

Where Sin Abounds

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*The Spread of Sin and the Curse in the Book of Genesis  
with A Special Emphasis on the Patriarchal Narratives*

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## Introduction

A PRIMARY FUNCTION OF Scripture is to impart a proper understanding of sin. The apostle Paul underscored this function when he noted in Romans 3:20 that “through the law comes knowledge of sin.” The context (3:9–19, 21) suggests that Paul is referring not to the Decalogue or five Books of Moses in particular but to the OT Scriptures as a whole as they function to reveal God’s moral demands for humanity.<sup>1</sup> However, later in the epistle the apostle narrows his focus to the first book of the Hebrew canon, namely, Genesis. In Romans 5:12–14, Paul uses the redemptive-historical narrative recorded in Genesis, which he describes with the phrase “from Adam to Moses,” to expound sin’s primeval origin, universal scope, and ultimate consequence (Rom 5:12–21).<sup>2</sup> Following

1. As Murray remarks, “It is not Pauline . . . to regard the law that is epitomized in the ten commandments as a law that can be segregated; the OT in its entirety is permeated with the requirements and judgments which are summed up in the ten commandments.” *Epistle to the Romans*, 105–6. See also Cranfield, *Romans 1–8*, 195; Hendricksen, *Exposition of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans*, 124–25; Hodge, *Epistle to the Romans*, 80–86; Moo, *Epistle to the Romans*, 204–10; Leon Morris, *Epistle to the Romans*, 169–72; Schreiner, *Romans*, 168.

2. Some commentators note Paul’s dependence on the Genesis 3 account of man’s “fall.” See, for example, Bruce, *Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, 129; Cranfield, *Romans 1–8*, 114; Godet, *Commentary on St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans*, 205; Murray, *Epistle to the Romans*, 181. Hendricksen suggests that Paul “may have been thinking, among other things, about the deluge, which destroyed almost the entire population of the world.” *Exposition of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans*, 179. It is probable, however, that Paul’s reference to “death reign[ing] from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam” is an allusion to the entire primeval and patriarchal epochs as they are recorded in Genesis. This is noted, but not developed, by Lenski, who observes in commenting on 5:14, “Abel was killed by his own brother. The history of every one of those ancients ends with *wayyamotoh*, ‘and he died.’ . . . These are the facts that stand out in the story of Genesis ‘from Adam to Moses.’” *Interpretation of St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans*, 363. Kline is certain Paul has the Genesis narrative in view. He writes, “These bounds [‘from Adam to Moses’] are not simply temporal, as if Paul said ‘until the days of the Hittite empire’ or ‘from the paleolithic to the late bronze age.’ But the *terminus ad quem*, ‘to Moses,’ and the *terminus a quo*, ‘from Adam,’ are epochal turning points in the history of divine-human relationships, or, in more Biblical terms,

Paul's reasoning, one would expect the motif of sin to play a major role throughout *the entire narrative* of Genesis.

WHAT EVER BECAME OF SIN  
(IN THE PATRIARCHAL NARRATIVE)?

Nearly all scholars divide Genesis into primeval and patriarchal history, though they debate the precise point of division.<sup>3</sup> Interpreters offer various reasons to justify the division. First, the primeval narrative focuses on human history in general, whereas the patriarchal narrative focuses on Jewish history in particular.<sup>4</sup> Second, the primeval narrative follows a fast pace and spans long periods of time, whereas the patriarchal narrative slows the tempo and spans only four generations.<sup>5</sup> Third, many scholars see a shift in thematic emphases.

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covenantal turning points." "Gospel Until the Law," 436. Kline goes on to note the many references to death in the Genesis narratives (*ibid.*, 437) and argues that "the Genesis history of the covenant people" is the "obvious source behind 5:14a" (*ibid.*, 438). While some facets of Kline's thesis are debatable, his argument that Paul's reference to the reign of death in 5:14a is an allusion to the Genesis history is convincing.

3. A number of biblical scholars and commentators conveniently locate the dividing point between Genesis 11 and 12. More commonly, however, interpreters mark the division between 11:26 and 11:27. A few make the division as early as 11:9. Von Rad carries primeval history through 12:9 and begins patriarchal history at 12:10. *Genesis*, 5–7.

4. Westermann argues that Genesis serves as an introduction to the Pentateuch and may be viewed as two concentric circles around Israel's birth as a nation at the exodus event: "While the stories of the patriarchs, Gen 12–50, present the history of Israel before it became a people, the story of the primeval events has a far wider horizon. It gives the events which take place in the middle of the Pentateuch a far wider horizon, extending them to world events in the broadest sense of the word." *Genesis 1–11*, 2. See also Gowan, *From Eden to Babel*, 3–6; Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, 43–44; Sarna, *Genesis*, xii–xiii.

5. According to the ages given in the genealogies of Genesis 5 and 11, primeval history (Gen 1–11) spans no less than two thousand years and probably somewhere between twenty-five hundred and three thousand years. For a detailed discussion of the significance of these genealogies for chronology, see Benjamin Shaw, "Genealogies of Genesis 5 and 11 and Their Significance for Chronology." On the other hand, the events recorded within the patriarchal history (Gen 12–50) occur within a three-hundred-year period. The following interpreters note the slowed pace: Dever, *Message of the OT: Promises Made*, 66–67; Hamilton, *Genesis 1–17*, 10–11; Speiser, *Genesis*, lxx; Thomas, *Genesis*, 113.

