

Dr. Kenneth Mathews, Genesis, Session 1, Introduction

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This is Dr. Kenneth Mathews in his teaching on the book of Genesis. This is session 1, Introduction.

Questions we can begin with are: why study the book of Genesis, and why is Genesis important? Well, the simple, but I think the best reason is because it is important to God.

God has chosen to make himself known to us so that he might form a relationship with us. Because he has motivated his love, God is intensely, intensely personal. And he, we discover from Genesis, has created us, men and women, to be persons, to engage, to communicate, and to love God, and to experience his love for us.

So, to do so, Genesis tells us that he unveils a plan whereby he will make that possible. And because of the brokenness of our lives through sin, and our broken relationships, he's taking a step to give to us a deliverer. And so, we find in Genesis the promise of a deliverer who will come and restore us to God and heal these broken relationships we have with one another.

And of course, we recognize, those of us who are Christian readers of Genesis, that although Genesis forecasts this coming of a deliverer, it has been realized through God's own Son, who came in the person of Jesus Christ. And this is the deliverer who has been promised to us. Well, by way of introduction, we have a context that is very helpful in rightly interpreting the book of Genesis.

It's an orientation in this first session. And I'll be speaking to five items in this orientation. First, the title of Genesis.

Second, the main message of the book of Genesis. And then the structure, the Pentateuch and Torah as a context. And then lastly, we'll be looking at the way in which we are to understand the authorship and setting of the book of Genesis.

First, the English title Genesis. It is derived from the Greek word meaning origins, which is the title in the Greek translation of the Old Testament known as the Septuagint. The Hebrew title is actually the first Hebrew word of the book of Genesis, and that is Bereshit, meaning as it's found in English translation, in the beginning.

Both the Greek and Hebrew titles describe the content of Genesis. So many times, people refer to Genesis as the book of beginnings. It's rather obvious, isn't it, that

when it comes to the second message, the main message, we could summarize it in two words, beginnings and blessings.

Well, it's pretty obvious why beginnings would be appropriate for the book of Genesis, given that almost everything that's found in the chapters of Genesis would be a beginning in one way or another. The word beginning, though, has something of a more important, profound idea than just simply starting. And that is, if you are beginning, then that presupposes an ending.

One thing that we discover about Genesis is that although it may be the start or the beginning of something in our minds, it is also an orientation toward an outcome or an ending. And in that sense, then, it's looking beyond itself, Genesis, in its message. And also, we can say, then, using a term that's often found among theologians, it's eschatological because it's forecasting an ultimate resolution to the many challenges that arise in the relationship between God and His creation and the many challenges we face ourselves with our own brokenness, our own sinfulness, and then the relationships that are impacted by that with others.

The word blessing is also very important to reveal the main message of Genesis. The words that are related to blessing, like bless and blessed, are all of these words that are connected to the idea of blessing and are found more often in Genesis than in any other biblical book. So, it takes on a special thematic idea.

Along those lines, I think that we find three programmatic blessings in early Genesis. By programmatic, I mean it appears that God declares and unveils a program, a project, whereby He's going to bless all peoples. And this begins, then, with what we find in chapter one, verse 28.

I'll read from the New International Version. Any standard translation that you have, I think, will be sufficient. After indicating that men and women are created in God's image in verses 26 and 27, it says in verse 28 that God blessed them and said to them.

Now we have a series of exhortations that are descriptive of the blessing that God has bestowed upon human life. Be fruitful and increase in number. Fill the earth, subdue it, rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, and over every living creature that moves on the ground.

So, the first aspect of this blessing is the relationship of what we enjoy with God. Because in verse 28, notice it says that God spoke to the human family. And this, again, indicates God wishes to unveil Himself, to make Himself known to humanity.

And so, God, who is personal, we will discover, speaks to those created in His image. That image includes the idea that men and women are persons designed by God to enter into a personal relationship. So that is part of God's plan.

A second part of God's plan is procreation and reproduction. The third would be that of responsible stewardship for ruling over that which God has created, the terrestrial world. So, that would be the first program that God has in mind.

