

Genesis: Session 1, Introduction

By Dr. Kenneth Mathews

Source: Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Keywords

Bereshit, programmatic blessings, promised deliverer, generations, Torah, Sinai revelation, Bronze Age, Mosaic authorship

Abstract

Dr. Kenneth Mathews' introductory lecture provides a structural and thematic orientation to the Book of Genesis. The lecture highlights how the main message revolves around "beginnings and blessings," which are detailed through three programmatic divine blessings. Mathews explains that the book's dual structure focuses on the universal and particular families, pointing forward to a promised deliverer. Additionally, the lecture explores the broader Pentateuchal context of Torah as instruction, the Sinai revelation setting, and the historical Bronze Age background of traditional Mosaic authorship.

Outline

I. The Purpose and Theological Significance of Genesis

- **Divine Importance:** Genesis is significant because it is intensely important to God, who chose to make Himself known to establish a relationship with humanity.
- **Relational Design:** Humans are personal beings created to engage, communicate, and experience God's personal love.
- **The Promise of a Deliverer:**
 - To address the brokenness of human relationships and lives caused by sin, Genesis introduces a plan to provide a deliverer to restore humanity's relationship to God.
 - For Christian readers, this promised deliverer is recognized as being realized through Jesus Christ.

II. Five-Part Orientation to the Book

A. The Title of Genesis

- **Greek Origin ("Genesis"):** Derived from the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint), meaning "origins".

- **Hebrew Origin ("Bereshit"):** Sourced from the first Hebrew word of the book, translating to "in the beginning".
- **Thematic Alignment:** Both the Greek and Hebrew titles accurately describe the content, framing Genesis as the "book of beginnings".

B. The Main Message: Beginnings and Blessings

- **The Concept of "Beginnings":**
 - A beginning presupposes an ultimate ending or outcome.
 - Genesis carries an **eschatological orientation**, looking forward to a final divine resolution to human sin, brokenness, and relational fractures.
- **The Concept of "Blessings":**
 - Words related to blessing appear more frequently in Genesis than in any other biblical book.
 - God establishes **three programmatic blessings** in early Genesis to reveal His plan to bless all peoples:
 1. *The Creation Ordinance (Genesis 1:28):* A voluntary blessing stemming from God's love and care. It encompasses a personal relationship where God speaks to humanity, procreation and reproduction, and responsible stewardship over the terrestrial world.
 2. *The Promise of a Deliverer (Genesis 3:15):* Announced during the judgment of the serpent after humanity's rebellion. It promises that the offspring of the woman will strike a mortal blow by crushing the serpent's head, while the serpent strikes the deliverer's heel (an injury, but not a mortal defeat). Christian scripture identifies this deliverer as Jesus Christ defeating Satan.
 3. *The Abrahamic Covenant (Genesis 12:1-3):* Intersects the universal family story with the particular story of Israel's patriarchal ancestors. Featuring five occurrences of the word "bless," it mirrors the elements of Genesis 1:28: land of Canaan (rule), a great nation (procreation), and a great name. It turns the blessing outward, making blessing for other nations dependent on their reaction to Abraham, and is ultimately realized through Abraham's ideal descendant, Jesus Christ.

C. The Structure of Genesis

- **1. Analysis by Content (Two Sections):**
 - *The Universal Family (Chapters 1–11)*: Traces the story of the human family from creation to the origin of nations. It consists of four primary narratives: Creation, the Garden story, Noah and the flood, and the Tower of Babel.
 - *The Particular Family (Chapters 12–50)*: Focuses on the patriarchal ancestors of the nation of Israel. It features four primary figures:
 - *Abraham*: The father of the covenant family.
 - *Isaac*: A transitional figure cast in the shadow of his father Abraham and his son Jacob.
 - *Jacob*: Father of the twelve sons who form the twelve tribes of Israel.
 - *Joseph*: Critical to the survival of the family, using his second authority in Egypt to provide them land to thrive.
- **2. Formal Scribal Structure ("Generations"):**
 - Organized around eleven occurrences of the Hebrew superscription, "*these are the generations of*".
 - The Hebrew word for generations is derived from a verb meaning "to procreate, generate, and to give birth".
 - Depending on the context, this phrase can introduce a genealogy or a narrative story, translating broadly to "account," "family story," or "family history".

D. The Context of the Pentateuch and Torah

- **Terminology:**
 - *Pentateuch*: A Greek term referencing the five-book collection of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.
 - *Torah*: A Hebrew word typically translated as "law" but rooted in the verb *yara* ("to teach"), meaning "instruction".
- **The Way of the Lord**: Taken together, legal collections and instruction represent "the way of the Lord," denoting a lifestyle or "walk" conforming to God's character.
- **Genesis as Narrative Instruction:**

- Genesis lacks large legal codes; instead, its narratives and genealogies show what "the way of the Lord" looks like in daily life (doing what is "right and just").
- *Example (Genesis 18:19)*: God chose Abraham to direct his household to keep "the way of the Lord" by doing what is "right and just".
- **Unity of the "Book of Moses"**: The singular term reflects the unity of the narrative plot running from creation in Genesis 1 to Moses' death in Deuteronomy 34.
- **Sinai Revelation Context ("Back to the Future")**:
 - Genesis must be interpreted in the context of the Sinai revelation, which dominates Exodus through Deuteronomy.
 - The first wilderness generation understood Genesis by looking back from their own experience of the Ten Commandments, the Tabernacle, and the wilderness wandering.
 - *Parallel of Divine Authority*: God speaking ten times at creation mirrors the Ten Commandments spoken at Sinai, proving that Israel's covenant God is the supreme Creator of the universe rather than a localized national deity.

E. Authorship and Historical Setting

- **Historical Setting**:
 - *Primeval Stories (Chapters 1–11)*: Chronology and settings cannot be determined with confidence.
 - *Patriarchal Period (Chapters 12–50)*: Fits into the Early to Middle Bronze Age, approximately 2200 BC to 1550 BC. This matches a political setting of small city-states and local kings. Cultural customs of the ancient Near East, such as a childless patriarch adopting a household servant (like Eliezer) as an heir, align with the biblical details.
 - *Wilderness Era (Moses)*: Set during the 1400s BC, roughly 1450 BC.
- **Authorship (Source Setting)**:
 - The Pentateuch is anonymous, but traditionally ascribed to Moses by Jewish and Christian communities.
 - Moses is presented as an eyewitness and recorded author of specific laws, covenants, itineraries, and songs in Exodus through Deuteronomy.

- *Post-Mosaic Updates:* Revisions occurred after Moses, such as the account of his death (Deuteronomy 34) and the Edomite king list in Genesis 36:31, which reflects the later era of the Israelite monarchy.
- *Genesis Compilation:* Since Moses was not an eyewitness to Genesis, he likely compiled ancestral written family records (such as the "book of the generations of Adam" in Genesis 5:1) preserved through ancient Near East scribal literacy, or received direct divine revelation. Genesis serves as a prologue, showing Israel how they fit into God's cosmic plan for humanity.