

The New International Commentary
on the Old Testament



THE BOOK OF
GENESIS
Chapters 1-17

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INTRODUCTION

I. TITLE

The title “Genesis” comes to us by way of the Latin Vulgate (*Incipit Liber Bresith id est Genesis*), which in turn borrowed, or transliterated, from the Greek LXX, *Génesis*. This word is best reproduced in English by “origin.”

In postbiblical Hebrew usage the title is *b^erē šît*, which is, in fact, simply the first word of 1:1 (“In [the] beginning”). This follows the custom of naming the books of the Pentateuch on the basis of either their first word, their first two words, or an expression near the beginning of the first verse. Thus the titles for the rest of the Torah books are as follows: Exodus—*w^e’ēlleh š^emôt* (“and these [are] the names of”); Leviticus—*wayyiqrā’* (“and he called”); Numbers—*b^emidbar* (“in the wilderness of”); Deuteronomy—*’ēlleh haddeḅārîm* (“these [are] the words”).¹ This custom is followed only sporadically in the Hebrew Bible once one moves beyond its first five books (e.g., “Song of Songs,” *šîr haššîrîm*, and “Lamentations,” *’ēkâ*).²

Some Hebrew manuscripts from the Middle Ages used titles like “First Book,” “Book of the Creation of the World,” and “Book of the Righteous.” Rabbi Isaac Abrabanel (1427–1508) writes at the end of his commentary on Genesis: “*B’reshith* is called ‘The Book of Creation’ (*Sepher ha-B’riah*) or ‘The Book of Formation’ (*Sepher ha-Yetsirah*).” Nahmanides likewise writes in his introduction: “*B’reshith*, which is the Book of *Yetsirah*, teaches that the world is new.” Midrash Habiur raises the question: “Why is

1. Modern Hebrew usage sometimes abbreviates titles (*š^emôt* for Exodus, *deḅārîm* for Deuteronomy), or slightly changes the title (*bamidbar*, “in the wilderness,” for Numbers).

2. “Lamentations” derives from LXX *thrénoi* and Vulg. *threni*, which is a translation of *qînôt*, the title given to this OT book by the Babylonian Talmud (*Baba Batra* 14b, 15a) and other early Jewish writings (Jerusalem Talmud, *šabbat* 16:15c, which uses the expression *m^egillaṭ qînôt*).

B'reshith called 'The Book of *Yashar*' (the righteous)?" It then answers, "Because it contains the history of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who were called the Righteous, as it is written, 'Let me die the death of the righteous' (Num. 23:10)."

Genesis is obviously a book concerned with origins—the origin of earth's creation, of humankind, of institutions by which civilization is perpetuated, of one special family chosen by God as his own and designated as the medium of world blessing. Transcending all of these emphases on beginnings is God. There is no *génésis theou* (theogony) in Scripture's introductory book, nor any theobiography. He is one without *rē'sīt* (beginning) and *'aharīt* (end).

II. STRUCTURE

Few books of Scripture reveal the lines of demarcation between their individual units as clearly as does Genesis. This is due to the presence of the formula *'elleh tōlēdōt*, used ten times throughout Genesis. At some points it appears preferable to translate the formula "this is the story (or history) of *X*." At other points "these are the descendants (or generations) of *X*" seems better. The choice between these two at any given occurrence depends mostly on the nature of the material following the formula. If the formula is followed by a genealogy then the preference is for the latter. If it is followed by narrative then the preference is for the former. The ten are (and we translate "generations" only for continuity):

1. 2:4a: "these are the generations of the heavens and the earth"
2. 5:1a: "these are the generations of Adam"
3. 6:9a: "these are the generations of Noah"
4. 10:1a: "these are the generations of the sons of Noah"
5. 11:10a: "these are the generations of Shem"
6. 11:27a: "these are the generations of Terah"
7. 25:12a: "these are the generations of Ishmael"
8. 25:19a: "these are the generations of Isaac"
9. 36:1a, 9a: "these are the generations of Esau"
10. 37:2a: "these are the generations of Jacob"

