



# Genesis

## SESSION 1—GENESIS 1:1–2:25; 6:1–22; 9:1–17

| *In the Beginning*

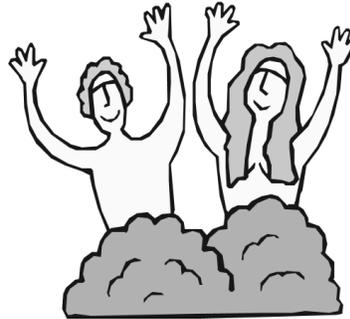
### Introduction

The book of Genesis is the first book of the collections of books we now call the Bible. It is also the first of five books called the Torah. This collection of books was compiled somewhere around four hundred years before the time of Jesus. It is a book about beginnings: of the world, of humankind, of a people.

We cannot deal with the entire book of Genesis in just three sessions. Instead, we will consider selected passages from this important book. In this first session we consider parts of what might be called the introduction to Genesis (chaps. 1–11). Session 2 includes the stories about Abraham and Sarah in chapters 12–23. We will not cover the stories of Isaac and Rebekah, or of Jacob, Leah, and Rachel, not because they are unimportant but for lack of time. The third session will center on Joseph, and God’s providential care of him, as found in chapters 37–50.

Genesis was originally written in Hebrew. The title of the book in Hebrew is *bereshith* (Hebrew for “in the beginning” or “when”). The name was derived, as was customary in antiquity, from the first word of the book, in this case *bereshith*. The name “Genesis” comes from the title given to the earliest Greek translation (called the Septuagint) of the Hebrew original. This name was chosen because the book was about the “origin” of things, about the “genealogy” of things.

Genesis was not all composed at one time by one person. A number of stories were brought together over several centuries. Two basic groups of stories and traditions can be differentiated in the book of Genesis on the basis of the terms used in reference to God. In one set the Hebrew term regularly used is *'elohim* (pronounced



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*el-oh-heem*), which is a rather generic word for God used at that time. This group of stories was inserted into an earlier group of stories somewhere around 450 BCE.

The earlier group of stories was more complete and used a distinctive term for God that we can no longer pronounce with certainty. Long before the time of Jesus, Jews had ceased pronouncing it out of reverence. They considered God’s name so holy that to pronounce it would show irreverence. This term is a personal name for God, the consonants of which are YHWH. Modern scholars (Jewish and Christian) think that it was probably pronounced “Yahweh,” but this cannot be proven. This earlier material was probably first collected around 950–850 BCE.

The first eleven chapters of Genesis, as already suggested, serve as an introduction to the book and to the Bible. It is important to recognize that this material was intended to explain the origins of the whole human family. It is not simply the prehistory of one ancient people that came to be called Israel. Israel does find its beginning here but so do all peoples, all the humans fashioned and claimed by God.

There are many items of interest in these first eleven chapters, but we are going to concentrate on only three:

two accounts of God’s creative activities and a detailed story about a devastating flood. Herein we will see how God began the story with humankind, ended it, and began it once more. It is a fascinating narrative, so hold on for the ride.

## The Earliest Creation Account

If you read the book of Genesis straight through, you will find that many stories are repeated in slightly different ways. There are two accounts of the creation, for example: Genesis 1:1–2:4a and Genesis 2:4b–25. The book of Genesis does not begin with the earliest account of the creation. It makes sense that the later writers put their version first. So, the earliest creation story actually is found in the second chapter, 2:4b–25 to be precise. In the opening words a bold, three-pronged affirmation is made: “In the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens . . .” (2:4b). This statement affirms that all that exists on earth and in the heavens is the result of God’s action. Further, everything is “made,” nothing exists in its own right. And finally, the “LORD God” is the agent of creation. That One who will later be known as the Deliverer of Israel from Egypt and confessed as the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, that one is the Lord God!

The term “LORD God” combines the personal name YHWH with the more generic word *’elohim*. This term is found repeatedly throughout the Old Testament. The personal name YHWH is rendered in the Bible as “the LORD,” as was done in the Septuagint with the term *kyrios* (Lord). While the earlier tradition used YHWH from the very beginning, the later tradition believed the personal name YHWH was not revealed until the book of Exodus, in the time of Moses, when Moses encountered God in a burning bush and God revealed the name YHWH (see Exod. 3:13–15). Thus the later writers did not use this name in the stories they included in Genesis.