It's a creation ordinance designed by God to bless, and He has done so voluntarily out of His own love and care for those created in the image of God. There is a second plan that is necessary by God because in the garden of our first parents, Adam and Eve rebelled against God, refused to trust that God was good and benevolent, and had a plan that was appropriate for blessing them. And so, in their rebellion, this relationship was broken, and the man and the woman were subject to death and expulsion from the garden.

But God would not let that rebellion prohibit him from carrying out his desire, his wish, and that is of blessing the human family with a relationship with Him. So, in chapter 3 of verse 15, in the context of an oracle of judgment against the serpent who in the garden tricked Eve, the woman, into sinning against God, and then the man who willfully, knowingly, rebelled against God, receives this oracle of judgment in verse 15. And I, that is God, will put enmity between you, that is the serpent, and the woman, in between your offspring and hers.

He will, that is the serpent, that is the deliverer, this offspring of the woman rather, will crush your head, and you, the serpent, will strike him, that is the deliverer's heel. Now, when we look at what is planned here, notice that it involves a legacy, the serpent's legacy or offspring, and the woman. And from the woman will come this savior, this deliverer, who will rescue the woman and also the man so that they may have this ongoing, continuing, right relationship with God.

But notice that there is going to be warfare between the serpent, who is the enemy of God, and the enemy of man and woman. And this warfare is going to end in the deliverer defeating the serpent. So, it says he will crush your head, and the deliverer will strike the mortal blow against the serpent.

And the imagery here is quite clear, isn't it? That a serpent is at the foot crawling along the ground at the foot of a man or woman, and by stomping on its head with one's heel, it will crush its head and defeat, kill the serpent. But in doing so, the serpent will have a chance at striking the heel of the deliverer, and this will be not a mortal blow but an injury. And so, what we find is that there is this foretaste, this forecasting, and again, you can use the term eschatological orientation toward the future of a coming deliverer.

We know from Christian scripture that this deliverer is God himself, who comes in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, who achieves that defeat of the serpent, who we come to recognize is Satan, or in the New Testament, he's called the devil, who is the archenemy then of God and of God's love for the man and the woman. Then, we turn to the third program. In the first, God still wants to bless and will not be prohibited from blessing.

He will take what is necessary, as we see in chapter 3, verse 15, to provide a reconciliation, but having this reconciliation depended upon the coming of a human from the seed of the woman as the seed, the offspring of the woman, the deliverer. But we discover in the outworking of this plan that God, through procreation, continuing that blessing, brings about a whole multiplication of people groups, the various nations that are described in chapter 10 of Genesis and chapter 11. From chapter 11, we find the genealogy ranging from Noah down to that of Abraham.

Abraham is the one who intersects the universal story of the family of humanity and its nations, as well as a particular story, the story of the patriarchs, the ancestors of a nation that God created, and that is Israel. And so, if you turn to chapter 12, you'll find this first stated in verses 1 through 3. In these three verses, we have occasion five appearances of the word bless. And so, what we've discovered is that this blessing consists of the three items that have already been echoed from the Genesis chapter 1 blessing.

So, in verse 1, the Lord had said to Abraham, or Abram, leave your country, your people, and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. So, the first thing I want us to notice is that there is mention of a promise of land. And when you think about what is occurring in Genesis 1, verse 28, the blessing mentioned is made there of the promise of rule.

That's God's intention over the earth, the land; the land that's in mind here, of course, is the land of Canaan. Canaan will become the homeland of Abraham and his descendants. And then it reads in verse 2, I will make you into a great nation.

Now to make a great nation means your population. And, of course, that's an echo of what we find in Genesis 1, verse 28, as well, where we have the exhortations to procreation. And then reading it says, I will bless you, and I will make your name great.

So, this has to do then with that relationship of God's love and provision and benevolence toward Abraham and his legacy. And then it goes on to read, and you will be a blessing. So now it turns outward from the man Abraham to these various people groups, the nations that have been listed in Genesis chapter 10.

