



Genesis 1:3

GENESIS

Background File

Moses was traditionally considered the author of Genesis, which is part of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible. But since at least the Middle Ages and after the Reformation especially, the question of who wrote Genesis has been seen as more complex. Genesis is now usually understood to have been written and compiled over the course of more than five centuries, being completed sometime after the Babylonian exile (587–538 BCE), when many of the Jewish people returned to their homeland of Judah and rebuilt Jerusalem and the temple.

What's the Story?

The book of Genesis is divided into two primary sections: Genesis 1–11 portrays the beginnings of the world, including creation, the first sin, and the flood and its aftermath. Genesis 12–50 tells the story of Israel's ancestors and is especially concerned to speak of God's promises to this family. The book may be outlined as follows:

The primeval story (1:1–11:26) God, with the help of various agents, creates the world. Human sin intrudes on the creation, with social and cosmic effects. God promises a new world order.

The story of Abraham and Sarah (11:27–25:18) God calls Abram (later renamed Abraham) and makes promises to him and his descendants through both Hagar and Sarai (later, Sarah), though it is only through his son Isaac that the covenant is established.

The story of Jacob, Leah, and Rachel (25:19–36:43) God renews the promises to Jacob (later renamed Israel), whose twelve sons become the tribes of Israel.

The story of Jacob's sons, especially Joseph (37:1–50:26) The development of Jacob's family is seen mainly through the prism of the story of Joseph.

The scholarly effort to reconstruct the history behind the book of Genesis has had mixed results, because the materials were edited over many centuries and because these chapters are more story than historical account. Especially regarding Genesis 1–11, we cannot determine its specific historical background with any confidence. As for Genesis 12–50, it is reasonable to claim that the stories carry authentic memories of Israel's ancient history prior to the exodus from Egypt (about 2000–1500 BCE). Yet, because these stories come from so long ago, it is difficult to verify the extent to which they reflect actual historical figures and events.

What's the Message?

Genesis is the first “chapter” of the Bible. Like the first chapter of any book, the placement of Genesis at the beginning is important for understanding both Genesis and the Bible as a whole.

The Bible begins not with the chosen people (Israel), but with the entire creation. It provides the reader with a universal frame of reference. Through it we can interpret everything that follows. God's purposes—at work among the people of Israel and in Jesus Christ—have to do with all of God's good creation. “For God so loved the world . . .” (see Jn 3:16).

Genesis continues with a sad story that has tragic effects. God created a good world with no sin or evil. Human beings did not trust God, and thus, sin disrupted the life of God's good world. Relationships at every level fell apart: between human beings and God, among human beings, and between human beings and the world and its creatures. Sin and evil are now powerful forces at work in the life of the world. Even so, God continues to shower blessings at every turn.

Genesis continues with a divine strategy to save a world broken by sin and evil. To this end, God chooses the family of Abraham and Sarah. Their task is stated clearly in Genesis 12:3: “In you all the families of the earth [listed in Gen 10] shall be blessed.” God chooses one family to bless all families. Initially, God makes an exclusive move (choosing one family) to achieve an inclusive end: salvation of the entire creation, both human and nonhuman.

Genesis focuses on God's promises. After the flood, God promises never to judge the world like this again. This promise is the foundation for God's later promises to the chosen family: blessing, descendants, a great name and nation, and a land to call their own. These promises, repeated throughout Genesis, begin to be fulfilled in this family's growth.

Genesis focuses on families. This interest in family life begins with Cain and Abel but centers on the families of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Leah and Rachel, and their children. But these stories do not present families in ideal terms. The chosen family is frequently dysfunctional! Yet God chooses to work in and through them, with all their flaws and weaknesses, on behalf of God's purposes for the world. Readers from every generation can recognize themselves in these families.

Genesis has an interest in the outsider, in families not chosen. Genesis often portrays the chosen family in relationships with outsiders (Egyptians, Canaanites, Philistines, Aramaeans), especially in view of its call to be a blessing to all families. Sometimes the chosen fulfill their responsibilities in exceptional ways; at other times they alienate the outsider and frustrate God's purposes. These stories help us think carefully about how we are relating to the outsiders in our communities.

Six Days of Creation and the Sabbath



1:1 When God began to create: The beginning of the ordered creation, not the beginning of all things (as in the NRSVue footnote). In this translation, the “when” appearing in verse 1 connects God's creative act to the time when the earth was a formless void (1:2).



Why is it significant that God creates by bringing a measure of order to chaos?

1 When God began to create^a the heavens and the earth, ²the earth was complete chaos, and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God^b swept over the face of the waters. ³Then God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. ⁴And God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵God

^a Or *In the beginning God created* ^b Or *while the spirit of God* or *while a mighty wind*



1:3-6 Tamar . . . Rahab . . . Ruth . . . the wife of Uriah:

Women were not usually listed in a genealogy, but Matthew includes four here (and one more in 1:16). Further, these were women who might be regarded as embarrassing entries in someone's family tree, either because they had been involved in something potentially scandalous or because they were "foreigners."