Closer examination of these occurrences reveals that in five of them the formula is followed by narrative: #1 (creation), #3 (the flood), #6 (Abraham story), #8 (Jacob story), #10 (Joseph story). In these five the introductory note should read "this is the story of *X*." Yet most of the modern versions of Scripture are not consistent. For example, one finds for 11:27a

“these are Terah’s descendants” (JB) or “this is the table of the descendants of Terah” (NEB), principally because of the presence of genealogical notes in 11:27b–32. Additionally NEB renders 25:19a as “This is the table of the descendants of Abraham’s son Isaac.”

The remaining five all appear as headings for genealogies: #2 (“the descendants of *Adam*”), #4 (“the descendants of *the sons of Noah*”), #5 (“the descendants of *Shem*”), #7 (“the descendants of *Ishmael*”), #9 (“the descendants of *Esau*”). Furthermore, these five genealogies in Genesis fall into one of two types. One type is the vertical genealogy, which traces one line of descent. This is found in 5:1ff. (#2), the ten-generation genealogy of Adam to Noah; and in 11:10ff. (#5), the ten-generation genealogy of Shem to Abraham. Both of these genealogies conclude with a reference to an individual who fathered three children:

Noah: Shem, Ham, Japheth

Terah: Abram, Nahor, Haran

The second type of genealogy in Genesis is a horizontal or segmented type in which the genealogy is not traced through one son (the oldest), but through various children. This type is found in 10:1 (#4), descendants of Shem/Ham/Japheth; in 25:12 (#7), the twelve descendants of Ishmael; and lastly in 36:1, 9 (#9), Esau’s family tree.¹ These last three genealogies protrude little into the narrative sections of Genesis. At points they seem almost tangential.

The first of these ten occurrences of the formula is clearly the most interesting. It is the only one of the ten in which a personal name does not appear. Instead, one finds “the *tôledôt* of the heavens and the earth.” And it is precisely here that a major problem of interpretation emerges. Does the first of these structure-providing formulae conclude what has just been recounted, or does it introduce what follows? If it is retrogressive, then 2:4a must be read with 1:1–2:3. If it is prospective, then 2:4a must be read with

1. See B. S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), p. 145. See also S. Tengström (*Die Toledotformel und die literarische Struktur der priesterlichen Erweiterungsschicht im Pentateuch* [Lund: Gleerup, 1981]) for the phrases “narrative genealogy” (i.e., Gen. 5) and “genealogical tables” or “tribal tree” (i.e., Gen. 10). Tengström’s novel suggestion that the seven attestations of the formula that remain in Genesis, after one subtracts the four that introduce genealogical tables (10:1; 25:12; 36:1, 9), are meant to parallel the seven days of creation in P (the Priestly source) is farfetched. How could the ancient writer have made the distinction between the two categories into which Tengström fits the eleven usages of the formula in Genesis?

2:4bff. Furthermore, this develops into the larger problem of whether all the instances of the *tôlêdôt* formula should be read as titles, introducing what follows, or as conclusions, summarizing what has preceded.

First, let us examine 2:4a. The majority of modern versions of the Bible handle 2:4a as a subscript to 1:1–2:3 (see, e.g., RSV, JB, NEB, NAB, Speiser). This division is reflected also in the typesettings of two of the recent editions of the Hebrew Bible, *BHK* and *BHS*. So understood, “generations” of 2:4a relates to the numerical pattern of the seven days of 1:1–2:3.

