

# THE BOOK OF GENESIS

## INTRODUCTION

1) 'Genesis' is a Greek word which means beginning. It is also the root word out of which the word 'birth' comes from. Genesis essentially tells the story of the birth or beginning of the universe we inhabit. It begins quite broadly, with the creation of the whole world. Then it focuses in on the human creature in particular and the relationship of humans with God. Early on this relationship between God and humans takes a bad turn, and God acts in some drastic ways to try to correct or eliminate the evil that comes between humans and God. As the story progresses it becomes clear that God will continue to pursue loving ways to relate to humans even though they are contaminated by an evil which they do not resist. God's actions against such evil are constrained by a refusal to eradicate human freedom. Human freedom, however, is also the cause of significant evil.

2) Genesis begins with the creation of the world. It then focuses in on the relationship of humanity to God, coming to some conflict when the first humans are banished from paradise (the garden of Eden), and when God rains a flood upon the earth (the story of Noah). The story then focuses in on a specific family (Abraham and Sarah) and God's calling of them to journey to a new place and become a new people (Israel). The cycle of stories for the remainder of Genesis (Chapters 12-50), involve Abraham & Sarah, Isaac & Rebekah, Jacob & Rachel, and finally Joseph, as main characters of the unfolding drama. The story ends with the family reconciled and well settled in Egypt.

3) Genesis is neither scientific history nor mythology. It is a revelation (unfolding) of the relationship between the Creator God and a people called to be the means to the salvation of the world. The world started as an Eden and its destiny cannot come to fulfilment until Eden is re-established. Is Adam and Eve, then, true historically? Even now debates rage in public schools in the United States. There are two extreme positions and something in between. On the one side there is Darwinian evolutionary theory, which, although it has many gaps, recognizes the world to be many billions and trillions of years old. The problem is that it can only speak about the world coming to be without reference to anything beyond the world. The other extreme position is 'creationism' which suggests the world was made in 7 days and that it started several thousands of years ago, exactly, literally, as the Adam and Eve story tells us. In the middle is the position of 'intelligent design.' This position suggests that science has lots to teach us about the origins and evolution of the world even though there are many gaps. But it also suggests that the more we discover how our world came to be, the more the evidence speaks of some intelligent, intentional, brilliant, and purposeful design. It doesn't use the word 'God' but it leaves us with few alternatives.

4) When was Genesis written? Given the development of the Hebrew language, references to places and geographical details, and so on, scholars agree that it was written while the Hebrews were under exile in Babylon (6<sup>th</sup> century BC). The stories of Genesis, however, are older and were passed on generation after generation in some form or another. What is powerful about its message is that the God of Israel (Yahweh), is not just one tribal God among many, not just the God of a particular nation, but the God of the whole world and all its peoples. Its message is universal, and it indicates the movement of Israel's faith from that of a tribal people to that of a nation among nations. It also teaches the people that God has not abandoned them, that God has a plan for the whole world, even though that plan is not visible in the messy details of history.

### 1:1 - 2:4

- 'Then God said' - speech is very important in the bible and in Genesis. Words have power. God's Word issues in creation. God's Word is active. It makes things happen.

- The presupposition of the creation story is of a universe pre- 1492 (the world is flat), that the world is like a big dome, that there are depths beneath the earth, and that outside the dome is the sky. This conception of the universe would not be very different from what other ancient peoples believed. What is different, however, is that for other peoples, sun, moon, stars, etc. would be conceived as deities. For Genesis, all these things are not gods, but part of God's creation, and there is an overall harmony that is governed and moved by goodness and beauty.

- The creation of the world and all that is in it is good. This is important because so much of the bible is taken up with evil and suffering as this is what human beings experience and perpetrate. The creation story, however, wants to communicate that God's intention and God's work is good. There is no inherent evil in anything that exists. Rather, (as we will see in Genesis 2 and following) evil comes into play as a corruption of something good, as a disease that distorts and disfigures the goodness of creation.

- 'In the image of God.' What does this mean? It means that human beings are made to have a certain imitative and constitutional 'likeness' to God. If God creates out of love, humans are called to participate in God's creation out of love. If God has freedom to do good, humans, too, have freedom to make good choices. The best way to understand the word 'dominion' (so often misunderstood) is by words such as 'caretaking' or 'stewardship.' A caretaker or steward is given responsibility and a certain independence to carry it out. But ultimately, they are responsible and accountable to the owner or 'Lord'. Human dominion over creation is simultaneously human accountability and responsibility before God, and the call of God to be like God and to live out that likeness by 'imaging' God's goodness in creation.

The broader question, though, is whether creation needs human stewardship. Isn't gardening or care intended for human purposes and human needs? Do the plants, animals and trees need humans to survive and thrive? Or are humans the problem because they impose their will on creation and 'subdue' it? How do humans image God who takes nothing from creation but simply takes delight in it finding it beautiful and good in all its wonderful and free diversity? How do humans take what they need from the earth but also give back and care for it so that there is harmony, balance, and mutual abundance for all life?

- The goodness of creation fills God with delight. The note of celebration, joy, completion, and a recognition of beauty, are all contained in this story. There is nothing that God makes for which God is regretful or unhappy or feels sad about. Creation pleases God immensely. What God will be sad about soon will be the choices humans make that do not image God/Love.

- The day of rest. The Sabbath. This is not a time to vegetate. It is not about 'down time.' Rather, the Sabbath rest is about taking in creation, giving thanks for it, contemplating, and rejoicing in the goodness of God. Again, God sets the pattern to which human beings are called to imitate (in the image and likeness of God). The Sabbath is a time to worship and enjoy the earth and those in our lives who image God's likeness to us. It is also the opportunity to image God's likeness toward others and in the way we organize and live out our lives in the world. Sabbath rest is the time needed to get centred and focussed on what this all means.