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ZONDERVAN

Introducing the Old Testament

An abridgment of *An Introduction to the Old Testament*

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ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Anchor Bible
Apollos	Apollos Old Testament Commentary Series
BCOTWP	Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms
BJS	Brown Judaic Studies
CsBC	Cornerstone Biblical Commentary Series
DSB	Daily Study Bible
EBC-R	Expositor's Bible Commentary: Revised Edition
Interp	Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching
NAC	New American Commentary
NCB	New Century Bible
NIBCOT	New International Bible Commentary, Old Testament
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NIVAC	NIV Application Commentary
OTL	Old Testament Library Commentary Series
SHBC	Smith and Helwys Bible Commentary
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries
UBCS	Understanding the Bible Commentary Series
WBC	Word Bible Commentary
ZIBBC	Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary

THINKING ABOUT THE STUDY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

The Old Testament contains those books written before the time of Jesus that are considered by the church to be the Word of God and thus, along with the New Testament, an authoritative guide to faith and practice. Unfortunately, many Christians ignore the Old Testament, even though it constitutes more than three-quarters of the Bible, because it is long, strange, and difficult. However, a knowledge of the Old Testament deepens our understanding of Jesus and the gospel and, though it is not always easy, studying it can enrich our spiritual life and knowledge of God.

About This Book

This book intends to provide the literary, historical, and theological background to the reading of the individual books of the Old Testament. Each chapter treats a single book of the Old Testament, and most chapters have the following structure (though not necessarily in the same order):

1. Content: What is the book about?
2. Authorship and Date: Who wrote the book and when?
3. Genre: What is the style of literature of the book?
4. Connections: How does the book anticipate the gospel?

There is also a short excursus exploring the genre of theological history (presented after the chapter on Esther). Much of the Old Testament is theological history; thus we give it a general treatment in the excursus while describing specific issues in the book chapters. Other

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genres (law, poetry, wisdom, prophecy, apocalyptic) are described in the relevant chapters.

Each chapter ends with references to further resources and then questions. What follows are some general resources for the study of the Old Testament.

Introductory

The NLT Study Bible. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2008.

The NIV Study Bible. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011.

Intermediate

Alexander, T. Desmond, and D. W. Baker, eds. *Dictionary of the Pentateuch*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003.

Arnold, B., and H. G. M. Williamson, eds. *Dictionary of the Historical Books*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005.

Boda, M., and G. McConville, eds. *Dictionary of the Prophets*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012.

Longman III, T., and P. Enns, eds. *Dictionary of Wisdom, Poetry and Writings*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008.

Advanced

Longman III, T., and R. B. Dillard. *Introduction to the Old Testament*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006.

THE BOOK OF GENESIS

Content: What Is Genesis About?

The title Genesis means “Beginnings,” and this book is indeed about beginnings: the beginnings of the cosmos, human beings, sin, a people chosen by God, and much more. Genesis is the first part of what is really a five-part literary composition known as the Torah or Pentateuch. The main story of the Pentateuch concerns the founding of Israel as a nation emerging from Egypt and traveling toward the Promised Land. Genesis is the prequel or introduction to this great story.

We can divide the contents of the book of Genesis into three parts, beginning with an account of primordial history (Gen. 1–11) that describes the creation of the world and humanity (Gen. 1–2). The account of creation is written using highly figurative language that bears similarity and contrasts with other ancient Near Eastern creation accounts from Mesopotamia (Enuma Elish; Atrahasis), Canaan (Baal and Anat), and Egypt (the Memphite Theology in particular). The purpose is not to explain *how* God created creation, but to proclaim that it was Yahweh rather than one of the other creation gods of the ancient Near East. The creation text also informs its readers about the nature of God (who is both transcendent and immanent), the dignified status of both men and women in the world, and the importance of marriage, work, and Sabbath. The creation accounts reveal that God created a good physical universe, and the account of Adam and Eve’s rebellion explains how sin and death came into the world (Gen. 3). The evil that people experience in themselves and from each other has nothing to do with how God

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created human beings, but rather with human choice to rebel rather than to submit to God.

The remainder of the primordial history contains both genealogies and three more stories. These stories all follow a similar pattern that reflects a pattern established in Genesis 3.