*The Sin Versus Grace Dichotomy*

In primeval history, the narrator focuses on the origin and spread of sin, as well as God's consequent curse and judgment on humanity. Although God's blessing begins the narrative (1–2) and his grace surfaces from time to time after the fall, the main emphasis of primeval history is on sin and the curse. In patriarchal history, however, the spread of sin theme falls off the radar of most scholars. Here, it is generally argued, the narrator shifts the emphasis to God's promise of blessing in the lives of his chosen people, the family of Abraham. A few interpreters argue that this shift occurs immediately after the Flood.<sup>6</sup> Most scholars locate the shift of emphasis sometime after the Tower of Babel story (11:1–9) with the introduction of patriarchal history. Gerhard von Rad, for example, contrasts “the Jahwist's great hamartiology in Gen. III–XI” where “sin broke in and spread like an avalanche” with patriarchal or “sacred” history where “the promise of the possession of the land of Canaan, and the promise of an innumerable posterity” become the central motifs.<sup>7</sup> Following von Rad, John Gibson sees the “main thrust of the [first] eleven chapters” as “negative” because “they have portrayed sin spreading like a virus and infecting mortally not only humanity but the very physical creation.” With the commencement of patriarchal history, however, “the call to Abraham which will set the Gospel story in motion is about to be issued.”<sup>8</sup> According to Gordon Wenham, chapters 1–11 reveal “the hopeless plight of mankind without the gracious intervention of God.” “But the promises first made to Abraham in 12:1–3,” argues Wenham, “begin to repair that hopeless situation.”<sup>9</sup> Victor Hamilton also views the patriarchal history (12–50) as the solution to the sin problem as outlined in the primeval history (1–11) and thus traces the progression of the

6. Keil and Delitzsch, *Pentateuch*, 1:34; Rendtorff, “Genesis 821 und die Urgeschichte des Jahwisten,” 69–78; Clark, “Flood and the Structure of the Pre-patriarchal History,” 184–211; Fretheim, *Creation, Fall, and Flood*, 112–13.

7. Von Rad, *OT Theology*, 152–54.

8. Gibson sees God's activity in the first eleven chapters as “a rearguard action as desperately [God] defends his Kingdom against [sinful man's] usurping hands.” But beginning in chapter 12, “God Launches His Counter-Offensive,” *Genesis*, 1:212–13.

9. Wenham goes on to expand this contrast: “Sin had apparently frustrated God's purposes for mankind [chs. 1–11]: the promises give hope that they may indeed be realized [chs. 12–50]. The primeval history thus explains the significance of the patriarchal story: though apparently of little consequence in the world of their day, the patriarchs are in fact men through whom the world will be redeemed.” *Genesis 1–15*, li.

narrative “from generation (chs. 1–2), to degeneration (chs. 3–11), to regeneration (chs. 12–50).”<sup>10</sup> More recently, Allen Ross has concluded that the curse predominates in the primeval history while the blessing holds preeminence in the patriarchal narrative.<sup>11</sup> As a result of this tendency to contrast the primary theme(s) of primeval narrative with patriarchal narrative, the spread of sin motif fails to receive adequate treatment in Genesis 12–50.<sup>12</sup>

### *The Plaster-Saint Syndrome*

Another factor that sometimes blinds scholars to the spread of sin theme in the patriarchal narrative is an inordinate emphasis on or exaggeration of the piety of the patriarchs. Of course, the patriarchal narratives as well as the rest of Scripture bear witness to the exemplary faith and obedience of these saints.<sup>13</sup> Yet Jewish and Christian exegetes have sometimes

10. Stating it from a different angle, Hamilton avers, “After the series of sorry examples presented in chs. 1–11, we are meant to read chs. 12ff. (patriarchal history) as the solution to this problem,” *Genesis 1–17*, 11.

11. In Ross’s words, “In Genesis the curse is prominent in the first eleven chapters, for that part of the book traces the spread of sin once humans came to know ‘good and evil.’ The emphasis on the curse is replaced in the patriarchal narratives by the prominence of the blessing, except for the warning of a curse for those who oppose God’s program and God’s people (Gen 12:1–3),” *Creation & Blessing*, 67.

12. Noting the use of narrative typology in the Pentateuch in which the narrator highlights how earlier redemptive events anticipate later ones, Sailhamer compares the “Spread of Sin” motif of Genesis with the theme of the “Defilement of the Camp” in Lev 11–16. But in Sailhamer’s analysis, the “spread of sin” theme is limited to the first eleven chapters of Genesis. *Pentateuch as Narrative*, 39–41. Genesis 1–11 depicts “an endless cycle of chaos, evil, and destruction,” according to Arnold. “But a significant turn occurs with the call of Abraham in chapter 12. The problem of human sin finds partial resolution through covenant relationship with God,” *Encountering the Book of Genesis*, 200. T. D. Alexander remarks, “While the early chapters of Genesis concentrate mainly on the terrible consequences of these initial developments [i.e., human disobedience, alienation from God, and divine punishment], the rest of Genesis, from chapter 12 onwards, moves forward with the hope that humanity may yet be reconciled to God.” *From Paradise to the Promised Land*, 98. See also Driver, *Book of Genesis*, lxx–lxxi; Roop, *Genesis*, 88, 93–94; Stigers, *Commentary on Genesis*, 34–35; Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 66–68, 604–05.