The chief concern of the earliest creation account has to do with the Lord God shaping a “dirt creature” from the “dirt.” With a play on a Hebrew word that means “dirt” or “dust” or “ground,” God is said to have “formed” (rather like a potter) an *’adam* (dirt creature) from the *’adamah* (dirt) (2:7a). The Lord God then breathes into the *’adam* the “breath of life” (2:7b). For modern readers it is important to note that the Hebrew text did not understand *’adam* to be a proper name until Genesis 5:1. (The Septuagint, on which early Christian interpretation leaned, however, rendered the term as a proper name

as early as 2:15.) From the standpoint of the earliest Hebrew tradition, humankind was dirt from dirt, enlivened and sustained only by the power of the Lord God, the one Creator.

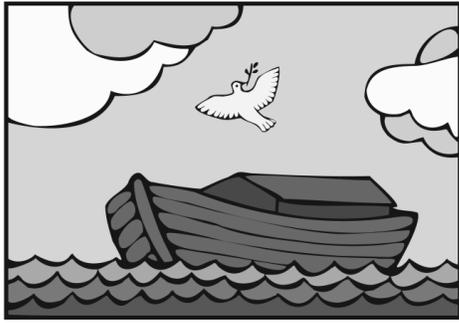
In the course of the story the Lord God recognizes that the *’adam* needs a companion and helper. So, after a number of attempts to supply such a partner (2:18–20), the Lord God makes an appropriate companion from the flesh and bone of *’adam*. With another play on words *’adam* exclaims:

This at last is bone of my bones  
and flesh of my flesh;  
this one shall be called Woman [in Hebrew *’ishshah*],  
for out of Man [in Hebrew *’ish*] this one was  
taken. (2:23)

With a comment about the significance of marriage, the opening scene of the earliest account of God’s creative work concludes with humankind, the man and the woman, the dirt creatures, happily living in a garden prepared for them by the Lord God (2:8, 25).

## The Second, Later Creation Account

As previously mentioned, the later account (Gen. 1:1–2:4a) is actually found before the first because the later editors controlled the order and structure of the book we now have. In a highly structured, almost poetic piece, written several centuries later than the first, *’elohim*, God, creates the world and all that is in it in six days. A special Hebrew term, *bara’*, used only with God as its subject, emphasizes that God “created” rather than “fashioned” all that is. In a carefully designed presentation, the work of the first three days is paralleled by the work in the last three days. For instance, on day one God utters a word and “light” appears in the midst of the “formless void and darkness” in which God began (1:2–3). The light is differentiated into day and night (1:4–5). Then, on day four, the day parallel to day one, God creates the stars, the moon, and the sun (1:14–18). To modern folk this seems odd. After all, if there was already light and day and night, how can the astral bodies only later be fashioned? But for the ancient writer the aim was to show how the universe was structured—how the house was built—on days one through three and then how it was filled out, or furnished, on days four through six. All along the way, God pronounces the work “good” and at the end declares the whole project “very good” (1:31).



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There are three points of emphasis in this account of the creation of humankind. First, 'adam is given "dominion" over all things: "let *them* [the plural pronoun stresses the collective understanding of 'adam] have dominion" (1:26). This dominion was to be in the form of guardianship, not exploitation. Second, humankind is created in the image of God. The Hebrew term translated "image" is *tselem*, which usually refers to a physical likeness of a ruling king or a deity. Such images were placed at the borders of a king's or a deity's territory. Here in Genesis the term is used to remind us all that we who are in the image of God—all of us!—are representatives of God. We remind one another about the One who is Creator of all. Third, in this account God differentiates male and female from the outset of their creation. The earlier account could be interpreted—and in fact has been interpreted—to suggest that "woman" was subordinate to "man" since she was created second and from the man. This later account removes the basis for any such misconception. Male and female are created together in the divine image and are blessed together by God (1:27–28).

While some may consider the creation of humankind as the high point of this account, those who constructed and preserved it thought differently. The climax of God's creative activity is reached on day seven: God rests (2:2). Of course, Genesis is not a modern scientific paper and "day" is not intended in a literal sense. But the important point that is made is that not only space but also time belongs to God. Thus, as God rested on the seventh day from all the work of creation (*bara'* is again used), so humankind is also to observe one day of rest, a Sabbath, on a weekly basis. Later, in the book of Exodus, God's rest on the seventh day is cited as the basis of the commandment to observe the Sabbath (Exod. 20:8–11; 31:12–17).