1:17 fourteen generations:

Letters of the Hebrew alphabet were also used as numerals, and it was common for Jewish people to add up the letters (numbers) that composed a name and use the sum as a symbolic reference. The name David was spelled DVD, a D was also a 4, and a V was also a 6; thus, David's symbolic number was 14 (4 + 6 + 4). By extension, since the coming Messiah was to be a descendant of David, many Jewish people associated the number fourteen with messianic promises.



1:18-25 engaged:

Joseph and Mary were "betrothed," not simply "engaged" in the modern sense. Betrothal meant they were legally covenanted together to be faithful to each other. Thus, if one or the other was suspected of infidelity, a divorce was required.



1:19 a righteous man:

Joseph demonstrates three qualities in Matthew associated with righteousness: a default willingness to do whatever God requires; a disposition to temper one's actions and attitudes with mercy (compare with 5:21-48); and a commitment to discerning God's will that transcends traditional thinking, including interpretations of scripture (compare with 5:21-48). See further 5:10, 20; 6:33; 13:43, 49; 25:37, 46; 27:4, 19, 24.



1:20 a dream:

A man named Joseph being guided by dreams recalls Old Testament stories about a dreamer named Joseph (Gen 37:5-11). See also 2:13, 19, 22 (and for the magi, 2:12).



1:21 name him Jesus:

A common name among first-century Jews from the Hebrew for God (Ya, an abbreviation of YHWH, the sacred name of God) saves (*shua* or *sus*). The same root gives the names Joshua and Hosea. *Jesus* is the Greek transliteration of Ye(ho)shua.



1:23 name him Emmanuel:

Drawing on the Greek translation of Isaiah 7:14, which mentions a virgin conceiving a child (the Hebrew original speaks about a "pregnant young woman"), Matthew indicates that Jesus is to be identified as the one through whom God remains eternally present with people (see also 18:20; 28:20).

Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers,³ and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram,⁴ and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon,⁵ and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse,⁶ and Jesse the father of King David.

And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah,⁷ and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph,^d and Asaph^d the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah,⁹ and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah,¹⁰ and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos,^e and Amos^e the father of Josiah,¹¹ and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.

12 And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Salathiel, and Salathiel the father of Zerubbabel,¹³ and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor,¹⁴ and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud,¹⁵ and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob,¹⁶ and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, who bore Jesus, who is called the Messiah.^f

17 So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah,^f fourteen generations.

The Birth of Jesus the Messiah

18 Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah^g took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be pregnant from the Holy Spirit.¹⁹ Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to divorce her quietly.²⁰ But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.²¹ She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."²² All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

23 "Look, the virgin shall become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,"

which means, "God is with us."²⁴ When Joseph awoke from sleep, he

^d Other ancient authorities read *Asa* ^e Other ancient authorities read *Amon*

^f Or *the Christ* ^g Or *Jesus Christ*

did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife²⁵ but had no marital relations with her until she had given birth to a son,^h and he named him Jesus.

The Visit of the Magi

2 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magiⁱ from the east came to Jerusalem, ²asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star in the east^j and have come to pay him homage.” ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him, ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah^k was to be born. ⁵They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶ ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah,
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd^l my people Israel.’”

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the magiⁱ and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” ⁹When they had heard the king, they set out, and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen in the east,^j until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped,^m they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

The Escape to Egypt

¹³ Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” ¹⁴Then Josephⁿ got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt¹⁵ and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.”

The Massacre of the Infants

¹⁶ When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi,ⁱ he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around



How do you experience the presence of God in this world? When are you most confident that God is “with us”?



2:1 Bethlehem of Judea: A city five miles south of Jerusalem (see notes on 5:35; 21:10), Bethlehem was famous as the hometown of David (1 Sam 16:1-13). See Map 12, p. 2001.



2:1 King Herod: A client king of Rome, this monarch ruled most of Judea, Samaria, and Galilee (see Map 12, p. 2001) from 37 to 4 BCE. He was the father of the man called Herod in 14:1-12, and of Archelaus, mentioned in 2:22.



2:1 magi from the east: Magi were Persian priests (and to this day Zoroastrian priests) and teachers of wisdom, famous for astronomical observations. Here they represent gentiles who seek out the Jewish messiah.



2:5-6 written by the prophet: See Micah 5:2.



How do we offer gifts to Christ? In his Christmas and Epiphany sermons, Martin Luther liked to couple the magi story in Matthew 2 with Jesus' words regarding the final judgment in Matthew 25:31-46. Those who want to follow the magi's example in offering gifts to Jesus may offer him gifts today by helping people who are poor, and others who are counted “least” among his family—for what is given to them is given to Jesus. *Matthew 2:11*



2:13-18 flee to Egypt: In the Old Testament, God saves people from slavery and genocide in Egypt by bringing them to the promised land (Ex 1-14). Now, God saves the family of Jesus from a baby-killing monarch in that promised land by directing them back to Egypt.



2:15, 17-18 spoken through the prophet: See Hosea 11:1; Jeremiah 31:15.

^h Other ancient authorities read *her firstborn son* ⁱ Or *astrologers* ^j Or *at its rising* ^k Or *the Christ*
^l Or *rule* ^m Gk *saw the star* ⁿ Gk *he*