13. In the patriarchal narrative, Abraham is commended for his faith (15:6), pious fear (22:12), and obedience (22:16; 26:5). Not surprisingly, later Scripture writers refer to him as God’s “servant” (Ps 105) and “friend” (2 Chr 21:7; Isa 4 1:8; Jas 2:23), and he is held up as a paradigm of piety for NT believers (John 8:39–40, 56; Rom 4:18–24; Gal 3:7, 9; Heb 11:8–17; Jas 2:21–24). The Scriptures also refer to Isaac and Jacob as God’s “servants” (Exod 32:13; Deut 9:27) and attribute the same quality of faith to them

stressed patriarchal piety to the point of minimizing or excusing the patriarchs' faults. For example, the Book of Jubilees, a second-century BC Jewish work, alludes to the manifold trials and temptations Abraham faced in the Genesis narrative and asserts that "in everything wherein [God] had tried him, he was found faithful."<sup>14</sup> Another Hellenistic apocryphal work reads, "Therefore you, O Lord, God of the righteous, have not appointed repentance for the righteous, for Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, who did not sin against you, but you have appointed repentance for me, who am a sinner" (Odes 12:8, NRSV).<sup>15</sup> The Genesis Rabbah, a fourth-century AD conflation of the Genesis stories, portrays Abraham's personal merit as the ground of God's blessing on him and his descendants.<sup>16</sup> The Babylonian Talmud stresses the merit of the patriarchs and

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(Heb 11:19–20) as well as to Joseph (Heb 11:21), whose moral integrity is especially highlighted in the patriarchal narrative (39:8–9).

14. The larger context reads: "And the Lord knew that Abraham was faithful in all his afflictions, for he had tried him through his country and with famine, and had tried him with the wealth of kings, and had tried him again through his wife, when she was torn (from him), and with circumcision; and had tried him through Ishmael and Hagar, his maid-servant, when he sent them away. And in everything wherein He had tried him, he was found faithful, and his soul was not impatient, and he was not slow to act; for he was faithful and a lover of the Lord" (17:17–18). Later the author describes the patriarch as "perfect in all his deeds with the Lord and well-pleasing in righteousness all of the days of his life" (23:10a). *Jubilees*, 121–22, 145.

15. This is the twelfth of fourteen Odes that are appended to the Psalms in the Greek manuscript codex Alexandrinus (fifth century AD) and bears the title, "The Prayer of Manasseh." Although its earliest known appearance is found in a third century AD writing known as the *Didascalia*, most scholars date the original work in the first or second century BC. See Metzger, *Introduction to the Apocrypha*, 123–28.

16. In Parashah 44:5 (commenting on Gen 15:1–21), Abraham reasons with God: "Lord of the ages, you made a covenant with Noah that you would not wipe out his children. I went and acquired treasure of religious deeds and good deeds greater than his, so the covenant made with me has set aside the covenant made with him." Then God is portrayed as answering the patriarch: "Out of Noah I did not raise up shields for the righteous, but from you I shall raise up shields for the righteous. And not only so, but when your children will fall into sin and evil deeds, I shall see a single righteous man among them who can say to the attribute of justice, 'Enough.' Him I shall take and make into the atonement for them all." Jacob Neusner, the translator and editor, interprets this to mean that the "merit of Abraham will protect Israel in time to come, and, in future ages, there will be someone in the model of Abraham, who will serve as atonement for Israel." According to Parashah 48:8, the patriarch possesses sufficient merit to deliver any Israelite from the fires of Gehenna: "In the age to come Abraham will sit at the gate of Gehenna, and he will not permit a circumcised Israelite to go down there. Then what will he do for those who sinned too much? He will remove the foreskin from infants who died before they were circumcised and will place it over [Israelite sinners] and then lower them into Gehenna [protected by the skin]." *GR*, 128–29, 182.

their invulnerability to the power of sin.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps to a lesser degree, some of the early church fathers so emphasized the godliness of the patriarchs that they found it necessary either to allegorize or to provide a positive interpretation of passages that appear to depict the patriarchs as engaging in sinful behavior.<sup>18</sup> Even the Reformers tended to overemphasize the patriarchs' piety and minimize their faults.<sup>19</sup> Štefan Porúbčan's thorough study of sin in the OT provides a more recent example of this tendency.<sup>20</sup> The author includes a summary of the historical development of sin in each major redemptive epoch. After treating man's fall into sin (404–32) and the subsequent spread of sin through antediluvian society (432–38), Porúbčan turns his attention to the patriarchal history

17. For example, *Berakoth* of *Seder Zera'im* attributes the efficacy of Daniel's prayer (Dan 9:17) to the merits of Abraham (7b). *Baba Bathra* represents the rabbis as teaching that "evil inclination had no dominion [over] Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" (17a). *Bab Talmud*, 35. See also Edersheim's survey of the Talmudic literature in *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, 1:271–72.

