

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY OF GENESIS

Genesis is the first of 66 books of the Old and New Testaments. It is basic to the study and understanding of the whole Bible. Jesus teaches us about the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. He is the God of the Christian faith (Mk 12:26). If we want to know this God, we must study Genesis. Genesis lays the foundation of our faith. Some people have false preconceptions about Genesis that make it difficult for them to study. If we want to learn from God from in the study of Genesis, we must approach our study with a humble heart.

1. JUST WHAT IS THE BOOK OF GENESIS?

The word “Genesis” comes from the first word in the Hebrew Bible, “In the beginning...” So Genesis is a book of beginnings. It is written about the creation of heaven and earth. We find in Genesis the beginnings of the world, all material things, life, man, sin, salvation, faith, and the beginning of death, curse, and judgment as well as the beginnings of the gospel, blessings, and redemptive history. Here also are the beginnings of culture, language, nations and races.

Author: Genesis is the first book of the Pentateuch, the five books of Moses. The Pentateuch includes not only the beginning of history, but also the beginning of the history of God’s chosen people. The books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy include the exodus of God’s people from Egypt and their life in the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land – God’s deliverance and training of his people. Some people have raised questions about the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch. The important thing to know is, however, that God himself spoke through the author. So in a real sense, God is the Author of Genesis. When Martin Luther translated Genesis into German he gave it the title, ‘The first Book of Moses.’ He was evidently quite sure of the Mosaic authorship.

Theme: Genesis teaches us creation order: God the Creator is first; mankind, next; then, all the other created things. Furthermore, Genesis teaches us how God began human history. We can learn the direction and flow of history. In this flow of history we can find the meaning of human existence and the place of created things. When we examine the contents of Genesis carefully, we can find some major principles of God’s way of working. We can find these themes flowing through Genesis from the beginning to the end.

1:31 says, “And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.” God’s purpose in creation was good. And God created heaven and earth and all things for his own glory. He also created man for his own glory. Because of Satan’s temptation, man fell. Since that time, God has sought the redemption of all men. His purpose in redemption is good. He wants to restore all creation to its beautiful and perfect state.

3:15 is not only the foundation stone of curse and blessing, it is also the beginning of a great redemption theme, which flows down through history all the way to Jesus Christ.

12:2 is the basic promise and blessing of God to Abraham. This is a continuing theme of Genesis and of the whole Bible. And God’s curse and judgment flow along side.

As we follow these themes through Genesis, we must deeply realize God’s good purpose for us and for all mankind.

2. GENESIS 1:1 EXPRESSES THE AUTHOR’S POSITION.

Genesis begins with the words, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” The author’s method is deductive. He begins with the premises stated in verse 1. If we want to study Genesis we must deeply accept the author’s major premise, “In the beginning God created the heavens

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and the earth.” These words are the basic premise of the whole Bible. They are the foundation of Biblical truth.

“In the beginning”: Here is the beginning point. All things started from this point. This is the point that marks the beginning of time and history. Everything before this point belongs to eternity. God was before the beginning of time. He is eternal. The fact that the eternal God began all things at some point in time implies that there will also be an end to all things at some point in time. The Bible begins with the words, ‘In the beginning,’ and ends with the words: “‘Surely I am coming soon.’ Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!” (Rev 22:20) The essential problem is just this: What is the origin of man’s existence? Where did man come from? Existential philosophy and so-called “crisis theology,” which ignore this basic question of man’s origin and only attempts to deal with man’s inner problems, cannot give any real answer to the meaning of man’s existence.

“God”: In the beginning, God was. God is not a vague “something.” Nor is he a metaphysical idea or some impersonal force postulated by philosophers like Aristotle. Nor is he just some “first cause” who has nothing to do with mankind and the universe today. He is the God who called heaven and earth and humanity into existence. He is the sovereign God. By his word of power, he not only created heaven and earth, he also continues to rule and control history. He is a personal God who speaks and feels and establishes a relationship with man. He introduced himself to Moses as the “I AM” – “I AM That I AM.” (Exo 3:14) He exists in and of himself. Our existence, and the existence of the universe are necessarily derived from Him. Genesis proclaims this truth in story form.