(1) Sin

Adam and Eve disobey God by eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (3:6–7)

Cain murders his brother Abel (4:8)

Humanity is completely evil (6:5, 11–12)

People settle down and build a city and a tower that is intended to reach the heavens (11:2–5)

(2) God announces judgment

The serpent, Eve, and Adam are rebuked (3:14–19)

Cain must wander (4:11–12)

The flood is proclaimed (6:7, 13–21)

Language is confused (11:6–7)

(3) A token of grace, a sign of God's continued involvement

Clothes (3:21)

A mark to protect Cain from violence (4:15)

Noah and the ark (6:8, 18–22)

Languages rather than complete confusion (chap. 10)

(4) The execution of judgment

Expelled from Eden and made subject to death (3:22–24)

Driven farther from Eden and made a wanderer (4:16)

Destroyed by the floodwaters (7:6–24)

Scattered and confused by language (11:8–9)

Up to this point in the book, Genesis focuses on the whole of creation and all of humanity. These stories depict humans as thoroughly sinful and deserving of punishment. God is described as one who judges sin, but also as gracious as he continues to pursue reconciliation with his human creatures.

The second of the three major sections of Genesis focuses on the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (chaps. 12–36). Gen-

Genesis 12:1–3 is one of the most important passages in the Bible. It describes God’s command that Abraham leave his homeland and travel to Canaan, and in return, God promises to make a great nation from Abraham, implying that he will have land as well as numerous descendants. In addition, God will bless Abraham and his descendants and also, through them, “all peoples on earth.”

Abraham is thus the father of the chosen people. For the most part, his life story follows his faith struggle as he encounters threats and obstacles to the fulfillment of the promises, especially the promise that he will have many descendants. To have many descendants, he has to have a child, but many years pass and still Abraham has no heir. God comes back to reaffirm his covenant promise to the patriarch (chaps. 15, 17), but time and time again Abraham keeps trying to manufacture his own heir. Once he suggests that he adopt his household servant Eliezer (15:2–3), and on another occasion he takes a secondary wife, Hagar, who gives birth to Ishmael (16; 17:18). God, though, continues to assure him that he will have his own child through whom the covenant promises will continue. Finally, in their advanced old age, Abraham and Sarah have Isaac (21:1–7). Born well beyond the natural age for childbearing, Isaac is clearly a gift from God. Even so, in a final and ultimate test of Abraham’s faith, God commands him to take his son and sacrifice him on Mount Moriah (chap. 22). At this point in his life, Abraham’s faith is strong and, though God stays his hand before he kills Isaac, Abraham shows his steady confidence in God (see Heb. 11:17–19).

The covenant promises are passed down to Isaac and then to his son Jacob. Isaac is a rather undeveloped character in Genesis, while Jacob, the trickster who himself is tricked on occasion, is rather colorful. Jacob struggles in his relationship with God, culminating in a wrestling match with him, after which God changes his name to “Israel,” the future name of the people of God (32:22–32). Israel and his two wives and two concubines give birth to twelve sons, who give their names to the future twelve tribes of Israel.

The concluding part of Genesis (chaps. 37–50) concerns Joseph, one of the twelve sons of Jacob. This story serves as a bridge between Genesis and Exodus, since it explains how the descendants of Abraham make their way down to Egypt. The Joseph story is filled with family intrigue. Jacob has his favorite son, Joseph, and thus his siblings are extremely jealous, and at their first opportunity they sell him to traders who take him down to Egypt, where he serves as a

slave. Although experiencing evil at the hands of his brothers, his Egyptian owners, and others, Joseph at the end of his life sees the guiding hand of divine providence that used these horrible experiences to save his family, the family of promise, from the deadly effects of a severe famine. Joseph articulates this understanding to his brothers after the death of his father, Jacob: “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives” (50:20).

The book of Genesis ends with the death of Joseph, but it anticipates the continuation of the story in the book of Exodus when Joseph makes his brothers promise that they will take his embalmed body back to the Promised Land in the future (50:22–26).

Authorship and Date: Who Wrote Genesis and When?

The question of the authorship of Genesis is bound up with the question of the Pentateuch as a whole, so that will be the subject of this section, and later chapters will refer back here. The authorship of the Pentateuch, perhaps surprising to some readers, is one of the most hotly debated subjects of Old Testament scholarship. On the one side are those who want to defend the viewpoint that Moses wrote the Pentateuch. On the other side are those who argue that Moses wrote no part of the Pentateuch, but rather that the Pentateuch is the result of a long history of composition that may have begun as early as the time of the United Monarchy (tenth century BC) but did not end until the postexilic period. Of course, there are many variations on these schools of thought, particularly the second.

