

SESSION THREE

INTRODUCTION TO GENESIS

I. THEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The book of Genesis appears as the first book in the canon of Scripture. Most conservative scholars follow the commonly accepted conclusion that Moses was the author of most of the Pentateuch, including Genesis. Therefore, as we approach the material that is recorded in Genesis, we must take into account the fact that Genesis is being written from the perspective of the Hebrew nation which is departing Egypt to enter the land of Canaan under the leadership of Moses. This being the case, Genesis is actually a testimony to the young nation of Israel concerning its origin and election into God's divine program. Consequently, Genesis was not written to provide a scientific or historical record of the origins of mankind (although the information provided is historically accurate). The contents are primarily theological, as even a cursory scan of the book reflects.

THE AUTHOR'S EMPHASIS	
Preliminary Events How the creation was spoiled and the nations came into rebellion Chapters 1—11	The Commission to Abraham And His Seed A Unique Nation to Be God's Channel of Blessing Chapters 12—50

The very way the book is compiled reflects that the author's concern is not simply to provide historical information. Of the 50 chapters in the book, 39 deal with Abram and his lineage. Obviously, chapter 12 marks the key chapter to the whole book, i.e., the call of Abram to leave his home country and begin a new nation. This is conveyed to Abraham in the form of a covenant. God covenants with Abram to make of him a new and great nation through whom He will channel His blessing to the world.

The immediate application of this is for the Israelites in bondage in Egypt. As Moses beckons them to leave the bondage of Pharaoh, forsake their role in slavery, and venture forth to a new land, they would need to know who it was that was calling them to so great a venture. One does not just "up and cast off the shackles of the Pharaoh of Egypt" without good reason. Such a proposal demanded a legitimate answer to several questions. What kind of a God is forming us into a new nation? What right does He have to impose His will over all the other gods of the pagan world, particularly Egypt? What right do we have to take the land of Canaan and subdue the inhabitants therein? More importantly, what assurance do we have that this God will be with us to bring it all about? Genesis provided the answers to these questions. Therefore, Genesis is written not simply as an historical book, but more so as a theological treatise. Allen Ross observes,

This philosophy of history is predominantly theological. The writer is interested in presenting the historical background of Israel's covenant from its theological perspective. Only the events that have bearing on that theme are selected and worked into the narrative.¹

So the book of Genesis revolves around the covenant and the nation. What kind of a God is calling the Israelites out of Egypt to another land? It is the one unique God of creation! Whereas the Egyptians trusted in gods who were the representations of nature, Israel's God created the elements of nature. What the pagans worship are no gods at all. They are merely what Israel's God created. Therefore, the Israelites need not fear what the pagans trust in. Furthermore, what Israel's God has created, that He controls. To leave the land of Egypt at the displeasure of Pharaoh is not an unreasonable action. Rather this is the faithful outworking of God's plan. He had promised a nation from Abraham who would be given the land of Canaan. Their election as a nation rested in the counsel of God Himself. Just as He created the organized universe and brought all of creation into existence, so He is able to create His nation and establish them in the land of promise.

When Moses instructs the Israelites to leave Egypt, he tells them that YHWH has sent him. The call to leave is not from Moses but from YHWH. And YHWH is the sovereign and supreme God of creation, as well as the one who elected the nation into existence through Abraham and guarantees their future! Therefore, the theocracy is founded on the sovereign God of creation.

As we go through the material in Genesis, we must seek to discover the theological point being made. We must ask why Moses would want the new nation of Israel to know this material, and why did he describe it in these terms? Furthermore, once we see the intended purpose, we must seek to understand the relevance to us today. On a broad level, Genesis underscores the identity and authority of the One who calls Israel forth as a people to do His will and channel His blessing to the world. This could be related to our commission in the present age to go forth and proclaim the gospel. To do that requires a sense of calling and authority. From our vantage point, we not only have the security that the God who calls us is the God of all creation (and who therefore is above all and in control of all) but also the security that our Lord and His work on the cross are validated by the resurrection of Jesus Christ!

II. THE ROLE OF GENESIS IN THE HISTORICAL LITERATURE

Elliott Johnson suggests the following purpose for the historical literature of the Old Testament:

To cultivate faith in YHWH
who acts to establish His rule over His chosen seed,
so that He might ultimately bless through the seed.²

Fundamental to this overall purpose of YHWH is the creation of "the seed" through whom He will work. There certainly is the need for such a "seed." Genesis 1–11 brings us face to face with the bleak reality of the cancerous effects of sin. Man has not followed after God or drawn close to his Creator. Rather, man rebelled against Him with the result that God had to thwart this rebellion by scattering the nations into

¹Allen Ross, "The Nature of Genesis," (class lecture notes, Dallas Seminary, 1979), 23.

