate, with Lot going to Sodom / Lot is taken captive when Sodom is ransacked by enemy kings / Lot is rescued by

A SURVEY OF THE TANACH FOR THE PRACTICAL MESSIANIC

Abram / Abram gives a tribute (a tenth) to Melchizedek, king of Salem / Abram and God “cut” a covenant with animal sacrifices, with God being its guarantor / Abram has relations with Hagar, who gives birth to Ishmael / God renames Abram as Abraham / God gives Abraham the covenant of circumcision at age ninety-nine / God promises that Sarah will give birth to a son / God in the form of three men visits Abraham / Abraham pleads with God for Him not to judge the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah / two angels arrive at Sodom and Gomorrah to take Lot and his family / Sodom and Gomorrah are judged by God / Lot and his daughters have sexual relations, believing that life on Earth has been wiped out / Abimelech kidnaps Sarah for his own / Sarah is returned to Abimelech, and Abimelech is blessed / Isaac is born to Abraham and Sarah / Hagar and Ishmael are sent away / Abraham, Abimelech, and Phicol seal an agreement / God asks Abraham to sacrifice Isaac / Abraham is stopped from killing Isaac, demonstrating his steadfast belief in God’s promises / Sarah dies and is buried at Machpelah / Eliezer is commissioned by Abraham to find Isaac a wife / Rebekah returns to become Isaac’s wife / Abraham dies and is buried at Machpelah / Rebekah becomes pregnant with twins, later giving birth to Jacob and Esau / Esau sells his birthright to Jacob for a meal / Isaac interacts with King Abimelech, telling him that Rebekah was his sister, just like his father Abraham had done with Sarah / Isaac moves to the Valley of Gerar, digging three wells / the Lord reaffirms His covenant with Abraham to Isaac / Esau marries two Hittite women, to the chagrin of his parents / Jacob tricks his father, not being able to see, into blessing him and giving him Esau’s birthright / Jacob must flee to his uncle Laban, as Esau wants to kill him / Rebekah does not want Jacob to marry a Hittite woman / Esau marries again / Jacob has a dream of a ladder (or staircase) reaching up into Heaven, and so God affirms His covenant commitment upon him / Jacob arrives at Paddan Aram and meets Rachel and Laban / Jacob agrees to work for Laban for seven years, in order to marry Rachel / Jacob is tricked into marrying Leah, and must work another seven years for Rachel / Leah gives birth to: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah / Bilhah, Rachel’s maidservant, gives birth to: Dan, Naphtali / Zilpah, Rachel’s maidservant, gives birth to: Gad, Asher / Leah gives birth to: Isaachar, Zebulun, Dinah / Rachel gives birth to: Joseph / Jacob shrewdly sees that his flocks are more prosperous than Laban’s / Jacob and his family depart for Canaan, with Laban in pursuit / Laban catches up with Jacob after three days, seemingly looking for his household gods / Laban and Jacob agree not to cross a pillar they erect, harming the other / Jacob prepares to meet Esau, sending messengers ahead of him / Jacob hears Esau is coming, and prays that God would preserve him / Jacob wrestles with a being all through the night, having his hip dislocated and being renamed Israel / Jacob settles in the vicinity of Shechem / Shechem, son of Hamor, violates Dinah / the Shechemites agree to be circumcised to join in alliance with Jacob’s family / Simeon and Levi kill all males in the city, after they have been circumcised / Jacob returns to Bethel, removing the foreign gods from his household / God reaffirms that great numbers of people will come forth from Jacob / Rachel dies giving birth to Benjamin / Reuben sleeps with the concubine Bilhah / Jacob returns to see his father Isaac, who dies / Joseph, given a many-colored robe, has dreams which make his brothers jealous / Joseph’s brothers sell him into slavery, at the suggestion of Judah / Jacob is told that his son has been killed by wild animals / Joseph is sold to Potiphar in Egypt / Judah marries Shuah / Tamar marries Er, who dies / Onan fails to perform the rite of levirate marriage, and so he dies / Judah sleeps with Tamar, impregnating her, and giving her his seal and staff / Judah hears of Tamar’s pregnancy, discovering he is the father, and he must declare her righteousness as superior / Tamar gives birth to Perez and Zerah / Joseph becomes the attendant of Potiphar’s house / Joseph is falsely accused of trying to rape Potiphar’s wife / Joseph is cast into prison, quickly attaining responsibility for good conduct / Joseph interprets the dreams of Pharaoh’s cupbearer and baker / Joseph is called before Pharaoh, to interpret his dream of seven fat cows and seven lean cows / a plan is derived to save Egypt from famine / Joseph is made viceroy of Egypt, second only to Pharaoh / Joseph’s wife Asenath gives birth to two sons: Manasseh and Ephraim / Joseph prepares Egypt for the coming famine / Jacob’s sons go to Egypt to buy grain, as famine hits Canaan / Joseph recognizes his brothers, even though they do not recognize him / Joseph “accuses” his brothers of being spies / Simeon is placed into jail, as the brothers must prove their honesty by leaving and returning with their youngest / Israel agrees to let his sons return with Benjamin to Egypt / Joseph’s brothers, not knowing who he is, are invited to his house to dine / Joseph encounters Benjamin, the son of his own mother, and weeps privately / Joseph orders that his silver cup be placed in Benjamin’s bag, and the brothers are accused of thievery and divination / Joseph says that Benjamin must become his slave / Judah tries to convince Joseph to allow him to be the slave, for the sake of his father / Joseph, not being able to control himself, finally reveals himself as Joseph to his brothers / Joseph asks for his father to come to him / the Pharaoh is pleased that Joseph is reunited with his family, and grants them of the best land to graze their animals / Jacob is overjoyed to hear that