18. When explaining Abraham's descent into Egypt and wife-sister ruse, Didymus the Blind (circa 313–398) can write, "On the literal level Abraham made an intelligent compromise with the lustfulness of the Egyptians." But "as for the spiritual meaning, those who pass from virtue to vice are said to descend to Egypt. . . . It does not say 'he descended' but 'he entered.' His descent is an entrance, because every zealous man condescends to those who fall without falling with them . . . to deliver them from their fall. Just as one becomes Jewish for the sake of the Jews without being a Jew, and ungodly for the sake of the ungodly without being ungodly, so one comes into Egypt without living as an Egyptian." *ACCS*, 2:7. Chrysostom portrays Rebekah's deceptive scheme to secure the blessing for Jacob as "a mother's affection" and equates it with "God's designs." According to Chrysostom, it was God "who prompted her to make plans and also made sure all turned out well." *ACCS*, 2:169. When Isaac assesses Jacob's act as deceptive (Gen 27:35), Augustine assures the reader that Isaac is only using the term in "a figurative sense" since in reality "a guileful, deceitful man . . . would deserve a curse." *ACCS*, 2:179.

19. Martin Luther begins his exposition of the patriarchal narratives well by noting Abraham's deliverance from idolatry and interpreting it "as proof for the doctrine of grace over against the worth of merits and works." *Lectures on Genesis*, 2:246. Yet throughout his lectures, Luther is quick to commend Abraham and his descendants for their piety, while at the same time excusing or minimizing their sins. John Calvin also commences his treatment of the patriarchal narratives by underlining "the gratuitous mercy of God" in Abram's call. *Genesis*, 1:343. But he, like Luther, feels compelled to emphasize the godliness of the patriarchs and to downplay their faults. The present study will highlight instances of this tendency in Luther and Calvin when relevant passages in the patriarchal narratives are analyzed.

20. Štefan Porúbčan, *Sin in the Old Testament: A Soteriological Study*. At the time of its publication, Porúbčan claimed, "So far there is no thorough and comprehensive study of sin in the OT" (xiii).

(438–44). He begins this section with a statement that conditions his entire perspective on the patriarchal narrative: “Here *we are not dealing with a sinner*, but with a particularly righteous man, a friend of God [emphasis added].” In the paragraphs that follow, he fails to mention a single patriarchal sin (!) and concludes by according Abraham’s personal merit equal weight with divine grace as a ground or basis for God’s covenant promise.<sup>21</sup> Victor Hamilton also overplays Abraham’s piety when he writes, “Will there be more Adams and more tower builders? Or is there a way out of this dilemma [i.e., human sin in primeval history]? The obedient model of Abraham contrasts to all the sorry models who have gone before him.”<sup>22</sup> As these examples demonstrate, an overemphasis on the virtues of the patriarchs has sometimes kept interpreters from seriously considering their vices.

#### *Removing the Rose-Colored Glasses*

However, there are at least four good reasons why the interpreter of Genesis should see the “spread of sin” as a major theme not only of primeval history but also of patriarchal history. First, the distinction between primeval and patriarchal history is not as sharp as sometimes alleged. Recent studies have demonstrated the integrity of the book as a whole and suggest that the central themes of chapters 12–50 actually are grounded in chapters 1–11.<sup>23</sup> The unity of Genesis would seem to suggest

21. Comparing Abraham with Noah, Porúbčan notes that “the covenant is built upon God’s favour and mercy, and at the same time upon the acknowledged righteousness and unshaken faith and faithfulness of the man Abraham. We can note the enormous influence of a righteous man with God.” *Sin in the Old Testament*, 440. While Porúbčan’s assessment of the patriarchal history and of Abraham’s piety is not devoid of truth, his failure to mention any patriarchal sin in a section purporting to be a history of sin is an obvious deficiency of his work. The author’s desire to emphasize Abraham’s merit (an emphasis consistent with his Roman Catholic theology) has to some degree blinded his eyes to the real and frequent portrayals of patriarchal sin in this period of redemptive history.

22. *Genesis 1–17*, 11. Hamilton references Coats who makes the same superficial contrast: “Genesis 1–11 seems uniform in presenting man as a creature who seeks divine power but whose search comes to ruin in confrontation with God. . . . One might well ask, on the basis of the disobedient model, what an obedient model would look like. The primeval history leads naturally to the history of God’s relationship to Abraham.” “The God of Death: Power and Obedience in the Primeval History,” 234.

23. Clines appropriately notes, “In the final form of Genesis, therefore, there is at no point a break between primeval and patriarchal history. What follows immediately upon the Babel story (11:1–9) is the genealogical table leading from Shem to Terah

that important themes developed in primeval history (e.g., spread of sin) will receive further treatment in patriarchal history. Second, as noted in the introductory remarks, the NT assigns a sin-revealing function to the entirety of the OT (Rom 3:10–20), especially the Torah, which includes the book of Genesis (Rom 5:12–21).<sup>24</sup> Third, the NT writers portray the patriarchs not only as saints but also as sinners saved by grace. In particular, Paul describes Abraham as an “ungodly” (ἀσεβῆ) man whom God justified. Since this description carries negative moral overtones<sup>25</sup> and cannot be limited to Abraham’s pre-conversion state,<sup>26</sup> it is likely

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(11:10–26). But who Shem is can be learned only from the Table of Nations, where his family is detailed . . . (10:21–31), or from the Noah story . . . (9:26). So the Shem genealogy is firmly linked into the primeval history. On the other hand, it is plain that the goal of the genealogy is Abram (11:26–30). Its function is equally to trace the ancestry of Abram—so it is attached to what follows—and to follow the line of descent from Shem—so it is attached to what precedes.” *The Theme of the Pentateuch*, 84–85. Based on the *toledot* structural device, Mathews argues, “The composition forms an Adam-Noah-Abraham continuum that loops the patriarchal promises with the God of cosmos and all human history.” *Genesis 1–11:26*, 41. See also Childs, *Introduction to the OT as Scripture*, 136–60; Mann, “All the Families of the Earth,” 341–53.

