

Dr. Kenneth A. Mathews, Genesis, Session 1, Introduction

NotebookLM's 6-min. Video Overview

Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Imagine standing in a barren wilderness 3,400 years ago. You are looking up at a jagged mountain peak, waiting for a set of laws that will define your new nation. For millennia, the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch, have served as the bedrock of Israelite law and identity.

But a paradox exists at the start of this legal code. Its opening volume documents events and family lineages that took place centuries before its author, Moses, was born. We know this book by its Greek title, Genesis, meaning origins.

The Hebrew title is its very first word, Bereshit, meaning in the beginning. The text functions as a preamble. It is designed to point towards an ultimate resolution, framing the ancient past for the immediate needs of the Sinai generation.

Understanding the internal structure of Genesis requires reading it through the eyes of those standing at the foot of Mount Sinai in 1450 BC. The book divides into two halves, a universal history of humanity and a patriarchal history. Both rely on a four-part symmetry.

The universal half builds on creation, the garden, the flood, and Babel. The patriarchal half mirrors this with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. To connect these halves, the author uses a Hebrew literary device called a toledoth, meaning generations or family history.

Appearing 11 times, these structural hinges transition the text between genealogies and broader narratives. This symmetry indicates Genesis was built as a foundation for the theology and law that follow. That foundation is oriented toward a future outcome.

The narrative is driven forward by a series of programmatic blessings. This breakdown of Genesis 1-28 shows the first of these blessings at creation. God establishes a relationship with humanity and provides directives for procreation and terrestrial stewardship.

The garden rebellion fractured that relationship, but Genesis 3-15 promises a deliverer will heal the break, making the text eschatological. To achieve restoration, Genesis 12 repeats blessing five times, directly linking Abraham's covenant back to the original mandates of Genesis 1. By restricting the narrative focus to a single

bloodline, the text establishes the mechanism intended to eventually push restoration outward to the entire world. This timeline shows the internal chronology of the text.

The patriarchal accounts align with the early to middle Bronze Age, which requires us to rewind the clock to between 2200 and 1550 BC. External records from the ancient Near East verify this environment. Bronze Age customs allowed a sunless patriarch to adopt a servant as his heir, a practice Abraham attempts with his servant Eliezer in Genesis 15.

If Moses compiled the Pentateuch in the 1400s BC, he would have required access to cultural details that had been obsolete for centuries. Literacy was common across the ancient Near East, and Moses likely utilized pre-existing written records. Genesis 5-11 explicitly states, this is the written account of the generations of Adam.

Moses acted as a compiler, weaving ancient artifacts and oral histories into a single cohesive prologue. The compilation process continued after the death of Moses. The text underwent editorial updates to remain clear for later generations of Israelites.

The evidence appears in Genesis 36-39. The passage lists a series of Edomite kings, noting that they reigned before any Israelite king reigned. Since there were no Israelite kings during the time of Moses, this phrasing indicates that a later scribe updated the text to clarify the chronology for his own audience.

These editorial layers show that Genesis was a working document used to orient Israel to its own history. This brings us back to the original audience. The newly freed Israelites, standing in the wilderness at Mount Sinai, were receiving the law.

The Hebrew word for that law is Torah. Derived from the root Yara, it translates to instruction. It represents the way of the Lord, an all-encompassing lifestyle, rather than a narrow list of legislative rules.

Genesis fulfills this function through narrative. It shows figures like Abraham modeling that lifestyle, putting the instruction of the Lord into practice. A deliberate parallel exists here.

During creation, the phrase, God said, repeats exactly ten times. To an Israelite receiving the Ten Commandments at Sinai, the implication is clear. The God who spoke the world into existence now speaks to define their nation.

Genesis proves that the God of Israel holds authority over the entire creation, mapping a universal plan of redemption directly onto the history of the Sinai generation.