

Genesis: The Beginning (Patriarchal History)

I. Patriarchal History (Genesis 11:10-50:26)- The goal of this section for Moses was to connect God's redemptive purposes in chapters 1-11 to later generations in order to give the exodus generation an incentive to cooperate with God's covenant purposes. In these chapters Genesis focuses on 4 great patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph (although Judah actually emerged as the ancestor of the messianic line).

1. Abraham (11:10-25:11)- Abram (great father) was later renamed Abraham (father of a multitude). Isaac becomes the son of promise to Abraham. Moses is careful to trace the Hebrew line from Noah's son Shem to Abram's father Terah (11:10-26). In 12:2-3,7 the promises from 3:15 are restated in the form of the Abrahamic promises. God promises Abraham land, seed, and blessing for his descendants. This blessing to Abraham was to extend to the entire world. The seed promise amplifies the unconditional promise of a seed who would defeat the forces of evil in (3:15).

Contrary to God's command to separate from his family (12:1), Abram instead took Lot (12:4) on the journey to Canaan and stopped in Haran in Padanaram (Syria) for some time. After finally moving to Canaan, Abram eventually went to Egypt (12:10), where he lied to Pharaoh about Sarai being his sister and was rebuked by the pagan king. The resulting plagues that came upon Pharaoh would remind Moses' readers of what happened in their time as well.

2. Isaac (25:12-26:35)- Genesis 25:12-18 distinguishes Isaac's line from the line of Ishmael. The line would continue through Isaac's youngest son Jacob rather than through his oldest son Esau. The divine election of Jacob over Esau is evidenced through the prophecy that the older would serve the younger (25:23). Esau's character weakness is evident in his despising his birthright and selling it to Jacob (25:27-34). The Abrahamic covenant was reconfirmed to Isaac (26:1-5, 23-25) with promises of personal blessing and protection (26:12-16).

3. Jacob (27-36)- The theme of deception recurs throughout the story of Jacob's life. Jacob moves to the forefront in 27-36). Despite the fact that Jacob deceived Isaac and cheated Esau out of the blessing of the firstborn (27:1-40), the Abrahamic covenant was reconfirmed to Jacob in the next chapter (28:10-17). This repetition of God's everlasting promises emphasizes the unconditional nature of the covenant. Jacob escaped from Esau's rage for stealing his blessing (27:41-45) by journeying north to his mother's ancestral home in Haran (28:10) where he eventually married Leah and Rachel, the daughters of Laban, his mother's brother (29:1-29). In route to Haran, Jacob encountered God in the dream of the angelic stairway. He believed it to be the gate of heaven. He renamed it Bethel (house of God), and vowed that the Lord (Yahweh) would be his God (28:16-21). Jacob's children become the 12 tribes of Israel. Eventually Jacob's name is changed to Israel (35:10), setting the stage for the rest of the story.

4. Joseph (37-50:26)- Joseph was the human instrument that God used to relocate Israel into Egypt. God revealed His purpose for Joseph in a dream. When he shared the dream with his brothers, they became envious and sold him as a slave into Egypt (37), setting the stage for their own descendants' future enslavement in Egypt.

II. Theological Significance: Genesis begins with the act of creation and ends with the words, "in a coffin in Egypt" (50:26). In between Moses lays the foundation of all biblical theology. Genesis 1 assumes God's existence (1), defines human beings as a unique and distinct creation made in the image of God (1:26) and given a mandate to rule God's creation (1:28). Adam's sin brought death and disorder to the creation and often resulted in divine judgement (1:24; 6:5-7; 11:8). As the world turned away from God, He turned to one man, calling Abraham to believe, trust, and follow Him (12:1-3), promising to make of his descendants a great nation through which He would bless all peoples. The election of Israel was confirmed by the Abrahamic covenant (15:1-6) and reaffirmed to his descendants Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob's 12 sons--the forefathers of the nation of Israel. Genesis acts a foundational prelude to Israel's greatest defining moment (Sinai) and Israel's immediate future (the conquest of Canaan).¹

¹ For more see "The Essence of the Old Testament: A Survey"