Joseph is still alive / Joseph is reunited with his father / Jacob is presented before Pharaoh / Joseph must monitor the results of the famine in Egypt / Jacob prepares to die, and Joseph agrees to bury him in Canaan / Jacob blesses Joseph, as well as his sons Manasseh and Ephraim / Jacob blesses all of his sons, blessing them and prophesying over their destinies / Jacob dies and is embalmed according to Egyptian custom / a huge company of Jacob's family, as well as Egyptian officials, make their way to Canaan to bury Jacob / Joseph assures his brothers that the past is behind them / Joseph dies, is embalmed, and is placed in a sarcophagus in Egypt

Key Scriptures: Genesis 1:27; 3:14-15; 6:5-8; 8:21-22; 9:12-16; 12:2-3; 13:14-17; 14:18-20; 15:4-6; 17:5-8; 22:7-12; 27:27-29; 28:3-4; 32:9-12, 28; 35:11-12; 45:4-7; 46:2-4, 29; 48:15-20; 50:19-21 / **The Story of Creation** (1:1-2:3); **The Story of Adam** (2:4-5:32); **The Story of Noah** (6:1-11:32); **The Story of Abraham** (12:1-25:18); **The Story of Isaac** (25:19-28:9); **The Story of Jacob** (28:10-36:43); **The Story of Joseph** (37:1-50:26)

Theological Summary: The Hebrew title of the first book of the Bible is *Bereisheet* (בְּרֵאשִׁית, pronounced *Bereishis* in the Ashkenazic tradition), coming from the first sentence in the text, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (1:1). Our English term "Genesis" is derived from the Greek Septuagint, which uses the term *geneseōs* (γένεσεως) in Genesis 2:4, describing "the book of the **generation** of heaven and earth" (LXE). This passed over into the Latin Vulgate as *Liber Genesis*. In the Jewish tradition, the full title of Genesis is *Sefer haBereisheet*, and referred to by some as *Sefer haYesharim* or "Book of the Upright."¹