It is equally arguable that 2:4a is an introduction to what follows. This is our preference, for the following reasons. First, an almost insurmountable problem is created if one tacks on 2:4a to 1:1–2:3, and yet wishes to hold on to Priestly (1:1–2:3) and Yahwistic (2:4bff.) creation stories. Almost all commentators agree (exceptions will be noted below) that the phrase in question functions everywhere else in Genesis as a superscript. Here, however, would be the one time where it is a subscript. Von Rad, sensitive to this point, argues in a strained fashion that the Priestly interpolator placed the formula uncharacteristically at the conclusion of the pericope for two reasons. One reason was his penchant for order and system—thus the presence of this rubric to accentuate that neat structure. The second reason was that the beginning of the chapter was canonically fixed and hence untouchable.²

It seems jarring, however, to designate seven days of creation as “generations.” In all the other instances where *tôlêdôt* appears, it designates the descendants of *X* by generation, or introduces a narrative about the descendants of *X*. If one links 2:4a to what has gone before, then one must be prepared to attach an awkward and unique meaning or nuance to *tôlêdôt* in 2:4a.

A second reason for reading the formula in 2:4a as a superscript is that the ancient versions (see, e.g., LXX) lend no supporting evidence for the dissection of 2:4. If anywhere, the break comes at 2:3, not at 2:4a. Note that the Masorah supports the unity of 2:4. Overall the Masorah divides Genesis into ninety-one *pārāšiyôt* (“sections, pericopes”), forty-three of which are *peṭūḥôt*, indicated by a *p* (“open sections”), and forty-eight of which are *seṭūmôt*, indicated by an *s* (“closed sections”).³ Observe that 2:4a begins one of these *peṭūḥôt*.

2. See G. von Rad, *Genesis*, OTL, rev. ed., tr. J. H. Marks (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), p. 63.

3. On *pārāšiyôt*, *seḏārîm*, *peṭūḥôt*, and *seṭūmôt*, see A. Dotan, “Masorah,” *EncJud*, 16:1406–7.

STRUCTURE

Third, since the formula is always followed by “the genitive of the progenitor, never of the progeny,” the phrase can only refer to that which is generated by the heavens and the earth, and not to the generation of the heavens and the earth themselves.⁴ So understood, the formula can only be read as a superscription to what follows. Thus 2:5ff. designates man and woman as the offspring of the heavens and earth, much as Seth is of Adam and Abram is of Terah.

There may be a deliberate reason for this type of styling. In the opening chapter of Genesis the male and female whom God created bore the divine image and likeness. Possibly these unique endowments might have been understood as providing qualification for Adam and Eve as the *tôledôt ’ēlohîm*. The OT at large does not shy away from labeling certain individuals (kings especially) as “sons of God,” but the phrase is conspicuously absent from Gen. 1–2. The only “sons of God” in Genesis are those in bondage to unrestrained lust (6:1–4). We would suggest that 2:4ff. forms a polarity with 1:1–2:3, and is *kenegdô* (“as a complement”) to 1:1–2:3 as is Eve to Adam. The one without the other is incomplete, and one is not more truthful, or more important, or more indispensable than the other. Just as 1:1–2:3 focus on humanity’s divine origins and endowments, so 2:4ff. focus on humanity’s mundane origins. For this reason 1:1–2:3 draws our attention to a primal couple created with authority (“you shall,” 1:29), while 2:4ff. draws our attention to a primal couple created under authority (“you shall not,” 2:17).

Thus, for the above reasons we prefer to understand 2:4a as a superscript to what follows, and as an introduction to the first of ten units in the book of Genesis, all of which are preceded by an introductory unit (1:1–2:3). We now turn our attention to the remaining nine instances of the formula.

It is widely accepted that all of the *tôledôt* formulae, with the possible exception of 2:4a, function in Genesis as titles that introduce a new unit. A number of writers also identify them as colophons. A colophon may be defined as an inscription usually placed at the end of a book or manuscript and usually containing facts relative to its production (e.g., the author’s name).

4. The quotation is from J. Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Genesis*. ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1910), p. 41. See also B. Childs, *Introduction*, p. 145; and F. M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1973), pp. 301–5, and esp. p. 302 for his discussion at length of 2:4a.

The New International Commentary on the Old Testament

Robert L. Hubbard Jr., general editor

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