

SYDNEY COLLEGE OF DIVINITY

**OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK OF GENESIS**

AN ASSIGNMENT SUBMITTED TO  
BR. LUKE SAKER  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT FOR THE CLASS REQUIREMENTS OF  
BB412 STUDIES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT  
AS PART OF AN M.A. PROGRAMME

BROKEN BAY INSTITUTE  
(A Member Institute of the Sydney College of Divinity)

BY  
ALEXANDER MICHAEL PECK

BRISBANE, QUEENSLAND  
APRIL 25, 2008

## BB412 – Studies in the Old Testament

## Assignment 1

**Overview of the Book of Genesis**

In the Hebrew Bible, Genesis is the first book of the Torah, which consists of the five books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, in the Old Testament, it is the first book of the Pentateuch (meaning “five-volumed book”<sup>2</sup>). The purpose of this essay is to briefly address the following elements of the book of Genesis: content, nature, literary form, history, and purpose.

**Content**

The primeval history chapters of Genesis 1-11 should to be regarded as a prologue to the Pentateuch, rather than only an introduction to Genesis.<sup>3</sup> The chapters that follow – Genesis 12-50 – may be divided into the Abraham cycle (Gen 11:10-25:18), the Jacob cycle (Gen 25:19-36:43), and the Joseph story (Gen 37:1-50:26).<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> John J. Collins, “Introduction: What Are the Hebrew Bible and the Old Testament?” in *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 1.

<sup>2</sup> *The NIV Study Bible: News International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1985), 2.

<sup>3</sup> R.N. Whybray, “The ‘Primeval History’ (Genesis 1-11)” in *Introduction to the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 29.

<sup>4</sup> John J. Collins, “The Patriarchs” in *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 91-105.

## Nature

A noticeable lack of uniformity characterizes the book of Genesis.<sup>5</sup> The reason is that the narratives within the book appear to have been composed from small, self-contained stories worked together into larger units by means of various geographical and genealogical tables.<sup>6</sup>

When considering the mention of the divine presence in Genesis, this varies from the implicit to the explicit.<sup>7</sup> In Genesis 1-11 (the primeval stories) and 12-25 (the Abraham stories), God's presence is explicit – He speaks and acts.<sup>8</sup> In the Joseph story (Gen 37-50), God's presence is implicit – He is referred to by others, and seldom appears directly.<sup>9</sup>

## Literary Form

Except for scattered poetic sections, the overall literary form of Genesis is the historical narrative.<sup>10</sup> “Narrative” can refer to a short piece, to an episode – such as that of Rebekah and Jacob's deception of Isaac in Genesis 27:1-40.<sup>11</sup> Or, it can refer to a larger work, such as Genesis itself.<sup>12</sup> Some scholars use “story” as a synonym for narrative – for example, the story of Sarah and Hagar in Genesis 16.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> John H. Sailhamer, “Genesis”, in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), 4.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Peter D. Miscall, “Introduction to Narrative Literature”, in *The New Interpreters Bible*, vol. II, ed. L.E. Keck et al. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 552.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Sailhamer, “Genesis”, 10.

<sup>11</sup> Miscall, “Introduction to Narrative Literature”, 540.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

Style refers to how the narrative is told – that is, its form.<sup>14</sup> One characteristic of style is the *episodic* nature of the material, allowing the reading of a given story to be separate from its overall context in the book, such as the Abraham cycle in Genesis 12-25.<sup>15</sup> In this connection, some of the stories involve a paratactic style – that is, where stories (or scenes) are juxtaposed without connecting or transitional phrases (such as Gen 1:1-2:4a and Gen 2:4b-25).<sup>16</sup> A second style characteristic is *diversity*, such as in the two creation stories which differ in their depictions of God, of creation, and of humanity.<sup>17</sup> Third, *repetition* is another characteristic of style, seen for example in the description of the six days of creation (Gen 1:1-2:4a), the two genealogies for Lamech (Gen 4:17-24; 5:1-31), and the three stories of a patriarch claiming that his wife is his sister (Gen 12:10-20; 20:1-17; 26:6-11).<sup>18</sup>

Although the predominant literary form in Genesis is narrative, the stories do not constitute a single narrative sequence.<sup>19</sup> In other words, the book of Genesis cannot be read as a modern novel.<sup>20</sup> Rather, as Robert Alter writes, the “composite artistry” in Genesis is a feature that enables one to appreciate the artistry of the book.<sup>21</sup>

## History

Genesis incorporates tales that may have originated as folklore or popular short stories – and which were shaped and edited, probably by several different hands, over hundreds of years.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 542.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 543.

<sup>19</sup> Whybray, “The ‘Primeval History’ (Genesis 1-11)”, 29.