24. Scholars often overlook the fact that the book of Genesis functions both as a witness to pre-Torah revelation and also as a part of Torah revelation. Hence, the events recorded in Genesis occurred *before the law* (Rom 5:13–14; Gal 4:17–18), yet they also constitute the revelation of *the law*, which has as one of its functions the revelation of human sin (Rom 5:12–21; see also Rom 4:15; 7:7–9; Gal 3:19, 22).

25. Some, such as Dunn, attempt to tie the term in this context to Abraham’s covenantal standing (i.e., he was justified while *outside the covenant*) and disconnect it from any negative moral connotations. *Romans 1–8*, 204–05. The basic meaning of the word ἀσεβῆ, however, demands a negative moral description of the person in view (see also Gen 18:23, 25; Exod 23:7; Deut 25:1; Ps 1:1, 4–6; 9:23; 11:5; 17:9; 26:9; Prov 1:10; 2:22; 10:20; Isa 5:23; 13:11; 55:7; Ezek 20:38; 33:8, 9, 11, 12, 14; Rom 5:6–8; 1 Tim 1:9; 2 Pet 2:5–6). This is further confirmed by the inclusion of David’s words (4:7–8) from Psalm 32:1–2, which bear biographical witnesses to the kind of “ungodly” person God justifies (i.e., in David’s case, an adulterer and murderer). The point of Paul’s argument is not merely that God declares people righteous who are outside the covenant (i.e., Gentiles) but that God declares people righteous who do not merit that accreditation.

26. Note that Paul bases his portrayal of Abraham as an ungodly man justified in Genesis 15:6, a text characterizing the patriarch some time after his initial conversion (compare Gen 12:1–6 with Acts 7:2–4; Heb 11:8). Although Abraham was justified once-for-all years prior to his act of faith described in Genesis 15:6, that simple faith remained paradigmatic of the patriarch’s first act of saving faith. Moreover, the blessing attributed to Abraham in 15:6, namely, being credited as righteous, continues to contemplate his state as “ungodly,” that is, as a sinner in need of saving grace. Similarly, Paul’s citation of David’s words in Psalm 32 certainly applies to David’s post-conversion experience (Ps 32:1–2; Rom 4:7–8).

Paul saw the patriarch's vices as well as virtues when he read the Genesis text.<sup>27</sup> Finally, and most importantly, a careful exegetical and theological analysis reveals an equal if not greater emphasis on the pervasiveness of human sin in the patriarchal narrative than that found in the primeval narrative.

#### FALLING SHORT: LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of relevant biblical studies reveals that a detailed and comprehensive exegetical and theological analysis that focuses particularly on the theme of sin in the patriarchal narrative does not exist.

#### Commentaries

As noted above, nearly all commentators fail to perceive a major role for the sin motif in the patriarchal history. The majority of these commentators do not ignore the sins of the patriarchs. Hamilton, for instance, notes the numerous sins and shortcomings of the patriarchs in his exposition of chapters 12–50. But he argues that the narrator's (and God's) silence concerning their sins implies a shift of emphasis from human sin to God's faithfulness and electing grace.<sup>28</sup> To Allen Ross's credit, he does not ignore the theme of sin and evil in the patriarchal narratives and assures the reader that "in [his] exposition of Genesis . . . the motifs of blessing and cursing and good and evil appear repeatedly, tracing the theological message of the book." Nevertheless, his general summary of thematic emphasis cited above (n. 11) betrays a common tendency to downplay the spread of sin theme in the patriarchal narratives.<sup>29</sup> Kenneth Mathews provides a "theology of Genesis," highlighting the themes of the promised blessing, seed, and land. Though he devotes only one paragraph to the theme of "sin" in his theology of Genesis,<sup>30</sup>

27. In other words, Paul's characterization of Abraham as "ungodly" is based not merely on the patriarch's pre-Canaan life (Josh 24:2; Neh 9:7) but embraces the totality of the patriarch's life as depicted in the patriarchal narrative. With respect to Abraham's legal status and moral condition before God, he is always viewed, to use Martin Luther's coined expression, *simul iustus et peccator*. See *Lectures on Romans: Glosses and Scholia*, 63; *Lectures on Galatians 1545: 1–4*, 232.

28. *Genesis 1–17*, 38–50.

29. *Creation & Blessing*, 69. Even the title of his commentary directs the reader's focus away from sin and the curse.

30. *Genesis 1–11:26*, 54–63.

Mathews's second volume, which covers patriarchal history, gives a slightly greater emphasis to the topic of sin, devoting almost six pages to the motifs of sibling rivalry, deception, and alienation. Yet he makes it clear that these sin motifs are subordinate to the overarching theme of God's promissory blessings.<sup>31</sup> Bruce Waltke comes closer to providing a unified reading of the entire Genesis narrative that incorporates the sin motif. But Waltke, like the commentators above, places the accent on redemption rather than on sin.<sup>32</sup> While a reading of Genesis that sees divine grace overruling human sin is generally sound (Gen 50:20), it can hinder the reader from fully exploring and appreciating the pervasiveness of sin that permeates the patriarchal narrative.