The theme of the Book of Genesis is undoubtedly beginnings. "Genesis covers an immensely long period of time, longer perhaps than the rest of the Bible put together. It begins in the distant past of creation, an event about whose absolute date we cannot even speculate, through millennia to reach Abraham at the end of chapter 11" (Dillard and Longman).² If the lifespans of the early genealogies in chs. 5 and 11 are added together, then the text itself covers almost 2,400 years.³ Specifically, it would cover 1,948 years from Adam to Abraham,⁴ and then 361 years to the death of Joseph, equaling 2,309 years.⁵ If one considers there to be missing generations or individuals via a telescoped genealogy, then the timespan between Creation and the Patriarchs becomes considerably longer,⁶ with human history certainly going back 18,000-20,000 years or much, much more. The wide breadth of space and history that Genesis covers cannot be ignored by any able interpreter. Several, if not multiplied millennia of human history, are covered in Genesis' first twelve chapters.⁷

Geographically, Genesis can be divided into two principal segments. This first segment, chs. 1-38, comprises a great deal about what we know about humans living in Mesopotamia. Many conservative scholars are agreed that the Garden of Eden was likely located in Mesopotamia. Mesopotamia was the original home of Abram, Isaac's wife Rachel was from Mesopotamia, and Jacob lived in Mesopotamia for twenty years. The homeland of the original Hebrews was, in no uncertain terms, found in Mesopotamia. Various other parallels exist between the customs and laws followed by the Patriarchs,⁸ and what was followed in Mesopotamia, in spite of them transplanting themselves to Canaan. Of extreme importance is the fact of distinct Mesopotamian influence on the first parts of Genesis. Harrison notes that "On the whole, English

¹ Nahum M. Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), xi.

² Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 37.

³ O. Eissfeldt, "Genesis," in George Buttrick, ed. et. al., *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 4 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 2:368.

⁴ Sarna, *Genesis*, xii.

⁵ *Ibid.*; such a basic approach is reflected in Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz, eds., *ArtScroll Tanach* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1996), 2024.

Note the chart in Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 150 with the different ages given in the textual witnesses of the Hebrew MT, Greek LXX, and Samaritan Pentateuch.

⁶ Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp 147-152.

⁷ For a further discussion on this, and related issues, the author recommends Hugh Ross, *The Genesis Question: Scientific Advances and the Accuracy of Genesis*, second expanded edition (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2001) and *A Matter of Days: Resolving a Creation Controversy* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2004).

⁸ Thomas Edward McComiskey, "Genesis," in Merrill C. Tenney, ed., *The New International Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 380.

translations of the first dozen or so chapters of Genesis are so literal that they betray the translators' ignorance of the Mesopotamian background that Genesis so faithfully reflects" (*ISBE*).⁹

"There can be no real question as to the immense antiquity of the source material that is to be found in Genesis" (Harrison).¹⁰ We cannot ignore some distinct parallels between what we see in the Hebrew Bible and what is recorded in Mesopotamian works such as the *Enuma elish* creation story and *Epic of Gilgamesh* disastrous flood.¹¹ However, it must be noted that there are severe differences as well. "The Babylonian account depicts the Creation as taking place as a result of the sexual union of the gods...It is patently mythical and pagan in its orientation" (*NIDB*).¹² This is contrary to a Divine Creator making humankind in His own image, and being One who cares for His creatures. The Mesopotamian stories are nothing more than perverse preservations of the true Biblical account. "[I]t would not then be at all surprising if the story concerning them should come to be mythologized in pagan traditions, while being preserved in authentically historical form within the stream of tradition of which Gn. 1-11 is the inspired deposit" (Kline, *NBCR*).¹³ It is probable though, that the author of Genesis knew of these myths when composing the text.¹⁴

This first segment of Genesis can largely be broken up into two halves. The first half deals with what we might call primeval or pre-history, the period from Adam to the appearance of Abraham (1:1-11:26). This largely covers the Creation and Fall of humanity, the spread of sin in the early world, Noah's Flood, and the Tower of Babel. The second half of this segment deals with the Patriarchal history (11:27-38:1), covering the lives of Abraham and Isaac (11:27-25:11), and then with Isaac and Jacob (25:19-35:29; 37:1). These parts record Abraham's journey to Canaan, the judgment of God upon Sodom and Gomorrah, and Abraham offering up Isaac for a sacrifice. They are interspersed by the genealogies of Ishmael (25:12-28) and Esau (ch. 36).