And I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse so that the blessing for the other nations will be dependent upon the reaction of the various people groups to Abraham because Abraham's God is the one true living God, the God of Israel, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And through the eyes of the New Testament readers, this would be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. And so, a right relationship with Abraham will give a person the means or way to have a relationship with the God who reveals himself, especially to Abraham.

Going on, it says that all people on earth will be blessed through you. And we will discover in our studies that the blessing that can be received from God by all these various people groups, and in particular individuals such as you and me, would be through the ideal descendant of Abraham, that wonderful deliverer who is anticipated in chapter 3 verse 15. So, the message is, I think, quite clear.

God has a plan of blessing. There is a break in the possibility of delivering that blessing because the people in the garden, our first parents, rejected that relationship. But God set forth a plan to deliver the man and the woman and all humans who will rightly, you see, be related to the revelation we have through Abraham's legacy, his offspring, and that is ultimately in the ideal deliverer, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Next is the structure of the book of Genesis. We can look at it in two ways when it comes to analyzing the structure. The first is the content.

The way in which most commentators and Bible students recognize the content of Genesis is the two major parts, or you could say sections, and that are chapters 1 through 11. Chapters 1 through 11 concern the universal family. It moves from creation to the creation of humanity, and then the various descendants and then people groups of the human family.

And so, it tells us a universal story of the human family. But then we discover that there is the major part that follows, which is the particular family, and that is the calling of Abraham that we read, and then his descendants. And that would be from chapter 12 through the end of the book, chapter 50.

We could, along these lines, subdivide each of these two parts, the universal family and the patriarchal stories, into subsections. In the case of the universal family, here are the four narratives that could be discerned. The first is creation.

The second is the garden story, Adam and Eve in the garden. Then Noah and the flood story. And last, the Tower of Babel story concerning the creation of the nations, the people groups.

Creation, garden story, flood story, and then the Tower of Babel. Now paralleling this would be four stories found in the patriarchal collection. And these stories, of course, focus on the main patriarchal figures.

First, there's Abraham. Second, Isaac. And third, Jacob.

And last, Joseph. I would say an additional word about Isaac. Although Isaac plays a critical role in the story of the patriarchs, he does not have the prominence that Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph have.

Isaac is always cast in the shadow of his father. He's the son of Abraham. And then when it comes to Jacob, he's cast primarily as the father of Jacob.

So, you might think of Isaac as a transition narrative, linking Abraham and then Jacob. And from Jacob will come the twelve sons who father twelve tribes, the twelve tribes of Israel. Special attention is given to Joseph because Joseph's will is critical in the deliverance, the survival of Jacob's family who descended from Canaan into Egypt, where Joseph has arisen to second authority in the land of Egypt and will influence Pharaoh to provide a special uh land for the Hebrew people to thrive.

So, we have then the four accounts in the universal history, the four accounts in the patriarchal stories. There's a second way that you can understand the structure. And this is the formal structure provided by the author himself.

And you are probably familiar with this expression if you have read Genesis or heard of Genesis in the past. And that is the word generations. And how could that be any more appropriate since so much of Genesis concerns generations and genealogies.

So, there are eleven occasions of this superscription. And this superscription reads, "these are the generations of." If you'd like to look at chapter two and then verse four, we have the first occasion of this expression.

These are the generations of in the Hebrew Bible. The Hebrew word generations is derived from the verb, which means to procreate, to generate, and to give birth. It reads in chapter two, verse four, that these are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created.

Now, in many of the translations, such as I have before me, the New International Version, because what follows is a story, not a genealogy, translators would like to see that the Hebrew word generations has a broader meaning than simply introducing a genealogy. This superscription can also introduce a narrative story. And so it may be in chapter two, verse four, you will have this kind of translation.

