

An Introduction to Genesis

Who?

As we'll find when asking this question of many books in the Hebrew Scriptures, the answer is quite complicated. The traditional view is that Genesis, along with the next four books of the Bible – Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers & Deuteronomy – were written by Moses, who takes over as the hero of the overarching narrative at the start of Exodus.

The book of Genesis itself, however, does not make any assertions regarding its authorship and it is highly unlikely that ancient readers of the text would have been interested in the question. There is also the fact that, at the end of Deuteronomy, we are told the story of Moses' death, which means, at least, that he cannot have written that part of the book.

In the late nineteenth century, as authorship became more important to the contemporary reader, a theory – which was to be almost universally accepted by scholars for over a century – was posited that the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures were drawn from at least four other pre-existing sources given the letters J, E, P & D. Each of these sources had an author, lost in the mists of time, each with a different theology and agenda. Thus the first five books of the bible were understood as a kind of patchwork book, knitting together these four strands.

Genesis was seen as a combination of the J & E sources. In your English translations of the Bible, you'll notice that sometimes God is called 'LORD' (in capitals) and sometimes 'God'. The former of these is thought to derive from the J source and the latter the E source.

The documentary hypotheses, however, is losing its universal power as scholars increasingly treat the book of Genesis as a unified document, perhaps one that draws material from a variety of places, but which can be seen as the result of one organising mind.

When?

The narrative of Genesis begins at the dawn of time and has a universal scope. This narrows down to a focus on the Middle East with the stories of Adam and Eve and

the flood, before, in chapter eleven we're introduced to the heroes, Abraham and Sarah. The rest of the book deals with these characters and their offspring and ends with a cliffhanger: Abraham's grandson, Jacob, and his family relocating to the land of Egypt.

The stories are ancient and prior to the introduction of Abraham are likely to be reinterpretations and adaptations of ancient myths and oral traditions. There are similar, although not identical, stories that originate from other Ancient Near Eastern cultures, which indicates that the different ancient groups were talking to themselves and each other through them.

Once we get on to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the themes of being strangers in a foreign land, or of being pilgrims between one home and another grow stronger. Genesis also asks where relations with other peoples fits into relations with God. Are foreigners good or bad? How do we relate to them?

If we ask ourselves when, in Israel's history, was it important for them to establish difference between their creation stories and the creation stories of other local peoples? when, in Israel's history, was it encouraging to dwell on the times in the past when they had been strangers or pilgrims? We might arrive at the conclusion that Genesis was written at some time during the Israelite exile in Babylon in the 6th Century BC.

This is the current thinking among Biblical scholars and it sheds some light on the contents of the book of Genesis, without ruling out the possibility that the stories it contains could indeed date back to the time of Moses and relate a history based in real events.

Why?

If Genesis was written during the exile in Babylon, there are a couple of purposes that it may have served. Firstly, it would have given them hope: the book begins with stories that affirm God's sovereignty over history. God created the world; it was not made in a conflict between equal and opposite powers as in other Ancient Near Eastern creation stories; there is no chance that God will be overcome by creation at some point in time.

There is hope also in the stories of Abraham and his ancestors. They were exiles, yet God made them a nation, so that possibility exists at the end of the exile in Babylon too.

Secondly, Genesis asks the Israelites how they regard the foreigner in whose land they are living. Genesis is not a nationalist book; God created the whole world. Equally, the foreign characters in Genesis are a mixed bunch, not all evil and not all good and as such they should be treated with respect, as we see in the story of Abimelech in chapters 20 & 21.

So, Genesis is a book written to give hope to a people in exile, to teach them that treaties with their neighbours are imperative to living a good life in their land and to reassure them that, despite their current plight, God is in control.