<sup>20</sup> Collins, “Introduction: What Are the Hebrew Bible and the Old Testament?”, 16.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

The historical setting or date of Genesis 1-11 cannot be determined with any degree of certainty – in a sense, the chapters are timeless, and the stories could have arisen at any time in the history of Israel.<sup>23</sup>

The historicity of many of the patriarchal narratives in Genesis, such as those surrounding Abraham (Gen 11:27-25:10) and Jacob (Gen 37:1-49:33), cannot be ascertained<sup>24</sup> – in fact, according to John Collins, “the stories of Genesis do not lend themselves easily to historical analysis”.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, one can never find the truth about Abraham and Jacob, for example, from archaeological remains – their lives were individual and particular, while archaeology deals with general patterns.<sup>26</sup>

Traditionally, Genesis (and the other books of the Torah) was supposed to be the work of Moses, but it has become clear that Moses could not have been its author.<sup>27</sup> While the Torah includes material from various centuries, it is more viewed as a product of the sixth century B.C.E. or later.<sup>28</sup> Rainer Albertz supports this view by stating that almost all the documentation of the early days of Israel originated at a much later date.<sup>29</sup> David Clines claims that the crucial point about the historical setting of the Pentateuch (including Genesis) is that it is a product of the Babylonian exile.<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Whybray, “The ‘Primeval History’ (Genesis 1-11)”, 39.

<sup>24</sup> Sailhamer, “Genesis”, 3.

<sup>25</sup> Collins, “The Patriarchs”, 86.

<sup>26</sup> Lawrence Boadt, “Archaeology and the Old Testament”, in *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 68.

<sup>27</sup> Collins, “Introduction: What Are the Hebrew Bible and the Old Testament?”, 13.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Rainer Albertz, “Religion in Pre-Exilic Israel”, in *The Biblical World*, vol. II, ed. John Barton (London: Routledge, 2002), 90.

<sup>30</sup> David J.A. Clines, “Function”, in *The Theme of the Pentateuch* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1978), 97.

## Purpose

It has been suggested that during the exilic period, the Jewish leaders recognized the need to create a religious identity for the scattered Jewish groups within the Persian empire.<sup>31</sup> The two governing councils (lay and priestly – the Elders, and the College of Priests) had the opportunity to create a document containing the obligations and laws of Israel’s religion for the Persian authorities.<sup>32</sup> This became the Pentateuch.

The lay theologians created a foundation history of Israel’s beginnings, using older traditions, including tales of the patriarchs, who wandered between Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Palestine (Gen 12).<sup>33</sup> In addition, the priest-theologians inserted a creation history (Gen 1-11) before the history of Israel’s foundation, thereby placing Yahweh’s special relationship with Israel into the larger context of the history of the world and humanity.<sup>34</sup> R.N. Whybray adds to this view by stating that Genesis 1-11, as a prologue, afforded the opportunity to express certain distinctly Israelite articles of faith which would have been more difficult to introduce into the later narratives.<sup>35</sup> Further, he acknowledges that some scholars see Genesis 1-11 as reflecting the experiences of the Babylonian exile or the postexilic period.<sup>36</sup> David Clines supports this view by stating that in the patriarchal narratives, exilic Israel reads also its own life story.<sup>37</sup>

Finally, while Genesis is a book of beginnings (*Genesis* is a Greek word meaning “origin”, “source”, “generation”, or “beginning”<sup>38</sup>), no explicit statement exists about

---

<sup>31</sup> Rainer Albertz, “Religion in Israel During and After the Exile”, in *The Biblical World*, vol. II, ed. John Barton (London: Routledge, 2002), 110.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>35</sup> Whybray, “The ‘Primeval History’ (Genesis 1-11)”, 36-37.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>37</sup> Clines, “Function”, 98.

<sup>38</sup> *The Open Bible: Expanded Edition – The New King James Version* (New York: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1983), 1.

God's purpose in creating the world – implied, nevertheless, is the significant position of mankind in God's plan.<sup>39</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Little is known today about the exact origin and authorship of Genesis.<sup>40</sup>

Nevertheless, this essay has attempted to briefly cover its content, nature, literary form, history, and purpose.

---

<sup>39</sup> Whybray, "The 'Primeval History' (Genesis 1-11)", 41.

<sup>40</sup> Sailhamer, "Genesis", 3.

## Bibliography

- Albartz, Rainer. “Religion in Israel During and After the Exile”. In *The Biblical World*, vol. II, ed. John Barton, 101-124. London: Routledge, 2002.
- \_\_\_\_\_. “Religion in Pre-Exilic Israel”. In *The Biblical World*, vol. II, ed. John Barton, 90-100. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Boadt, Lawrence. “Archaeology and the Old Testament”. In *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction*. New York: Paulist Press, 1984.
- Clines, David J.A. “Function”. In *The Theme of the Pentateuch*. Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1978.
- Collins, John J. “Introduction: What Are the Hebrew Bible and the Old Testament?” In *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004.
- \_\_\_\_\_. “The Patriarchs”. In *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004.
- Miscall, Peter D. “Introduction to Narrative Literature”. In *The New Interpreters Bible*, vol. II, ed. L.E. Keck et al., 539-552 Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998.
- Sailhamer, John H. “Genesis”. In *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, 3-284. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984.
- The NIV Study Bible: News International Version*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1985.
- The Open Bible: Expanded Edition –The New King James Version*. New York: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1983.
- Whybray, R.N. “The ‘Primeval History’ (Genesis 1-11)”. In *Introduction to the Pentateuch*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995.