This is the account of the heavens and the earth, or this is the story, or if what follows is an account of a person's story, it might read something like the family story or the family history. And that is the way in which this superscription can introduce a genealogy, or as we find it here, the story about Adam and Eve in the garden, beginning with chapter two, verse four. So that is one way, a helpful way, and many commentators will begin in that fashion.

In the series of studies, I will pay attention to both the content and the superscriptions. I will merge these so that I can take advantage of both ways in which the content reflects the structure. The fourth item, let's speak of it: first, the English title, the main message; second, the structure; third, and now number four, the context of the Pentateuch.

And as you probably know, the Pentateuch is a Greek term referring to a five-book collection. And this would be Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. And this is seen as a distinctive collection because the five will fit together.

And let me explain how that occurs here in a moment. The Hebrew term that is used for the Hebrew Bible is Torah, referencing these first five books. In the word Torah, that's actually a transliteration, not a translation or transliteration of the Hebrew word.

And generally, it is translated law. So, Torah is a noun, and it is related to the Hebrew verb *yara*, which means to teach. So, the basic idea of Torah is instruction.

I think that is the better way to refer to Torah, although your translations typically render Torah as law. It's better to think of it as broader than law because usually, when we think of law today, we think of legislative laws or law courts. When the word Torah is broader in usage, it may and does refer to legal collections.

But it also may refer generally to teaching or instruction. So, the word Torah has varied meanings, and it's going to depend upon the specific context. It is commonly used, as I said, for the idea of law.

And since there are extensive legal collections in the Pentateuch, there are, I want to reiterate, laws and collections of laws in the Pentateuch. Nonetheless, it's broader than that. In other contexts, the word Torah means teaching in this general sense.

So, if you take the two together, legal collections or corpora, and hence the idea of law, and then you place that with the idea of instruction, teaching in a broad general sense, I think taken together that Torah may be simply understood as, and I'll use the quote marks, the way of the Lord. The way of the Lord refers to the application of

and teaching of the Lord's commandments. So, the way of the Lord's expression then, I think, rightly captures the idea of a person's lifestyle.

Just like we use the figure of speech for a walk, how to walk, someone's walk in life has to do with a person's lifestyle. And so, what is called upon those who enter into this relationship with God, that God's teaching, his instruction, we can even say because he does so out of his love and care for the people that he forms and engages as a mentor. He is the mentor.

He is instructing them in how they are to live in order to have the most blessed life, the most prosperous life, a life well lived when we follow the blesser's life, the way of the Lord, meaning that there is a lifestyle that conforms to God's person, God's character, and receiving then his blessing, pleasing him. Now, what's interesting about Genesis, of course, is it does not have a large collection of laws. It is primarily narratives and then, of course, genealogies.

When it comes to the narratives, instead of giving specific commands, what it does through the narrative is describes and portrays what a life looks like when it comes to the way of the Lord. Here is a passage that depicts this when God and Abraham are engaged in a dialogue, and it has to do in context what God has planned for Sodom and Gomorrah because of its wickedness, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. And so, God says, somewhat rhetorically, that he is going to reveal to Abraham what is about to occur in Sodom and Gomorrah.

The chief reason is that one of the relatives, his nephew of Abraham, lives in Sodom and is in harm, harm's way and in danger. And so there will be an escape provided for this nephew: chapter 18, verse 19.

For I have chosen, here God speaks of Abraham rhetorically, I have chosen him. In other words, I have chosen you, Abraham, so that Abraham will direct his children and his household. See how that brings in the idea of legacy, of genealogy, the promise of a future deliverer, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep, and here's our expression, to keep the way of the Lord. By how? Doing what is right and just.

So, this is that lifestyle we're speaking of that conforms to the character of God who is just, who is upright, so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him. So, as we work through Genesis, think of it as providing a narrative that is a portrayal of what God will specifically command in the law collections of the following books, Exodus or Deuteronomy. So, we have two literary kinds, the genealogies and narratives that dominate Genesis, but we will also find poetry and prayers in Genesis.