#### *Articles, Essays, and Monographs*

Numerous journal articles and essays explore the theme of sin in Genesis. Those focusing on narrative sections within the larger patriarchal narrative are limited in scope.<sup>33</sup> Monographs that explore the theme of sin include various literary analyses of stories<sup>34</sup> or themes within the larger

31. *Genesis 11:27—50:26*, 72–80. See also Mathews's theology of Genesis in the *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 140–46. Mathews does list "crime and curse" as one of the major themes in the book, but he confines his discussion under this heading to passages in the primeval narrative.

32. Says Waltke, "God's promise to establish his kingdom through his grace that overcomes human sin is the governing theme of Genesis." *Genesis*, 50.

33. The literature here is too vast to cite exhaustively, but a few examples include Berg, "Der Sündenfall Abrahams und Saras nach Gen 16:1–6," 7–14; idem, "Nochmals: ein Sündenfall Abrahams—der erste—in Gen 12:10–20," 7–15; Doyle, "The Sin of Sodom: *yāḏaʿ*, *yāḏaʿ*, *yāḏaʿʿ*?" 84–100; Kirsh, "What Did Sarah See?" 107–10; Daube and Yaron, "Jacob's Reception by Laban," 60–62; Tucker, "Jacob's Terrible Burden: In the Shadow of the Text," 145–58; Friedman, "Deception for Deception" 131–44; Caspi, "The Story of the Rape of Dinah," 25–45; Kessler, "Genesis 34—An Interpretation," 3–8; Bechtel, "What If Dinah Is Not Raped? (Genesis 34)," 19–36; Shapira, "Be Silent: An Immoral Behavior?" 232–44; Fewell and Gunn, "Tipping the Balance," 193–211; Nichol, "Genesis xxix.32 and xxxv.22a: Reuben's Reversal," 536–39; Schimmel, "Joseph and His Brothers," 60–65; White, "Reuben and Judah," 73–97; Ackerman, "Joseph, Judah, and Jacob," 2:85–113; Mathewson, "An Exegetical Study of Genesis 38," 373–92; Wildasvsky, "Survival Must Not Be Gained Through Sin," 37–48; Hilgert, "The Dual Image of Joseph in Hebrew and Early Jewish Literature," 5–21.

34. Alter provides a brief analysis of the Judah-Tamar story in *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 3–12. Gunn and Fewell provide a more detailed investigation of this story as well as the stories of Abraham and Sarah in *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, 34–45, 90–100. Fokkelman explores the Jacob cycle in *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 46–81, as does Fishbane in *Text and Texture*, 40–62. Sternberg provides an extended analysis of the sto-

patriarchal narrative. Devora Steinmetz provides a literary analysis of the phenomenon of ethical conflicts between fathers and sons in the patriarchal narratives as the promise and blessing is passed on from one generation to the next.<sup>35</sup> David and Diana Garland focus on the moral abuses suffered by some of the matriarchs in the patriarchal narrative.<sup>36</sup> Burton Visotsky, a Jewish rabbi, provides a more comprehensive analysis of sin committed within the patriarchal family extending from the story of Abraham to Dinah's rape in Shechem.<sup>37</sup> There are also character studies that comment on the sins of the patriarchs.<sup>38</sup> Iain Duguid has written two books that highlight both the failures and the triumphs within the families of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He stops at Genesis 35, however, and his work is written on a semi-popular rather than scholarly level.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, Ian Toppin's study of family dysfunctions within the patriar-

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ry of Dinah's rape in Genesis 34. *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 445–75. Ryken examines the stories of Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph in *Words of Delight*, 62–71, 71–81, 100–05.

35. *From Father to Son*. Although Steinmetz's analysis is primarily literary in character, it operates under the normative assumption of modern psychoanalytical and anthropological theories, which she discusses in her introduction. *Ibid.*, 11–34.

36. In particular, they explore the theme of sin as it affects the lives of Sarah, Hagar, Leah, Dinah, and Tamar in *Flawed Families of the Bible*, 19–124.

37. *Genesis of Ethics*. However, Visotsky's analysis is flawed since it rejects the Scriptures as the normative basis for ethics. According to Visotsky, "Even God's law must stand the scrutiny of human ethics." *Ibid.*, 208. Not surprisingly, he views the stories simply as a helpful means to elicit discussion concerning moral dilemmas, which in turn promotes moral development. In his own words, "It is not the narrative of Genesis that makes the work sacred. Rather it is in the process of *studying* Genesis that the transformation takes place." *Ibid.*, 11 (emphasis his). Visotsky follows a reader-centered hermeneutic, at times offering several interpretations for the same passage and considering them valid ways to view the text. Some of his readings will be noted in this present study.

38. Such would include Getz, *Abraham*; idem, *Jacob*; idem, *Joseph*; Jordan, *Primeval Saints*, 61–149; LaSor, *Great Personalities*, 13–49; Whyte, *Bible Characters*, 65–123. In some cases, important characters are not discussed. For example, neither Getz nor LaSor includes a treatment of Isaac, Esau, or any of the matriarchs. Whyte's study excludes Judah. Moreover, some of these studies tend to be written on a more popular level and often lack sufficient exegetical discussion. Jordan's treatment, while reflecting a degree of scholarly reflection, is marred by an overly positive view of the patriarchs reflected in his attempts to justify many of their sins. The study below will interact with some of Jordan's attempts to exonerate the patriarchs and matriarchs of certain wrongdoings.