Analysis of the issue should begin with the observation that the Pentateuch is technically anonymous. No one is ever named as the author of the Pentateuch within the Pentateuch itself. However, the Pentateuch does describe Moses writing down law (Ex. 24:4; 34:27), narrative (Ex. 17:4; Num. 33:2), and a song (Deut. 31:22; see Deut. 32), so it does picture Moses in a writing capacity—though, again, these passages may not be construed as indicating that Moses wrote the entirety or even the majority of the Pentateuch. Even so, later Scripture looks back on a body of writing that is clearly associated with the Pentateuch and refers to it by such titles as the “Book of Moses” (2 Chron. 25:4; Ezra 6:18; Neh. 13:1; see also Josh. 1:7, 8). In the New Testament, Jesus and the composers of the Gospels asso-

ciated much, if not all, of the Pentateuch with Moses (Matt. 19:7; 22:24; Mark 7:10; 12:26; John 1:17; 5:46; 7:23).

These are the strongest reasons to think that Moses was involved in the composition of the Pentateuch, but they do not constitute evidence that he wrote it in its entirety. Indeed, most defenders of Mosaic authorship recognize that there are certain texts that Moses could not have written, most clearly the account of his death in Deuteronomy 34. Since these texts were obviously written after Moses' life, there is no good principal reason to think that other texts that are not so easily recognized were also written later in the history of Israel, perhaps even as late as the postexilic period. On the one hand, Moses is presented as an authority figure in the book. Thus, if he was not involved at all in the writing of the Pentateuch—or at least if the traditions about his involvement in the history of Israel (particularly the receiving of the law) are not true—then there are some legitimate theological questions that can be raised. On the other hand, the ultimate authority of these materials rests not on Moses' authority, but on God's.

Many scholars strongly believe that Moses was not involved in the composition of the Pentateuch, but instead it is a result of a process that lasted many centuries. While, as mentioned, there are a number of alternate theories for the production of the Pentateuch, the classic Documentary Hypothesis is the default viewpoint still held and taught by many today.

The modern era of the study of sources in the Pentateuch began when Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1632–77) questioned its authorial unity, but it was Jean Astruc (1684–1766) who first proposed sources. He attempted to defend Mosaic authorship by suggesting that Moses himself used a source. The Mosaic material could be distinguished from the source by the use of the divine name Yahweh rather than Elohim. Very soon after Astruc, however, the search for the original sources of the Pentateuch led many scholars to completely disassociate it from Moses. The classic source-critical analysis of the Pentateuch now known as the Documentary Hypothesis was formulated by Julius Wellhausen in the 1880s. He used four basic criteria to distinguish the sources from each other: (1) the divine names Elohim and Yahweh, (2) double stories (for instance, the two accounts of creation in Gen. 1:1–2:4a and 2:4b–25), (3) double namings (for instance, the nomads said to have taken Joseph to Egypt are called Ishmaelites [Gen. 37:25] and Midianites [Gen. 37:28]), and

(4) different theology (for instance, monotheism versus henotheism, or a central altar versus multiple altars).

Wellhausen concluded that there were four sources that came together over time to produce the Pentateuch. The oldest source was J, the Jahwist. Often dated to the tenth century BC and considered a southern source, J was a captivating storyteller, describing God in larger-than-life human terms. A good example of J's style and theology may be seen in Genesis 2 and 3, the second creation account and the story of Adam and Eve's rebellion. The J source may be found intermittently up through the book of Numbers. The second source was E, the Elohist. Often dated to the ninth century BC and considered a northern source, E is more fragmentary than J, distinguished by its use of Elohim rather than Yahweh to refer to God. The third source was D, the Deuteronomist. Dated to a specific time in the late seventh century BC because of its association with the discovery of a law book in the temple during Josiah's reforms (2 Kings 22–23), D is mostly associated with the book of Deuteronomy, so its distinctive theological perspective may be found in the chapter on Deuteronomy. The final source is P, the Priestly source, so named because much of its content would be of interest to the priestly class (genealogies, sacrifices, sacred festivals, purity laws, etc.). It is often dated to the exilic or postexilic period.

This traditional view of the Documentary Hypothesis is still widely held today. Interest in source criticism seems to have waned in the period 1980 to 1995 because scholars began to focus on the final form of the text regardless of its possible diachronic origins. This interest came about through the influence of both canonical readings of the text and an emphasis on the application of literary methods to the study of the Old Testament. This concern with the final form of the text continues today, but is coupled with a renewed commitment to analyzing the sources that combined to produce the final form.

While Wellhausen's conclusions continue to be widely held, there are many variations among scholars that are intensely debated. For example, some scholars hold that it is not possible to distinguish E from J. Others would take D and/or P as indicating a redactional perspective rather than an original separate source. Some speak in general terms of P and non-P, finding it hard to distinguish the other sources.