Now, I'd like to talk about what the rabbinic literature says about the first five books of the Bible, this is called the Books of Moses. In rabbinic literature, which would range from roughly 200 BC down through 400 AD, the plural, the Books of Moses, is more often used than the singular, but it does occur. The singular, the Book of Moses, reflects the unity of the narrative plot that runs from creation in Genesis 1 to the death and burial of Moses, recalled in Deuteronomy chapter 34.

And when you take the key human figure, that is Moses, we see that the Pentateuch, the Torah, is dominated by this figure because he is born in Exodus chapter 2, and his life then spans all of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, and then we have his death and burial at the end in Deuteronomy 34. Now, how long is that period? Well, the length of his life is 120 years, so the focal point is a revelation given to Israel at Mount Sinai, which begins in Exodus 19 and runs all the way through the end of Exodus and the Book of Leviticus, all of Leviticus, and then through Numbers 10.10, after which you see the people leave Sinai and head toward Canaan. So the focus then is how Moses' Pentateuch, his story, has to do with Genesis. And what we'll discover is that Genesis plays a very important function because it gives the nation of Israel an understanding of how they fit into God's cosmic plan of blessing for humankind and the nations.

And so we will address these questions in more detail as we work through the forthcoming sessions. So, Genesis then may be interpreted, and in my opinion must be interpreted, in the context of a revelation that's given at Sinai because that's the prominent space given to the Pentateuch, Exodus through Deuteronomy. So, we might think of that movie series, Back to the Future, and that is how we are to understand Genesis and its relationship to the Pentateuch because the first audience of the whole of the Pentateuch would have been that generation that was in the wilderness with Moses.

And so, as that generation who had experienced the revelation at Sinai, they would be able to understand Genesis looking back to their own times. What Genesis does is give a forecast or foreshadowing of what they themselves, that is, that first generation, experience. So they have experienced that revelation, which included the Ten Commandments, which included the building of the Tabernacle, which included worship in that Tabernacle, and then the leadership of God's Spirit through Moses as they walked and wandered about in the wilderness and then eventually came to the edge of the land of Canaan.

Let me just give you a quick example of that and that is the theological message here is that the God of the Israelites is not a family deity or a national deity, but rather, he is the God of creation. One way this is suggested and implied is the repetition at creation where God, on 10 occasions, the narrative says, God said, God said, God said. Then, we find the Ten Commandments at Sinai, where God also speaks the Ten Commandments.

The implication is, the idea of this is that the God of their ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, their God, who has formed a commitment with them, a covenant, there you have a relationship expressed that he is not just a parochial deity and is on the same stage with all the other deities in the ancient world, but rather he is the one true God of creation, and that he speaks with authority the creation. And at Sinai, he speaks with authority, creating a new nation, a new people group, Israel.

Now, let's turn our attention to the authorship in the setting. When it comes to the authorship in the setting, we can have a setting that is the presentation of the book itself, what the time period is as the narratives reveal to us when the events take place and where the events take place. Of course, the primeval stories, such as the Tower of Babel before the time of Abraham, cannot be determined with confidence. But when it comes to the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, there, because of internal evidence that is coming from within the Bible itself, and then external, that is from what we've been able to recover in terms of language and culture from the ancient Near East, we have a pretty good handle on the patriarchal period time frame.

This would be approximately from 2200 BC to 1550 BC. 2200 BC to 1550 BC. Now, when it comes to the life of Moses and the Israelites' journey to Canaan, that would have been during the 1400s BC, and we can say roughly 1450 BC.

The political situation during the time of the patriarchs was that you had many small kinglets, small city-states, and numerous small kings who were dispersed throughout the land of these little kingdoms. In other words, later, we will come across the great empires of the Egyptians, the Hittites, and the Babylonians, who dominated the region of Canaan. But in this earlier period, the external evidence makes it clear that personal names and place names are consistent with the biblical names of the period.

And we have the customs that I mentioned that are found in the ancient world. One example of this that we found in the Bible is the practice where if a patriarch, a family head, did not have a son who would inherit the patriarch's various possessions, then that patriarch could adopt a servant in his household to be the recipient. This is what Abraham suggested; if you maybe have read Genesis chapter 15, his servant Eliezer presented Eliezer as a candidate to be Abraham's heir or descendant.