²Class notes, Dallas Seminary, 1976.

confusion and disunity (Gen 10–11). Consequently, blessings are forfeited. God's intent had been for man to share in His dominion—to participate in exercising authority with God over creation. In short, man was to reign with God, yet in a subservient manner (cf. Gen 1:26-28). God wanted to share His reign and His blessings with man who was obedient, submissive, and worshipping Him.

In the light of the scattering of nations in Gen 11, it was necessary for God to establish one nation which would submit to Him and which could become the channel of blessing to all the other nations of the world. This is the central focus of the Pentateuch. Segal puts it this way: ". . . the real theme of the Pentateuch is the selection of Israel from the nations and its consecration to the service of God and His laws in a Divinely-appointed land."³ He goes on to say, "The central event in the development of this theme is the divine covenant with Abraham and its twofold promise to make his offspring into the people of God and to give them the land of Canaan as an everlasting inheritance."⁴

III. THE PURPOSE OF GENESIS

Primarily, Genesis served to establish the foundation of the theocracy, particularly in the fact that the origin of the nation was rooted in an unconditional covenant relationship with YHWH, the creator-God. For the Exodus generation, as well as subsequent generations, the purpose was to separate them to faith and obedience through an introduction to the nation's origins. The book of Genesis demonstrates not only the validity of the nation's existence, but also the obligation they had to respond to the promises of YHWH in faith. Israel's election and foundation in the Abrahamic covenant is the basis to leave Egypt for Canaan. However, the means to secure the promises of YHWH would be by faith. The latter is the great lesson of Genesis 12–50. In this light, we could formulate a thesis statement for Genesis:

To introduce the nation to its origin in Election and Promise.

Chapters 1–11 introduce the nation to its origin in election. These chapters appear to be designed to explain "the reason for setting apart the worship of God in the world of a special people, Israel, in a special land, Canaan."⁵

Chapters 12–50 introduce the nation to its origin in promise. YHWH separates men to Himself through promise, i.e., promised blessing is secured by faith, through which men are separated to YHWH.

³Segal, *The Pentateuch*, 23.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Segal, 28.

IV. THE STRUCTURE OF GENESIS

The structure of the book is built on the $\underline{t\hat{o}l^{\circ}d\hat{o}t}$ scheme. One significant observation about Genesis is the frequent use the author makes of the structural word $\underline{t\hat{o}l^{\circ}d\hat{o}t}$, usually rendered by the expression "these are the generations of" The $\underline{t\hat{o}l^{\circ}d\hat{o}t}$ formulas are the basis for the structure of the book.

The word $\underline{t\hat{o}l^{\circ}d\hat{o}t}$ is derived from the Hebrew verb $y\bar{a}l\bar{a}q$, which means "to bear, generate," with the *hiphil* stem having the idea to "produce, beget." It appears that it must refer to that which is produced, and thus each $\underline{t\hat{o}l^{\circ}d\hat{o}t}$ heading delineates the historical result of a certain ancestor. Periphrastically, we could translate the phrase as "this is what became of" Ross clarifies this idea in regard to Gen 2:4:

In reference to Genesis 2:4, then, we would understand it as the historical result of the cosmos, and 2:4–4:26 would present to the reader what became of the heaven and the earth. What follows, of course, is the story of the fall, the murder of Abel, and the development of sin with civilization. The story would not be presenting another creation account; it would be carrying the account from the point of the climax of creation (reiterated in Gen. 2) to the corruption of creation by sin. This is what became of it.⁶

Thus each new $\underline{t\hat{o}l^{\circ}d\hat{o}t}$ precedes a new section and marks a new transition. The owner (the person specified) of the $\underline{t\hat{o}l^{\circ}d\hat{o}t}$ does not need to be the central character of the following narrative (e.g., Terah in 11:27, though the section has Abraham as its central character). The point of each $\underline{t\hat{o}l^{\circ}d\hat{o}t}$ is to convey "This is what became of"

When we look at the several $\underline{t\hat{o}l^{\circ}d\hat{o}t}$ s, we notice a narrowing process: Noah, Shem, etc. through Abraham until we come to Jacob and his descendants. The focus is clearly on the chosen seed that will eventuate in Jesus Christ. Occasionally, a $\underline{t\hat{o}l^{\circ}d\hat{o}t}$ concerning a member outside the chosen seed is inserted to form a contrast with the line of those inheriting the promises. These families (namely Ishmael and Esau) are mentioned because of their historical connections to the chosen seed. The $\underline{t\hat{o}l^{\circ}d\hat{o}t}$ of Ishmael is placed before that of Isaac. Likewise, the $\underline{t\hat{o}l^{\circ}d\hat{o}t}$ of Esau (the father of the Edomites who in time became bitter enemies of Israel) is placed before the $\underline{t\hat{o}l^{\circ}d\hat{o}t}$ of Jacob. In each case, the author briefly introduces the line not transmitting the Abrahamic blessing before giving a more extended treatment of the chosen seed that does carry on the blessing.