Furthermore, many remain skeptical of the whole endeavor of trying to find sources in this way, and they continue to defend an

essential Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, proposing alternate reasons for the criteria that lead many to propose sources. Such a view must, however, recognize that there are sources of a different type in the Pentateuch (introduced by the formula *‘elleh toledot PN*, “This is the account of PN,” where PN is the personal name of a person whose descendants will be the subject of the following section [2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10, 27; 25:12, 19; 36:1, 9]). These indicate the use of oral and/or written sources (see 5:1) for the writing of the book of Genesis. In addition, as noted above, the presence of the so-called post-Mosaic makes clear that the composition of the Pentateuch did not come to a close with the death of Moses. The amount of material that postdates Moses in the Pentateuch is unclear.

Genre: What Style of Literature Is Genesis?

Whether Genesis was written in large part by Moses using sources or later, the book of Genesis gives an account of the past—indeed, reaching back to the far distant past, even the creation of the cosmos. Thus the book can rightly be called a work of history, if by history is meant a recounting of past events.

However, like all history writing, Genesis recounts the past in order to help explain the present and from a certain focus that is generated by later interests. Take, for instance, the creation narratives. They make a bold historical claim: Yahweh (and not any other god) created creation. The creation narratives clearly have a theological, and not a scientific, interest. Since the creation accounts (and the rest of the primeval history [chaps. 1–11]) use a high degree of figurative language and interact extensively with ancient Near Eastern literature, it is an error to read these chapters to discover *how* God created the universe.

Beginning with Abraham, the reader can detect a clear shift in narrative style. Time slows down and the scope of the narrative radically narrows. While Genesis 1–11 covers the whole world from creation up to Abraham (an undetermined, but enormous period of time), the focus narrows to one individual, Abraham, whose life is then followed for the next fourteen chapters. Thus the composer signals a more intense interest in historical detail that continues until the end of the book.

That is not to deny that literary and theological concerns shape the presentation of the patriarchs and Joseph. The Abraham narrative

is concerned with the patriarchs' response to the covenant promises, and Joseph's life is told in a way that highlights the providence of God as he preserves the people of promise through a harrowing famine.

Connections: How Does Genesis Anticipate the Gospel?

The connections between the book of Genesis and the New Testament are manifold; accordingly, we can only highlight a few. Romans 5:12–21 describes Christ as a second Adam. The first Adam brought sin and death into the world by his disobedience, while the second Adam, Christ, brings life through his righteousness (see also 1 Cor. 15:45–49 for an Adam and Christ analogy).

Paul also draws a connection between Jesus and Abraham in Galatians 3:15–22, and it is a rather surprising one at that. Paul reminds his readers of the promises God made to Abraham, especially the promise of “seed.” He emphasizes the fact that God's promised seed is singular and therefore does not point to many descendants, but rather to only one, whom he identifies as none other than Christ. Jesus is the “seed” anticipated by the promise to Abraham. This is surprising in that the book of Genesis itself makes it clear that the promise of “seed” does indeed point to the numerous descendants of Abraham (for instance, Gen. 15:5). Paul as an expert in the Old Testament would surely have known this. What Paul is doing is exploiting the collective singular to make an important theological point. Jesus is the ultimate fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise, and those who are in union with Christ are the true children of Abraham (Gal. 3:29).

The Joseph story also anticipates Christ in that Joseph's life illustrates God's providence whereby he can even use the evil acts of people to bring about salvation. In Joseph's case, God used his brothers, Potiphar's wife, and others to put him in a place where he could provide for his family during a famine. In the case of Christ, God used the actions of evil men who nailed Jesus to the cross in order to bring salvation to the world (Acts 2:22–24).

Recommended Resources

Duguid, I. M. *Living in the Gap between Promise and Reality: The Gospel according to Abraham*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P and R Publishing, 1999.

- _____. *Living in the Grip of Relentless Grace: The Gospel according to Isaac and Jacob*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P and R Publishing, 2002.
- Longman, T. *How to Read Genesis*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005.
- Waltke, B. K. *Genesis*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001.
- Walton, J. H. "Genesis." Pages 2–159 in ZIBBC 1. Edited by J. H. Walton. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009.

Questions for Review and Discussion

1. How does Genesis relate to the rest of the Pentateuch?
2. What does the creation story teach us about God, ourselves, and our world?
3. How does the story of Abraham inform us about the nature of faith?
4. What does the Joseph narrative tell us about the nature of divine providence?
5. Who wrote the Pentateuch?
6. Read Galatians 3:15–22 yourself and see if you agree with the perspective offered in this chapter.