## The Great Flood

A third major account found in the introduction to Genesis and the Bible concerns a great flood that swept over the earth (6:11–8:19). The story is about how Noah and his family, along with countless birds and animals, escaped destruction in an ark, a boat, that God instructed Noah to build. The story appears to have been composed from two slightly different versions that have been woven together. This is evidenced by variations in some of the details. For instance, on the one hand, we are told that a pair of each type of animal and bird was to be preserved (6:19–21), while in another place we are told that seven pairs of "clean" animals and birds and one pair of "unclean" animals were to be taken on board (7:2–4). Such discrepancies do not mute the point of the account.

This flood account is preceded by some significant notes about happenings among the human family. Had the story stopped after the creation stories, we would have had humankind created in God's image and living in happy innocence in a beautiful garden, all the work of God. But the story does not end there. In Genesis 3 the breakdown of the relationship between humans and God culminates with the man and woman expelled from the garden of Eden (3:24). Immediately thereafter we read of Cain's murder of his brother Abel (4:1–16).

There are notes about the invention of the lyre and pipe (4:21), the development of bronze and iron tools (4:22), and the observation that during the time of Enosh "people began to invoke the name of the LORD [YHWH]" (4:26; compare Exod. 3:13–15). Then the story of the downward slide of the human family continues, culminating in what was considered a great wickedness. The "sons of God," a term usually referring to divine beings of some sort, intermarry with mortal women (6:2)! This occasions an important assertion: "The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart" (6:5–6). Thus, the Lord decides, "I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created . . . for I am sorry that I have made them" (6:7).

Two very important points are made here. First, great care is taken to make clear that the action of God was not capricious or unprovoked. God is not pictured acting in an immoral manner. Though some may consider God's

actions too harsh, the narrator goes to lengths to make certain that the readers understand that God was not acting without cause. Wickedness was rampant among humans, and God had to do something about it. Unlike some of the stories told in the ancient Near East about deities who were viewed as jealous, vengeful, demanding tyrants, the story in Genesis is about a Creator deeply troubled by the evil that humankind exhibits. This is not a story about inescapable “fate” such as the Greeks liked to tell. It is a story about moral failure on the part of the humans God had created (6:5, 11–12).

The second point that this story makes is that the divine Creator has feelings and can alter plans. God’s decision to destroy humankind because of their great wickedness is conveyed in terms of divine sorrow rather than anger. The situation brings pain to God’s heart (6:6). Human behavior matters to God! The biblical story that unfolds here and throughout the Old Testament is an ongoing demonstration of how God adjusts to the continuing disregard by humans of God’s desires. Judgment and forgiveness are aspects of God’s care for the world and are repeatedly exercised by God (see also Exod. 34:6–7; Ps. 103:8; Jonah 4:2).

The story again might have ended except for divine mercy. Though God is deeply saddened at human behavior, and though God has decided to “blot out from the earth the human beings” that God had created (6:7), God nonetheless graciously chooses to continue the story through a person named Noah (6:8). Noah alone was deemed righteous in his generation (6:9). “Righteousness” in the Bible is not so much a moral category as a relational one. Noah maintained his relationship with God and carried out his assignment, faithfully demonstrating how “righteous” he was.

There is much in these chapters that can distract a reader. Could any of this literally have happened? What about flood stories from different cultures around the world? Where did all the animals and birds come from? Were

exotic species from the Amazon basin included? And on and on! But to fall into speculation about such matters is to risk missing the main point. So let us restrain our imaginations and stick with the narrative.

The story makes at least two more important affirmations. First, at the conclusion of the flood God acknowledges a sacrifice made by Noah and promises: “I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done” (8:21). In effect, God acknowledges that the sinfulness of humankind will always be a factor in God’s relationship with his creatures. Nonetheless, God pledges not to give up on the project! Human wickedness will never again provoke God to the judgment represented by the flood. Second, God establishes a covenant with all flesh (the humans, the animals, the birds) that came out of the ark (9:9–11). The covenant is strictly an act of divine favor. It is not earned or deserved. God solely takes the initiative to establish an everlasting relationship. The sign of this covenant is the rainbow (the Hebrew word can also be rendered as “war bow”). Each time it appears in the heavens all flesh is to be reminded of God’s marvelous grace.

## Conclusion

The flood story and the creation accounts sketch the “beginnings” in a way that highlights the intention of a loving, caring Creator for the whole human family. These stories are for all humankind, not only for one particular group later called the Israelites. That needs to be remembered as we continue.

## About the Author

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