Another observation to note is the deterioration that occurs within each $\underline{t\hat{o}l^{\circ}d\hat{o}t}$ section. From the start of each $\underline{t\hat{o}l^{\circ}d\hat{o}t}$, there follows deterioration. For example, the $\underline{t\hat{o}l^{\circ}d\hat{o}t}$ of 2:4 concerns the question of "what became of the heavens and earth?" The answer is that sin entered into the picture accompanied by the fall of man and judgment, with the earth coming under curse. Even after Gen 12:1-2, this pattern continues with a constant tension between the motifs of blessing and cursing, the blessing being connected primarily with the promises of offspring and the land. From Gen 12 onward, there is a constant striving for the place

⁶Allen Ross, "The Literary Composition of Genesis" (class notes, Dallas Seminary, 1979), 7.

of blessing, but still with each successive narrative there is deterioration, for the latter patriarchs do not measure up to the first. What impresses us is the unexpected state of the chosen family by the conclusion of Genesis! Rather than being in the land of blessing, they are in Egypt. Kidner expresses their plight this way: "Man had traveled far from Eden to a coffin, and the chosen family far from Canaan to Egypt . . ."⁷ God began a program with Abraham. Eventually, his faith matured and evidenced itself, but with each passing generation of patriarchs there is a decline in their faith relationship with YHWH. Genesis ends on a tragic note with Jacob in his coffin in Egypt, far from the land of promise and blessing. With the close of Genesis, we have the seed but not in the land.

THE STRUCTURE BASED ON THE *tôl^odôt* INDICATORS

1.	(Creation)	1:1–2:3
2.	<i>tôl^odôt</i> of the heavens and earth	2:4–4:26
3.	<i>tôl^odôt</i> of Adam	5:1–6:8
4.	<i>tôl^odôt</i> of Noah	6:9–9:29
5.	<i>tôl^odôt</i> of Shem, Ham, Japheth	10:1–11:9
6.	<i>tôl^odôt</i> of Shem	11:10-26
7.	<i>tôl^odôt</i> of Terah	11:27–25:11
8.	<i>tôl^odôt</i> of Ishmael	25:12-18
9.	<i>tôl^odôt</i> of Isaac	25:19–35:29
10.	<i>tôl^odôt</i> of Esau	36:1–37:1
11.	<i>tôl^odôt</i> of Jacob	37:2–50:26

V. THE BLESSING/CURSING MOTIF

Another significant factor in the book is the need and desire for blessing from God. In the beginning, man experiences the fullness of God's blessing. Created in the image of God, he is given authority to rule and exercise sovereignty over the creation, observing the "rest of God." The fall of man, however, robs the man and woman of this splendid blessing. The "image" is now marred by a corrupt sin nature (depravity). The sovereignty and rule are forfeited (cf. Heb 2:6-8). The "rest of God" must await a future age for full

⁷Derek Kidner, *Genesis*, Tyndale Commentaries, 224.

realization (cf. Heb 4:9). The movement in Gen 1–11 is downward, from curse to curse. The question arises, "Can man recapture the blessing of God?" Is he left the helpless victim of curse? The hope of blessing remains with the promise that the "seed of the woman" shall triumph over "the seed of the serpent" (Gen 3:15) . . . a Messianic hope!

With the appearance of Abraham and the initiation of the covenant in Gen 12, the promise of blessing brings a new ray of hope to man. From this point on, biblical theology centers on the realization of the promised blessing. The hope of blessing from God is now implanted in the breast of man. From the divine perspective, the full realization must await the coming of Jesus Christ, first in redemption and then in glory. The development of the promised blessing, however, does begin in Genesis, for there must be the "seed" through whom the blessing will come. The development of the promised blessing is traced in Gen 12–50, although never realized since the patriarchs continue to struggle between good and evil, between blessing and cursing, until at last they find themselves in Egypt, outside the land. The book closes with the seed of Abraham awaiting a visitation from God that will liberate them and establish them in the land.