And so, we will find that God rejects this plan that Abraham proposes. So, on these bases, we can say that the stories pertaining to the patriarchs fits very nicely into what we know in this time period from 2200 to 1550 BC. You may be interested when it comes to the archaeological language that's used for this period would be the early Bronze Age into the middle Bronze Age.

But what is the source setting? The source setting would be who wrote Genesis in the Pentateuch. Well, we've got to start by saying, when it comes to the source setting, that the book of Genesis and the whole Pentateuch are anonymous. Well, by tradition, you probably know that the Jewish and Christian communities ascribed the Pentateuch, including Genesis, to Moses. And there must have been some motivation for that.

And within these five biblical books, we will find that there is a dominance of Moses. First, he serves as an eyewitness in the accounts of Exodus through Deuteronomy. Moreover, he is said repeatedly to have authored and collected accounts in Exodus through Deuteronomy that have been written down in a book, like the defeat of the Amalekites in Exodus 17, verse 4. The covenant scroll in Exodus 24, verses 4 through 8. The Ten Commandments in Exodus 34, verse 28.

An itinerary of the journey of the Israelites through the wilderness, Numbers 31, verse 2. Then there is the writing of a song of Moses in Deuteronomy 31, verses 19 and 22. The song itself is found in chapter 32 of Deuteronomy. And then there is the book of the law.

And that is Deuteronomy 31, verse 9, verses 24 and 26. So, it is highly suggestive, just suggestive, not definitive, that the core of the Pentateuch was authored by Moses. But also, there were later updates, editorial additions, and revisions after the time of Moses.

The clearest evidence of this for the Pentateuch is of course the description of Moses' death and burial in Deuteronomy chapter 34. Even during the Middle Ages, it was recognized that there must have been additions updating, such as place names and giving supplementary information. This would help readers have a better understanding.

A good example of that is found in Genesis 36, verse 31. Genesis 36 gives a list of kings from Edom. The Edomite kings, the descendants of Esau.

It reads there that these Edomite kings reigned before the kings of Israel. Well, of course, in chapter 36, in this early period, there were no kings of Israel. So, this must have been written at a time when kings were present, which had been the monarchy of most likely during the time of David.

So, these kings of Israel don't occur until centuries later. But the addition here made by some later hand, some later reader, has been designed to update and make it more understandable. The relationship time-wise between Edomite kings and then the kings of Israel.

Now, how is it with Moses if, in fact, he were the primary collector of the Pentateuch? What are we going to do with Genesis, given that he could not have been an eyewitness of Genesis? This is before his time. Well, I think that there is some suggestion within Genesis that there were collections of writings that could have been available to Moses. And we have a specific case in Genesis 5, verse 1. And it reads, Genesis 5, verse 1, this is the book, see it's written, it's a record of the generations of Adam.

Now, when you look across the ancient Near East, there was a scribal profession in each nation. In other words, literacy was very commonplace. And so there was the recording of myths, of stories, of royal records.

We also know that when writings were considered sacred, they were preserved and passed on to subsequent generations. So certainly, when it came to the ancestral stories of Abraham's family, these, I would think, would be written records that were passed forward. So that may help us understand that in addition to oral remembrances, there may have well been an accumulation of authoritative writings and family stories that Moses could access.

There could have been also occasions, as we see later in the Pentateuch, when God simply spoke and wrote, for example, the Ten Commandments. And so it may be that God informed Moses through that form of revelation pertaining to the things that Moses could not and did not witness. So, when it comes to Genesis, most likely, I would think, the author of Genesis, whoever that may be, was the recipient of these and put them into an account that would serve as a prologue, a preamble, a way in which to better understand how the patriarchal family, Israel, fit into the table of nations, the whole world plan that God has in mind for the whole human family.

In the second session, we will be talking about the creation account.

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