39. *Living in the Gap Between Promise and Reality*; idem, *Living in the Grip of Relentless Grace*.

chal community, though spanning from Adam through Jacob's sons, suffers from brevity and a lack of exegetical and theological depth.<sup>40</sup>

### *Dissertations*

A few doctoral dissertations examine the theme of sin in Genesis, but most of these limit their analysis of sin to the primeval narrative.<sup>41</sup> Those that do extend beyond the primeval narrative limit their focus to a particular dimension of sin within the Genesis corpus. John Ronning sees the Cain-Abel narrative as the first fulfillment of the divinely-imposed enmity between these "seeds," and he traces successive fulfillments of Genesis 3:15 throughout the narrative, noting several striking parallels between, for example, Ishmael and Isaac, Esau and Jacob, and the ten brothers (especially Judah) and Joseph.<sup>42</sup> Michael Williams identifies and analyzes those narratives in Genesis involving deception, with the aim of determining whether evaluative patterns in the text itself indicate the rightness or wrongness of the deceptive act.<sup>43</sup> While these studies

40. *Biblical Patriarchs and Their Legacy of Family Dysfunctions*. The book includes 116 pages of exposition. Toppin provides little exegetical analysis of the Hebrew text and no interaction with secondary literature.

41. Bratcher builds on the earlier studies of von Rad, Westermann, and Clines. She notes a formal pattern of episodes of sin, discovery of sin by Yahweh, judgment speech, mitigation of the judgment, and execution of the judgment in Genesis 1–11. She concludes that the narratives focus on the human violation of God's will and God's response to expose sin and correct it with judgment and grace. "The Pattern of Sin and Judgment in Genesis 1–11." Lim's *Grace in the Midst of Judgment* is a slight revision of the author's doctoral dissertation that was published in 2001. Lim employs a "theological hermeneutic" and analyzes the narratives of Genesis 1–11, concluding that "grace in the midst of judgment" not only characterizes the theme of these chapters but continues throughout the OT canonical literature. Shank studies the theme of sin in Genesis 1–11 in light of the Cain and Abel narrative. He concludes that the central theme of primeval history is not the spread of sin and grace [contra von Rad, Westermann, Clines] but rather the "self-limitation of God." Applied to the Cain and Abel account, "God permits sin to exist as an independent entity with a desire for Cain which he can master. Furthermore, within the context of the God-Cain relationship, sin emerges as a human responsibility" (iii). "The Sin Theology of the Cain and Abel Story."

42. "The Curse on the Serpent (Genesis 3:15) in Biblical Theology and Hermeneutics," 143–78, 184–211. Although Ronning's dissertation is actually concerned with the curse on the Serpent and its intertextual connections throughout the entire Bible, he does provide helpful analysis of the themes of hatred, strife, and violence throughout Genesis.

43. *Deception in Genesis*. In this edited and republished version of his PhD dissertation. Williams notes that while the narrative evaluates most deceptive events negatively, it assesses deception positively "when the perpetrator deceives one who has previously

make significant contributions to a theology of sin in the patriarchal narrative, none of them provides a comprehensive picture.

#### THE BOOK OF GENESIS: WHERE SIN ABOUNDS

The objective of the present study is to meet the need for a comprehensive and detailed exegetical and theological analysis of the spread of human sin in the patriarchal narrative of Genesis. More particularly, the study will examine both the varied expressions of human sin (i.e., sin proper) as well as the effects of human sin (i.e., the divinely imposed consequences for sin). The study will be “comprehensive” in that the patriarchal narrative as a whole will be analyzed.<sup>44</sup> The study will also deal with grammatical particulars and theological nuances within the text and thus be “detailed.” Moreover, the study will engage in theological exegesis, which accepts the text’s own self-attestation as divine revelation and which attempts to formulate from that revelation doctrine normative for human faith and life.

#### MARKING THE BOUNDARIES

The nature of this study requires certain delimitations. First of all, questions of authorship, intended audience, and historical setting are important components for interpreting any piece of ancient literature. To achieve the objective of this study, however, it will not be possible to engage the source-critical debate regarding the pre-textual history,

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wronged him in order to restore his own condition to what it would have been had it not been disrupted, while, at the same time, not harming the victim.” That is, “deception is justified when it is used by one previously wronged against the one who has done the wrong in order to restore *shalom*” (56). After analyzing the material in Genesis, Williams examines deception in other key OT passages. Then he looks at evaluations of deception in later Jewish tradition, Ancient Near East literature, and parallels in folklore. He concludes that “deception in Genesis is a phenomenon with significant differences from its occurrences in the rest of the Bible and in other cultures ancient and modern” (223). Williams goes on to suggest as an “avenue of inquiry deserving further study and reflection . . . the question of the purpose for the preservation of so many deception accounts in Genesis” (224).

44. An attempt is made to analyze all the major passages in which human sin or the divine curse is present. The study, however, is not exhaustive in the sense of including detailed discussion on every explicit or implicit mention of sin or the curse in the Genesis narrative. Space did not permit such an exhaustive coverage. However, the appendix includes a table featuring all the noted instances of sin or the curse in the entire Genesis corpus.

authorship, date, and integrity of the book of Genesis. Such a pursuit is beyond the scope of this study, and there are already useful works that critique the philosophy and many of the conclusions of modern source criticism.<sup>45</sup> The writer proceeds from the conviction that the entire book of Genesis is a unified literary work authored by Moses<sup>46</sup> written to the newly formed nation of Israel sometime between the exodus from Egypt and conquest of Canaan. Second, sensitivity to the literary art and structure of a text is also helpful in establishing the meaning of a text.<sup>47</sup> But again, the objective of this study will not permit an extended analysis of the literary devices or the overall structure of the patriarchal narrative, though the writer will seek to incorporate insights gleaned from the available literary and structural analyses.<sup>48</sup> Third, many questions regarding the historicity of the patriarchal and especially the primeval narratives have arisen in modern times. These questions cannot be ignored since denial or affirmation of the historical accuracy of the Genesis narra-

45. For critiques of the documentary hypothesis and source criticism, see Allis's classic *Five Books of Moses*. For more recent critiques, see T. D. Alexander, *From Paradise to Promised Land*, 3–94; Garrett, *Rethinking Genesis*.