“The heavens and the earth”: These words refer to the universe. Narrowly speaking, this is the place created for man to live. Broadly speaking, these words include man and the whole created universe. God, according to his own will and purpose, created out of nothing all things that are. God had a purpose in his creation. He created everything according to that purpose. No created thing, including myself, could have any existence apart from God. This world does not belong to man. It is God’s world, for he made it.

“Created”: God’s almighty power is revealed in creation. In chapter 1 the word “created” is repeated five times – in verses 1, 21, and 27 (3 X). It is used in verse 1, when God made everything out of nothing. It is used in verse 21, when God made living creatures first. And again, it is used in connection with God’s creation of man. We can see a progression here – material things from nothing; life from lifelessness; personality from impersonal life. This word is used three times in connection with God’s creation of man. Only God, the Creator, can make everything out of nothing. Only he can make living creatures. And only he can make a human personality. God’s creation is not an unplanned accident. God created a good world, and he created it for himself. When he looked at his world, he was pleased – he saw that it was very good. We can see God’s great love shining through his creation. And we can see the foundations of his redemptive history. This gives us hope.

So Genesis 1:1 tells us that history has a beginning and an end. God alone is absolute. He is the Sovereign Ruler of creation and history. The author of Genesis here proclaims his own faith. At the same time he tells us that here is God’s own revelation concerning man. Genesis 1:1 leaves no room for atheism or pantheism. Let us conclude this discussion of Genesis 1:1 by thinking more about how this verse refutes atheism and pantheism.

First, atheism: Originally, atheism began in materialistic metaphysics. This is the position of materialistic evolution. The naturalistic philosophy of ancient Greece said that all things originated from water, fire, earth, and air. Advocates of Darwin’s evolution contend that life originated from a single-celled amoeba or from a single protein molecule. Other scientists have other theories, but they all have in common the idea that they can find some origin of life other than God. And none of these theories offer any suggestion about what existed before the material world. Evolutionists cannot offer any explanation for the existence of human beings who think and feel and love and have personality.

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More than this, there is no meaning for human existence in these theories. They can go no further than to say that man happened by chance and is a toy of fate. Modern atheism says that man can live without God, and this is the foundation of the thorough-going humanism of modern times. Those who take this position must make great effort to overcome meaningless nihilism. Humanism is not so much atheism as it is rebellion against God. But this is nothing new. In Genesis 3 the history of disobedience and rebellion against God begins, and these same factors of disobedience and rebellion continue down through human history. Furthermore, no matter how atheistic humanists deny their underlying nihilism, they cannot escape the responsibility for planting the seeds of despair and for giving birth to a meaningless and violent counter-culture.

But the teaching and influence of Genesis 1:1 is very different. In the beginning a God with personality and intelligence created all things. He has revealed himself in history. He is living now. He continues his creative work. He is a God who revealed himself fully in Jesus Christ. And he reveals himself in the lives of countless men and women of faith.

Second, pantheism: Pantheism is idolatry. All the way from the animistic worship of the sun, moon, and stars down to the philosophical idea promulgated by Baruch de Spinoza (1632-1677), "God and Nature are one being," pantheism is idolatry. But Genesis 1:1 challenges the worshipers of nature, the worshipers of sun, moon, and stars, by saying that all these things were made by God. The Egyptians, at the time of Moses' birth, worshiped the sun. In Genesis 1:1 Moses proclaimed God as Creator and challenged the sun-worshipers of Egypt. Those who elevate created things to the place of God are rebellious enemies of God.

3. TO STUDY GENESIS

There is a problem which intellectuals who sit down to study Genesis must face. Intellectuals are tempted to study the Bible in the same way as they study their own particular discipline. So there is a tendency to read Genesis like a college textbook and understand it in one's own way. But in order to really study Genesis and discover the deep meaning there, we must study from the point of view of the author. We must listen to what the author is trying to tell us. So we must begin by accepting Genesis 1:1. And we must accept the fact that the spiritual world is quite different from the scientific world.