The second major segment of Genesis, chs. 39-50, that covers far less time, sees the scene shift from Canaan to Egypt. From 39:2-50:26 we see the lives of Jacob and Joseph, and the twelve sons of Israel having to move into Egypt. We also get a feel for the Ancient Hebrews' lives in Egypt, and as a result, we see that the author of Genesis is quite familiar with the Egyptian civilization, with careful attention given in this part to specific agricultural advances made and perfected by Egypt.

The authorship of Genesis is a lively debate in modern theology, and has been since the mid-Eighteenth Century. Most, regardless of their position, are agreed that Genesis should not be read on its own without some connection to the rest of the Torah or Pentateuch (Exodus-Deuteronomy), as the story continues on. It is important that we remember Genesis "was not written as an independent and complete volume" (*New Interpreter's Study Bible*).¹⁵ But as one can imagine, reading the Book of Genesis in light of the rest of the Torah has caused a great deal of controversy.

Historically, both Jews and Christians have held to the position of some kind of Mosaic authorship, even though Genesis is, in a strict sense, totally anonymous.¹⁶ Varied ancient traditions, both inside and outside of the Bible, Jewish and Christian, almost all attest to Moses being the author of Genesis (at least before 1750). The principal witness that we have attesting to genuine Mosaic authorship—as Believers—is actually the Apostolic Scriptures or New Testament. Acts 15:1, for example, treats the rite of circumcision as being "according to the custom of Moses" (even if here it involved some Rabbinic additions), a direct allusion to Genesis 17. A consensus reading of the Apostolic Scriptures assigns some level of the Torah's authorship to Moses (Mark 12:26; Luke 24:27; Romans 10:5; 2 Corinthians 3:15), especially John 1:45 and 5:46:

⁹ R.K. Harrison, "Genesis," in Geoffrey Bromiley, ed., *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 2:438.

¹⁰ Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 552.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp 555-558; Ronald S. Hendel, "Genesis, Book of," in David Noel Freedman, ed., *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 2:938-939.

¹² McComiskey, "Genesis," in *NIDB*, 381.

¹³ Meredith G. Kline, "Genesis," in D. Guthrie and J.A. Motyer, eds., *The New Bible Commentary Revised* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 79.

¹⁴ Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 552.

¹⁵ Theodore Hiebert, "Genesis," in Walter J. Harrelson, ed., et. al., *New Interpreter's Study Bible*, NRSV (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 1; Harrison, "Genesis," in *ISBE*, 2:431-432; Dillard and Longman, 37.

¹⁶ Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 542; Dillard and Longman, 39.

- “Philip found Nathanael and said to him, ‘We have found Him of whom Moses in the Law and *also* the Prophets wrote – Yeshua of Nazareth, the son of Joseph’” (John 1:45).
- “For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me, for he wrote about Me” (John 5:46).

All of the specific quotations in the Apostolic Scriptures from Yeshua or the Apostles ascribe Moses as being the author of the Torah. “[T]he NT endorses the Jewish tradition of Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, not excluding Genesis” (Kline, *NBCR*).¹⁷ Sailhamer further repeats, “It appears relatively certain that Jesus and the writers of the NT believed that Moses was the author of the Pentateuch” (*EXP*).¹⁸ So, for anyone to deny Moses’ hand in composing the Torah, such a person is going against the authority of the Messiah and the Apostles.