46. For a defense of essential Mosaic authorship, see Archer, *Survey of OT Introduction*, 99–147, 173–89; Dillard and Longman, *Introduction to the OT*, 38–48; Garrett, 47–83; Harrison, *Introduction to the OT*, 495–541; Young, *Introduction to the OT*, 42–46; Youngblood, *Book of Genesis*, 9–15. As these works demonstrate, a traditional defense of Mosaic authorship does not preclude the possibility that Moses may have utilized some earlier sources or that there may be some “post-Mosaica” glosses in Genesis. The current tendency among evangelicals, though, as Dillard and Longman note (47–48), has been to speculate more about possible pre-Mosaic sources underlying the Genesis text or to concede too much post-Mosaic redaction.

47. On the value of literary analysis for biblical studies, see Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*; idem, *Art of Biblical Poetry*; Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*; Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*; Ryken, *Words of Delight*; Ryken and Longman, *Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*.

48. Some more recent commentaries provide helpful examples of literary and structural analyses of Genesis. For example, a number of commentators see the repeated use of the formulaic phrase הוֹלְדוֹת אֵלֶּה / *elleh tōlēdōt* (2:4; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10; 11:27; 25:12; 25:19; 36:1; 36:9; 37:2), or its variant, סֵפֶר הוֹלְדוֹת / *zeh sēper tōlēdōt* (5:1), as a major structuring device. See Ross, 69–88; Waltke, 18–21; McKeown, *Genesis*, 2–3. For a structural analysis of the entire book of Genesis and its relationship to the larger Hebrew canon, see Dorsey, *Literary Structure of the OT*. For examples of literary analysis of individual sections within the larger Genesis narrative, see Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, 34–45, 90–100, 194–205; Fishbane, *Biblical Text and Texture*, 40–62; Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 11–241; Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 62–105; Sailhamer, “Genesis,” in *Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*, 108–20; Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Language*, 131–85, 285–308, 349–54, 394–400, 445–75.

tives profoundly influences one's exegetical and theological conclusions. Nevertheless, space will permit neither a careful analysis of the objections raised to the historicity of the primeval and patriarchal narratives nor a comprehensive defense of their historical reliability. Many sound defenses having been set forth,<sup>49</sup> the present study will proceed on the assumption that the Genesis narratives convey historical information that is both real and also reliable.

#### THE MODUS OPERANDI

The Genesis narratives address such topics as the origin, nature, spread, and divine restraint of human sin, but space does not permit a comprehensive and detailed exploration of these. Instead, this study will focus primarily on *the spread of human sin*. Of course, it will be necessary to address briefly the origin and nature of sin, especially as revealed in the Fall narrative in order to provide the historical backdrop and theological framework for understanding sin's spread. Furthermore, the divine curse on sin will be briefly examined in the Fall narrative, and its outworking will be explored in the subsequent narratives inasmuch as it contributes to the overall theme of sin's spread. God's restraint of human sin takes one into the realm of common grace and special grace. Though these are important counterbalancing themes to the spread of human sin, they will not be the focus of this study. Moreover, though this study will explore sin's beginnings in the Fall narrative and its subsequent spread through the primeval narrative, its primary focal point will be the patriarchal narratives.

Part one, a chapter that investigates the Fall narrative, first situates mankind's fall into sin in its creational and covenantal context. An analysis of the serpent's temptation and the human fall into sin then follows. The chapter also addresses the essential nature of this first human transgression, concluding with an examination of God's inquest, curse, and banishment of the human couple from the Garden of Eden.

Part two is a chapter exploring the spread of sin and the curse themes in the primeval narratives in order to uncover certain patterns

49. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the OT*, 1–5, 313–72; 421–500; Garrett, 47–83; Hamilton, *Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 56–67; Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, 109–11; idem, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 22–55; Ross, *Creation & Blessing*, 50–64. For a discussion of the larger question of historicity and the OT, see Long, "Historiography of the OT," 145–75; idem, *Art of Biblical History*, 281–429.

and motifs that will serve as narrative types to evaluate the patriarchal narratives. In this way, the second chapter prepares the reader for a deeper exploration of these themes in the patriarchal narratives.

Part three consists of six chapters. Chapter three examines the spread of sin in pagan society as revealed in the patriarchal narrative. Chapters four through seven provide a detailed analysis of the spread of sin in the patriarchal community, moving from the first to the fourth generation of the patriarchal family. Finally, chapter eight investigates the spread of the divine curse in the patriarchal narrative, which complements the theme of the spread of sin.

The study concludes with a summary and synthesis of the findings. In addition, the conclusion highlights important contributions to one's view of the overall thematic structure of Genesis, as well as to one's understanding of the doctrines of sin, grace, justification, and sanctification.