Genesis and science. Is there a problem between the Bible and science? And more particularly, is there a problem between Genesis 1 and science? There is no real problem if we realize that science and the Bible look at the world from different points of view. Because we are steeped in the scientific way of thinking and studying, we sometimes have a problem understanding Genesis. So we must overcome our own habitual way of thinking and studying.

Modern people have a smattering knowledge and information about archeology, geography, and biology. People are tempted to try to synthesize what they know and come to some conclusion about the Bible before they have a thorough knowledge of any of these disciplines and before they have studied the Bible. But there are many pure scientists who read Genesis 1 and confess that, although the description of the creation of the universe is not intended to be scientific, it is not in any way anti-scientific. Rather, it is amazing that in the times of Moses such a scientific explanation could be written. For example, in a day when everyone thought that light came from the sun, Genesis 1 describes the creation of light on the first day and the creation of the sun on the fourth day. Scientists of a few years ago said that this could not be. But today scientists are beginning to accept this as a possibility.

Evolutionists are the greatest critics of creationists and of Genesis. But evolution springs from atheism and teaches that man evolved from a lower form of life, beginning with the amoeba. Actually, there is no real scientific evidence to support and prove this theology. There are certain

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mutations, which have evolved through heredity. But there is no record of a cat being changed into a dog. The Bible, however, does not deny categorically all forms of evolution. Genesis 1:27 speaks of two ancestors of the human race, Adam and Eve. Chapter 10:32 goes on to show that all races of men come from this one source. No one can deny the objective facts about many different races and species and kinds, and we know that some mutations occur within these species, but evolutionists take a great leap of “faith” and proceed to deny the existence of God and explain the origin of life and of various species by a theory of evolution. But Genesis chapter 1 says that God created all species in an orderly fashion, each after its own kind. Finally, as the crown of creation, he created man in his own image. The theory of evolution is not true science. It is the effort of atheists to deny God and give a materialistic explanation to the origin of all things.

Science describes the order of the world, which God created. So pure scientists acknowledge God’s hand moving in the world of nature. They are awed by the mysteries of nature, which reveal God and his glory. And real scientists humbly acknowledge before the Creator the limits beyond which science cannot go. Sometimes we run into problems that we cannot solve. Our scientific way of thinking makes us want to delve more deeply into these questions. For example, we do not know the length of the days of creation nor can we understand the author’s use of time in Genesis. We cannot grasp eternity with our human concept of time. If we allow ourselves to become tied up in these peripheral issues, we will miss the author’s main point and the truth that Genesis teaches. So, as we study Genesis, we must hold in our hearts and in our minds Genesis 1:1, we must deeply affirm and believe the sovereignty of God the Creator of the heavens and the earth.

Genesis and history: Genesis records the history of the origin of the universe, the history of the fall and judgment of mankind, the history of the forefathers of faith – Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The phrase, “These are the generations of,” is repeated at least 10 times throughout Genesis. This tells us that Genesis is a record of history. The truth taught in Genesis is different from that of other philosophies or religions because it rests on this foundation of historical truth. So the study of Genesis is the study of history – study which leads us to see God’s history and God’s working in human history. God’s history in Genesis is living history. It is the record of how the living God began history and how he continues to work in history. God is still living and he still controls history and he still works in the lives of people and in my life in the same ways. Through the study of Genesis, we must meet and know the living God.

What kind of history is the history in Genesis? It is the history that has been brought together in a synthesis. There are two kinds of history. There is “historie,” or narrative history, and there is “Geschichte (Gay-shik-tah),” or history that moves through events. “Historie” is simply an account of things that happen in the order that they happen. But Genesis does not even pretend to record all of the things that happen from the time of Adam. In chapter 4 we read about people other than Adam and his family and we can easily become confused. We wonder how these people are related to the creation story recorded in Genesis 1 and 2. But the author passes this anthropological problem without a comment. The author has a spiritual purpose and he has recorded the events, which fit into his purpose. This is “Geschichte.”

The study of Genesis should give us decisive help in learning about God and in coming to know the spiritual world. It can help us to know the basic problem of mankind and the real meaning and value of our human existence.