There are, however, conservative-moderates who believe in principal Mosaic authorship of Genesis, but do allow for post-Mosaic editing in some distinct references. “The concept of Mosaic authorship does not demand the belief that Moses was the first to write every word of each account in the Book of Genesis. It is generally understood today to mean that much of his work was compilation” (*NIDB*).¹⁹ Verses that clearly indicate post-Mosaic editing of Genesis include the mention of “Dan” (14:14), a list of kings that reigned in the land of Edom (36:31), and a reference to the “land of Ramses” (47:11). Many “conservative Christians have been too quick to distance themselves from the possibility of sources and too closed to any evidence of significant post-Mosaic activity” (Dillard and Longman),²⁰ and the idea of exclusive Mosaic authorship of Genesis permeates the vast majority of today’s Messianic community, with almost no room to move.

In affirming Mosaic authorship of the Book of Genesis, none of us can conclude that Moses is the author of every single letter. First, we do not know if he used scribes to compile the earliest edition of Genesis, and secondly, it is quite probable that Moses did incorporate outside materials in its composition. Harrison speculates that the material for chs. 1-36, including the story of Creation and the Flood, originally existed on cuneiform tablets, and that information was adapted by Moses for our canonical Genesis account:

“If it is correct to assume that the first thirty-six chapters of Genesis had originally had an independent existence as cuneiform tablets, it would have been a comparatively easy matter for a talented person such as Moses to compile the canonical book by arranging the tablets in a rough chronological order” (*ISBE*).²¹

Conservatives generally believe that “the writer of the Book of Genesis appears to have composed his work from ‘archival’ records of God’s great deeds in the past...the narratives within the Book of Genesis appear to be largely made up of small, self-contained stories worked together into larger units by means of various geographical and genealogical tables. If such is, in fact, the case, one should not expect to find absolute uniformity of style, etc., among all the individual narratives any more than an absolute uniformity can be expected in later historical books” (Sailhamer, *EXP*).²² Some divide the material for Genesis 1:1-37:2 into eleven possible tablets,²³ noting “to what extent [Moses] wrote any of its contents, with the possible exception of all or part of the Joseph narratives, is unknown” (Harrison).²⁴

Moses may better be described as the “principal compiler” of Genesis, if indeed he took Patriarchal traditions that had been passed down in the community of Israel, and via God’s Spirit integrated them into His authorized religious Instruction. It is notable that having been raised in Egypt, he would have seen that the original Genesis was written on leather, a more preferred and durable material than clay.²⁵ The author of Genesis has a knowledge of Egypt (13:10) and the Egyptian language (41:43-45), certainly pointing to Moses. We must, however, consider the fact that whatever was written in Moses’ time was composed in the paleo-

¹⁷ Kline, “Genesis,” in *NBCR*, 79.

¹⁸ John H. Sailhamer, “Genesis,” in Frank E. Gaebelien, ed. et. al., *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976-1992), 2:5.

¹⁹ McComiskey, “Genesis,” in *NIDB*, 380.

²⁰ Dillard and Longman, 39; cf. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 542.

²¹ Harrison, “Genesis,” in *ISBE*, 2:437.

²² Sailhamer, in *EXP*, 2:4.

²³ Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp 548-551.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 542.

²⁵ Harrison, “Genesis,” in *ISBE*, 2:437-438; cf. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 552.

Hebrew or Phoenician script, whereas what we have today is in Assyrian or Babylonian block script, acquired by the Jewish exiles who were taken to Babylon. The Talmud tells us that Ezra the Priest was responsible for the final composition of the Tanach in the current block script (b.*Sanhedrin* 21b),²⁶ and so the Torah, and thus Genesis as we have it today, is a product of the post-Babylonian exile.

Our ministry falls well within the conservative-moderate position of Mosaic authorship of the Book of Genesis, and we are certainly not advocates of the liberal view.²⁷ We cannot ignore the broad array of events and history that Genesis covers,²⁸ including the incorporation of outside sources into Genesis, so it is best to say that we believe in the “essential authorship” of Moses (Dillard and Longman),²⁹ allowing for possible later editing by individuals such as Joshua or Ezra the Priest.

The liberal view of the composition of Genesis, and indeed the entire Torah, is one that most Messianics are not even aware of. Liberals all deny any Mosaic authorship of Genesis, and instead adhere to some kind of “documentary hypothesis.” The most widely advocated of these theories is commonly called JEDP, which is believed to string together various religious traditions from a distinct element or religious tradition within Ancient Israel. Forms of this theory have existed since the mid-1700s, and were popularized in Germany in the mid-1800s, specifically by Julius Wellhausen. It is often based on factors such as differing literary styles, usage of the Divine name YHWH, alleged contradictions in the text, and perceived developments in Israel’s religion³⁰ – although there have been significant scholars who have challenged it.³¹

Liberals advocate that the Jews returning from Babylonian exile in the Sixth Century B.C.E. compiled various traditions into what we now call the Torah, ascribing authorship to Moses. Extreme liberals believe that the story of Creation and the Flood are largely myths, coupled with other “local legends” such as the judgment upon Sodom and Gomorrah.³² Perhaps Abraham existed as an historical figure, but never as prominent as Genesis portrays him. Furthermore, many have tried to postulate that the religion of Ancient Israel developed from polytheistic to monotheistic, so any references in the Hebrew text to “YHWH” (J) or “Elohim” (E) are actually to be viewed as references to two different deities. This view came to prominence in a time highly dominated by social Darwinism, and is undeniably affected by the theory of evolution.³³

Liberal views which deny the historicity of the Book of Genesis are frequently developed by people who deny anything supernatural. Conservative views are commonly criticized as being “shaken by modern natural science, especially by biology and Darwinism” (*IDBSup*).³⁴ While JEDP is a very common theory to hear in liberal Christian seminaries, many Jews likewise believe in it.³⁵ Many in Jewish and Christian institutes think that they “have to” believe it because “everyone else does,” but as Sarna validly points out, “it is beyond doubt that the Book of Genesis came down to us, not as a composite of disparate elements but as a unified document with a life, coherence, and integrity of its own. For this reason, a fragmentary approach to it cannot provide an adequate understanding of the whole.”³⁶ A good trend in Biblical scholarship among liberals appearing more and more is acknowledging some kind of unity in Genesis on literary grounds,³⁷ recognizing that all readers have to deal with the text in its final form, even though some Mosaic involvement in Genesis’ composition will still be denied by these people.

²⁶ “And even though the Torah was not given through [Ezra], the script was changed through him” (b.*Sanhedrin* 21b; *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*, MS Windows XP, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005. CD-ROM).

²⁷ Cf. Dillard and Longman, 38.

²⁸ Cf. Sailhamer, in *EXP*, 2:3-4.

²⁹ Dillard and Longman, 40.

³⁰ Eissfeldt, “Genesis,” in *IDB*, 2:369-373; C. Westermann and R. Albertz, “Genesis,” in Keith Crim, ed., *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible: Supplementary Volume* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), 358; Hendel, “Genesis” in *ABD*, 2:933-938; Dillard and Longman, pp 40-44.

³¹ Harrison, “Genesis,” in *ISBE*, 2:433-437.

³² Eissfeldt, “Genesis,” in *IDB*, 2:376-378.

³³ *Ibid.*, 3:379.

³⁴ Westermann and Albertz, “Genesis,” in *IDBSup*, 356.

³⁵ Jon D. Levenson, “Genesis,” in Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 11.

³⁶ Sarna, *Genesis*, xvi.

³⁷ Dillard and Longman, 46-47; cf. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 564.

From a textual standpoint the major witnesses that we have of the Book of Genesis are the Hebrew Masoretic Text (MT), Samaritan Pentateuch, the Greek Septuagint (LXX), and Genesis fragments found among the Dead Sea Scrolls.³⁸ On the whole, the Hebrew textual witnesses of Genesis are very good, but on occasion it can be necessary to find a better reading evident in a secondary version because of Genesis' antiquity.³⁹ This is especially true of translation into English where the Hebrew can be unclear or vague, and the Greek LXX will often give a translator clues as to what a clearer rendering in English can be.

The theological message of Genesis is clear to anyone who reads it. Genesis must be understood for a person to understand the rest of the Bible.⁴⁰ Genesis lays the groundwork via the promises given by God to Abraham for the establishment of the nation of Israel, and most importantly lays the groundwork for understanding the Messiah to come. Genesis is highly monotheistic as Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph are all seen relating themselves to a single deity. We see God relating to humanity in both love and judgment in Genesis, characteristics seen throughout the rest of Scripture.

As Genesis lays the foundation for the rest of the Bible, and specifically the Torah, we see that Israel is not just an emerging nation brought about by random chance, but by God directly intervening in the lives of people. We see that God has a plan of blessing all the peoples of Planet Earth through the line of Abraham (12:1-3), and the beginning of the people who will accomplish this blessing as His representatives. Sarna summarizes that "the entire Hebrew Bible is both God-centered and Israel-centered,"⁴¹ so any examination of Genesis by us as Messianic Believers today must be done by us seeing what God's ultimate agenda is for the world: **to see humanity's restoration to Himself.** Not surprisingly, some of the themes seen at the beginning of Genesis are repeated at the end of Revelation.⁴²

When we consider the theology of today's Messianic movement, some challenges exist in our present approach to Genesis. While many Messianic Believers engage in a consistent study of the Torah, including Genesis, some tend to make the reverse mistake of liberals who deny that its miraculous events took place. Some Messianics have an "overly mythical" view of Genesis that largely comes from consulting ultra-Orthodox and Chassidic Jewish sources, at the expense of understanding Genesis in the context of the Ancient Near East. Honest inquiries about human origins and the greater universe are often dismissed. We would do well in the future to adapt a more conservative-moderate view of Genesis, where we fully affirm the accuracy of the text, that God did indeed create the world intentionally with humans made by His intelligent design, that these people and the events actually did take place, and that these accounts give us a vivid picture of God's love, but also His judgment. We need to engage with more commentaries and references that do not skirt around the controversies which exist with Genesis, so that our faith can be strengthened, and we can truly see the supernatural interacting with the natural.

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³⁸ Hendel, "Genesis," in *ABD*, 2:933.

³⁹ Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 565.

⁴⁰ Dillard and Longman, 37.

⁴¹ Sarna, *Genesis*, xii.

⁴² Harrison, "Genesis," in *ISBE*, 2:432.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION ON GENESIS:

1. Which of the narratives in Genesis do you consider to be the most important? Or, at least requiring greater investigation on your part?

2. Summarize the features of the idyllic state of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. How do you intend to see that this condition is restored one day, or at least that elements of it are captured right now?

3. What were the conditions that required God to send a flood upon the Earth?

4. What do you think is most significant about the life of Abraham? Summarize God's original promise to him, and how Abraham responded.

5. Why do you think God judged Sodom and Gomorrah?

6. Do you believe that Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac represents anything important?

7. Summarize the events in the early life of Jacob. Which one do you think requires further inquiry on your part?

8. What are the qualities of the different sons of Jacob/Israel? What can these individuals teach us about the human condition?

9. How and why did Joseph end up in Egypt? How do you think Joseph advanced so quickly while in Egypt?

10. Do any of the specific blessings that Jacob/Israel gives to his twelve sons peak your interest?

11. Which issue(s) seen in the Book of Genesis do you believe may shake Messianic Bible scholarship in the future? Do you think there is anything in Genesis that the Messianic community might be avoiding?

12. In your religious experience – Messianic, Jewish, or Christian – have you ever been exposed to the idea that Moses did not write or compose *any* of the Torah? What is your reaction to hearing about the JEDP hypothesis? Why do you think the Messianic movement today largely avoids addressing it *in any way*?

REFLECTION ON GENESIS' PLACEMENT IN THE CANON

Write two short paragraphs about what struck you about reading the Book of Genesis: