

Genesis

Chapters 1-11

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Introduction

Genesis 1–11 Are Necessary and Problematic

If we start reading the Old Testament in *Genesis* 12, it makes little sense. God chose Abram, whom he renamed Abraham,¹ called him to wander around a foreign land called Canaan and made a number of promises to him. Abraham had a son, Isaac, who had a son, Jacob whom God renamed Israel, who had twelve sons. Israel moved with his family to Egypt.

The remainder of the Old Testament describes how the descendants of Israel grew into a multitude, but the Egyptians enslaved them. God used a man named Moses to free the Israelites from slavery and build them into a nation. God gave the Israelites the Law to follow and Canaan to occupy as their homeland.

However, the Israelites generally failed to live up to God's calling; they didn't fully take Canaan and didn't fully obey the Law that Moses gave them. No matter how much God displayed his power and blessed them or how much he punished them, they turned away from him. For 1,000 years, God had a stormy relationship with the Israelites.

The Israelites split into two nations, Israel and Judah. God scattered Israel, leaving only Judah; the nations began to call the Israelites "Jews." God soon sent the Jews into exile, but he brought them back to their land, where they lived in subjection to the Persian Empire.

As the Old Testament closes, God's last words to the Jews sounded as much a threat as a promise.

By itself, this is all meaningless, in spite of all the hints that God has something greater planned. It doesn't explain why God called Abraham in the first place or why he remained so devoted to the Israelites and then the Jews as they continually failed to obey him.

The problem is that we skipped the first eleven chapters of *Genesis*. Of course, no one does this intentionally. However, we sense the problems the text produces and become distracted. We become critical of the text or spend our time trying to explain things away. Either way, we end up missing the many lessons these chapters contain, and we come away with a sense that something is wrong with them.

We do this because the text doesn't meet our expectations. We expect it to contain *narrative history*—factually accurate accounts of historical events. Our expectations are reasonable because Moses wrote the rest of *Genesis* and his other four books as narrative history. But the stories in these chapters don't sound like other narrative histories in the Bible; they sound like origin stories from other ancient religions.

1 I will use Abraham throughout, even when the text calls him "Abram."

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But Moses didn't *intend* to write these chapters as narrative history. He *intended* to write origin stories, which focus on lessons and don't care about the details. Our sense that these stories have a lot of loose ends turns out to be correct, and they *do* sound like origin stories because that's what they are.

I didn't come to this conclusion easily; I went through several phases over my three decades as a believer trying to come to grips with these chapters. I started with blind acceptance, I then invented complicated theories about God resurfacing Earth as the flood waters receded, and I then ignored the Flood and treated chapter 1 as poetry. All that time, I ignored the criticisms of scientists even though I knew that their points were valid.

Finally, I gave up after reading a book dealing with floods and the history of geology. It was written by an unbeliever who gently addressed my denial; I read it with a good deal of anger before I admitted that I was wrong. I realized that I wasn't giving God's word a chance and that God didn't give us the ability to reason and then expect us to ignore it. The Bible didn't have a problem, I did. I decided to ignore all the traditions and disputes and start from scratch.

These are the basic questions we should ask when studying any book of the Bible.

- Who was the author?
- Whom did he write to?
- What was the culture like?
- What were the circumstances?
- What were the needs?
- Why did he write?
- What approaches did he take?

As I answered these questions, I realized that these chapters don't contradict science; in fact, there are no conflicts at all. God inspired Moses to write what he did, and it makes sense. And I learned a lot.

I will share my view by answering the questions above, and then I will go through all eleven chapters and discuss the lessons Moses wanted us to learn.

Ancient Religions and Stories

Religion bound ancient societies together. It provided a common set of beliefs, values, and observances that gave a nation or city-state its unique identity. Nationalism and religion were strongly linked.

Sacred stories were central to these religions, as they defined and explained the nation's beliefs and values. While a story could vary from one nation to the next, within a nation the story and its interpretation would be carefully preserved for generations.

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The most significant type of story was the origin story. Origin stories typically dealt with the distant past and explained things like the nature of the gods and their interactions with humankind, the origins of the world, humans, and the nation itself. Ancient peoples assumed that the stories were true, but the stories could also be highly symbolic and filled with hidden meaning. Legend was another type of story which tended to focus more on heroic individuals and their actions. Epics grouped origin stories and legends into a longer unit.

Together, origin stories and legends defined ancient peoples' world views. To change a people's identity meant to change their origin stories and legends.

The Author and His Audience

Moses

Moses played a prominent role in establishing Israel as a nation. He was the son of a man and woman of the tribe of Levi, and he had an older sister Miriam and an older brother Aaron. He was born around 1527 BCE during the time when the Egyptian governor was forcing the Israelites to throw their newborn boys into the Nile River. His mother came up with a desperate plan that worked, and the governor's daughter found the infant Moses and hired his mother to nurse him. After perhaps five years, his mother returned Moses to the governor's daughter.

In his youth, Moses received an education and developed the confidence of a nobleman. At the same time, his heart remained with his people, and he must have harbored some thoughts of rescuing them. One day, he saw an Egyptian taskmaster beating an Israelite. Moses decided to take matters into his own hands and killed the Egyptian. However, this soon became known, forcing Moses to flee from Egypt.¹

Moses ended up at the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula among the Midianites. A Midianite priest named Reuel, also called Jethro, took Moses in and gave him his daughter Zipporah as his wife. Moses spent decades working as a shepherd in Jethro's house, and Zipporah bore him two sons.

Exodus gives us little information about Jethro, but he was a priest, and he appears to have been wise and dignified. Though the Egyptians despised shepherds, Moses spent the remainder of his youth and middle age tending sheep. Watching Jethro perform his priestly duties must also have made an impression on him. However, all Moses' confidence and dreams slowly drained from him. He was close to 80 when God called him.

1 In *Acts* 7:23, Stephen, while preaching to the Sanhedrin, stated that Moses was forty years old at the time. However, *Exodus* is silent on this matter, and Stephen was most likely repeating a Jewish tradition. Moses was 80 years old when he went to Pharaoh, and he died at 120. Thus, the Jewish tradition conveniently divides Moses' life into three blocks of 40 years. However, it seems more likely than Moses acted out of the impetuosity of youth; we might guess that he was in his twenties.

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One day, Moses was tending his flock on Mount Sinai¹ when he saw a bush on fire. The flames, however, didn't consume the bush, and Moses wandered over to look. Suddenly, God spoke to him from the bush, and Moses covered his face in fear.

God said that he had seen the suffering of the Israelites and proposed an audacious plan. Moses would go to Pharaoh, that is, the Egyptian governor,² and demand the release of the Israelites. He would then lead the Israelites out of Egypt to Canaan, the land God had promised to Abraham.

Moses was less than enthusiastic about this new calling and questioned how he could possibly do this. God answered Moses' questions until Moses made the excuse that he didn't speak well. God then demanded that Moses go; Moses' brother Aaron would do the talking.

Moses reluctantly obeyed, said goodbye to Jethro, and headed back to Egypt. Aaron met Moses along the way, and they returned to the Israelites. The Israelite leaders were more confident than Moses.

However, the governor wasn't impressed. He sent Moses and Aaron away and then made life even harder on the Israelites by refusing to provide straw for the bricks the Israelites made. This forced Israelites to find straw along with their normal duties. Moses complained to God, as he had no confidence that God's plan would work. The Israelites also felt deeply discouraged.

God repeatedly sent Moses and Aaron back to the governor. Initially, Aaron performed the miraculous signs God gave them, including turning his staff into a snake and then the waters of the Nile River to blood, the first of ten disasters God inflicted on the Egyptians. However, by the fourth disaster, Moses began speaking directly to the governor, and he performed the action that led to the sixth disaster. By the tenth disaster, Moses had fully assumed his role as leader of the Israelites.

Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt, and God destroyed the governor and his army in the Red Sea after the Israelites crossed over.

The Israelites, however, were losing confidence. They repeatedly complained and failed to obey God's simple instructions. Leading them was a burden, but Moses became more invested in them even as they rebelled and doubted. As Moses was on Mount Sinai for 40 days receiving the Ten Commandments, the people made a golden calf and planned to return to Egypt. God told Moses that he would wipe out all the Israelites and build a new nation from Moses' descendants, but Moses pleaded with God on behalf of the Israelites, and God relented.

Having fully received the Law from God and established the priesthood under Aaron, Moses settled into his leadership role. Moses would often visit with God in the Tent of Meeting.

"Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend. When Moses turned again into the camp, his assistant Joshua the son of Nun, a young man, would not depart from the tent." (*Exodus 33:11, ESV*)

1 Also called "Horeb."

2 The term "pharaoh" meant "great house" and could also refer to the occupant of a palace. It wasn't used as a title for the king of Egypt until much later. The kings at the time lived in Thebes some 375 miles south of Goshen. To the Israelites, the governor of Goshen was like a king.

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This is the man who soon wrote *Genesis*.

The Israelites

Abraham was the patriarch of the Israelites. He was born in Ur of Sumer; Sumer, located in southern Mesopotamia, was one of the earliest civilizations. God called Abraham to move to Canaan and promised to build him into a nation. Abraham had a son named Isaac, and Isaac had a son named Jacob, and Jacob had twelve sons. God renamed Jacob "Israel," and Israel's sons grew into the twelve tribes of Israel.

The key fact about the Israelites was that they maintained a strong ethnic identity as Sumerians through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob/Israel. Because of this, they strongly resisted assimilation with the Egyptians or the Canaanites.

Part of this effort to maintain their own identity involved passing down detailed accounts about the Patriarchs. These stories were brutally honest and often put their ancestors in a negative light. However, they were quite detailed and genuine. Most of all, God's calling of Abraham and the promises made to him, which were inherited by Isaac and then Jacob/Israel, gave the Israelites a sense of destiny and hope for a future as a great nation.

Along with the family stories, the Israelites held to the origin stories and legends from Sumer which Abraham and his household brought with them.

14 "Therefore, fear the Lord and worship him in sincerity and truth. **Get rid of the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River** and in Egypt, and worship the Lord. 15 But if it doesn't please you to worship the Lord, choose for yourselves today: **Which will you worship—the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River** or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living? As for me and my family, we will worship the Lord." (*Joshua* 24:14-15, CSB)

Sumerian religion was still a strong component of their identity even after they entered Canaan after Moses' death.

Personally, I was under the impression that Abraham and the Israelites were monotheistic; that is, they worshiped God and God alone. However, *Joshua* clearly says otherwise. Instead, the Israelites still believed in the gods contained in the stories of Sumer, but they worshiped God as the god of Abraham.

For around 100 years, the Egyptians had enslaved them and severely oppressed them. Common suffering increased their unity, and it made them willing to uproot their lives and move to a foreign land. At the same time, it left them demoralized and dispossessed. They longed for the God of Abraham to rescue them and return them to Canaan, the land he had promised to Abraham, and yet they held deep-seated fears that Abraham's God would fail them.

For an in-depth look at Sumer, its religion, and how this influenced what Moses wrote in chapters 1-11, please see "*Genesis* Background."

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The Author's Intent in Genesis

God's Role

We must look at God's role in the authorship of Moses' writings. *Exodus* 33:11 describes how God would speak with Moses face to face in the Tent of Meeting on a regular basis. Of all the prophets, God seems to have been the most intimate with Moses. I speak of Moses as the author, but he had the great advantage of having God as his mentor as well as having inspiration from the Holy Spirit.

At the same time, it seems that God *inspired* Moses rather than *dictating* to him. In other words, God didn't use Moses as a living typewriter. There are many places where God did dictate to the prophets, but those are typically marked with, "Yahweh says."

This means that God accepted working through Moses' human limitations. Accepting this helps us see the importance of evidence from outside the Bible and also our need to understand what Moses was thinking when he wrote. Failing to appreciate the human limitations of *Genesis* will cause us to miss the meaning just as much as failing to appreciate God's inspiration.

Moses' Challenge

God gave Moses an enormous challenge in leading the Israelites. The first aspect of this challenge was simply to maintain order among two million runaway slaves living in the desert. From the start, the Israelites questioned Moses' leadership, and they periodically grumbled and even rebelled. *Exodus* 18:13ff relates how the Israelites also demanded Moses' time to resolve their personal issues.

The second aspect of this challenge was to structure a mob into a nation. God provided Moses with a complete system of laws, a new system of worship, and a priesthood with a large clergy responsible for both conducting the worship and administering the laws. This provided the Israelites with an infrastructure that would allow them to function as a nation.

The third aspect of this challenge, and the most important, was to transform the worldview of the Israelites so that they identified themselves as God's chosen nation. For the Israelites to be orderly and organized was not enough; Moses needed them to be transformed inwardly as well. To create this new worldview, Moses had three goals, the first two of which were tightly linked.

Creating a New World View

First, Moses wanted the Israelites to worship God only, rather than worshipping him as well as other gods. Sumerian religion saw the gods as a vast family, and the Israelites tended to worship God along with others. Moses wanted to instill the idea that the Israelites should worship God *only*.

Second, Moses wanted to establish the idea of God *alone*. In ancient times, this was a truly radical idea. God had established his dominance by turning the gods of Egypt into plagues on the Egyptians. However, in the minds of the Israelites, that did not mean the Egyptian gods didn't exist, only that God

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was greater than they. Moses wanted to establish the idea that God was *alone* in the heavens and on earth. There was no El, Baal, Asherah, and the rest.

Third, Moses wanted the Israelites to have a sense of *destiny*, to understand that God had set a plan in motion and that they were central to that plan. Moses wanted to establish *why* God needed a plan in the first place and how the Israelites fit into that plan.

Achieving this worldview transformation was Moses' greatest challenge, especially given the God-alone requirement. Essentially, Moses needed two million people to give up all their old beliefs and accept new ones.

Specifically, this meant causing them to let go of their old origin stories and legends and adopt a new set of stories to replace them. That is *not* to say that all the new stories had to be origin stories and legends; Moses had the option of creating a new form of story. However, Moses did have to rid the Israelites of the origin stories and legends that they had brought with them, the ones Abraham and his household brought with them from Ur in Sumer. These had helped the Israelites maintain their identity as they lived among the Egyptians, and they wouldn't let go of them easily.

Moses' Solution

Moses did in fact invent a new kind of story, narrative history.¹ This new form was similar to legend in that it focused mainly on people and their actions. What was radically different is that Moses wrote about real people and actual events based on sources. This is evident in how often his narratives show his main characters behaving badly and the naturalness of the details.

The Israelites had maintained many stories about Abraham, Isaac, Jacob/Israel, and Israel's twelve sons. The Israelites preserved the stories, the good, the bad, and the ugly, from these four generations, and Moses wove them together as *Genesis* 12–50.

The question becomes, what kind of story did Moses use for chapters 1–11? We must keep the following in mind. Moses

- had no traditions to use from the time before Abraham
- knew the origin stories and legends brought by Abraham and his household from Ur that the Israelites still held to
- intended that his stories drive out and replace the various origin stories and legends that filled the Israelites' minds

What Moses *couldn't* do was write narrative history. He needed to write about what were, from his perspective, prehistoric times, for which he had no sources.

1 *Narrative history* involves telling history as a story. This differs from *historical narrative*, which is a fictional story that takes place in the context of historical events. I maintain that Moses didn't add fiction into his narratives. This isn't possible to prove one way or another; I only note that attempts to add fictional details into historical events tends to expose themselves.

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The natural solution, one that all ancient peoples had used for thousands of years, was to create his own origin stories and legends.

Of course, we immediately reject that idea. In our minds, origin stories and legends are inherently fake. In fact, by the first century, many Greeks and Romans had rejected religion based on origin stories and legends in favor of philosophy. We find the idea that Moses would use these types of stories naturally offensive.

At the same time, we accept psalms, proverbs, wisdom literature, and parables while knowing that they aren't based in fact. We do this in part because they don't pretend to be fact-based, but we do so mostly because we believe that they are *inspired*.

Moses created origin stories and legends, knowing full well that they weren't based in fact, because God inspired, or even told, him to do it. At first, this might seem odd, but there is no reason not to accept them, given that they were *inspired by God*.

As we approach these stories, we should remember that Moses intended that the Israelites to accept them at face value. In fact, Jesus accepted the Flood story and Noah at face value—see *Matthew 24:37-39*. On the other hand, we should approach them for what they are, fictional stories containing a great deal of symbolism. Their value is in their *inspiration*, not in their containing facts.

Approaching these chapters as inspired fiction provides us with a great deal of freedom. We no longer need to address all the little loose ends we find in them. Instead, we can study them, contemplate the symbolism, and look for the lessons they contain.

As Moses wrote his stories, he kept his three goals in mind.

- To portray God as supreme and alone
- To explain why God called Abraham
- To “cancel” the old stories from Sumer

To eliminate the old stories, he picked up themes and images from them and worked them into his own stories, even if the stories had nothing else in common. To the Israelites, the new stories sounded familiar, and they could let go of the old stories because the new ones contained the same interesting imagery.

Sumerian Origin Stories Compared to Moses'

If Moses wrote his own stories, then how do they compare to those of Sumer? Did Moses essentially copy what he found, or are his efforts original? Briefly, Moses' stories are quite different; they are concise, orderly, and flow from one to the next to form an overarching account.

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Most important, Moses' stories taught lessons radically different from those of Sumerian religion. Moses used imagery from the old stories to make his relatable, but his themes were completely different.

The Text

I'm going to jump right into the text. Please read each passage in the Bible first. Even better, read *Genesis* 1–22 first, and then re-read each passage, although this isn't essential.

Chapter 1:1–2:3—The Creation Of The universe

Genesis opens with an account of the creation. It stands alone; it is completely disconnected from the accounts that follow. It establishes three key concepts.

1. God, and God alone, created the universe and everything in it
2. Humankind was the crowning achievement of God's creation, made in God's image
3. Everything that God created, including humankind, was *good*

From the perspective of ancient people, it makes two additional points.

First, God created everything that they considered gods, including the sky, the land, the ocean, Sun, Moon, the stars and planets, and every plant and animal. None of these have any special divine status.

Second, to ancient people, chaos was evil and order was good. In their minds, the ocean was particularly chaotic. Their origin stories often have a great god defeat the god of the ocean. God started with nothing but ocean and darkness and systematically brought order to it. In their minds, this was more significant than creating it.

In the Beginning—1:1–2

Moses uses an impersonal name for God, the same as we do today. The Hebrew word, *elohim*, meant *gods* or *rulers*; in ancient times, ancient people didn't see a difference.¹ Note that Moses uses the plural form but he uses it as if it is singular. His reasons for doing this are unclear, and we shouldn't draw any conclusions from it.

The opening two verses makes the following points:

- God existed *before* the cosmos did, and he exists *apart* from it
- God created *everything*; nothing exists apart from his will
- The cosmos had a definite start; it didn't always exist

¹ *Eloah*, plural *elohim*, has a range of meanings, but *gods* or *rulers* seem to best capture the idea.

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- The Earth was formless, shrouded in darkness, and covered with water; it was like a lump of unworked clay waiting to be shaped
- God had no intention of leaving things in this condition

The thing absent from this account, from the perspective of the Israelites, is that it makes no mention of any other gods. Other creation stories typically introduced a hierarchy of gods; frequently, the next step was intrigue and infighting. Here, God is *alone*, and he will stay that way. This concept, something we take for granted, was radically foreign to the Israelites.

Heavens referred equally to three different things to the Israelites. The first heaven was the sky, the second heaven was the firmament containing the Sun, Moon, and stars, and the third heaven was the place where God dwells.

Order from Chaos—1:3–31

God gave form to the creation in six distinct days; this demonstrates a methodical, orderly process. God brought order out of chaos according to a plan. This also demonstrates his complete sovereignty over the creation.

As far as the structure of the days, they fall into two parallel groups. This parallelism is a key feature of Hebrew poetry.

1	Light, day and night	4	Sun, Moon, stars
2	A dome ¹ separated the waters	5	Sea creatures, birds
3	Dry land, vegetation and trees	6	Land animals, including humankind

God saw that what he was forming was *good* seven times in these verses; in verse 31, it is *very good*. God intended his creation to be blessed, not cursed. This is a sharp contrast to many other origin stories, where the gods quarrel, must tame the world, conquer chaos monsters, or defeat death.

God Creates Humankind—1:26–31

The sixth and final day doesn't end before God has created humankind. The intent of the verses is to show that humankind is both the pinnacle of God's creation and qualitatively better than what God created before.

God created humankind in his own image, and they are given dominion over the rest of the creation. Sumerian religion said that the gods created humankind to do their work for them; humans were inferior to the gods and often an annoyance to them. Here, God sets humankind in the place otherwise reserved for the gods, and God gives them his blessing. This brings the end of the sixth day.

That God created humankind in his own image is critical. This cannot be talking about human bodies, as God exists outside the Creation. Whatever is special about people, it has to do with

1 Most translations use *expanse*; the New Revised Standard Version uses *dome*. Dome more accurately captures the idea ancient peoples had.

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something that is separate from and more permanent than the cosmos. Humankind, while they were created along with the animals, were set apart from the other animals; humans are *more* than animals.

God created humankind, both male and female, in his own image. At the time, men treated women as inferior. Moses explicitly set women on an equal footing with men. The Law also gave women a few rights in the midst of a totally male-dominated society. While this had little practical impact on women's status in Israelite culture, Moses planted seeds that would germinate with the coming of Christ and eventually lead to equal treatment for men and women.

As God created humankind, he was clearly talking to others he considered peers. Hundreds of years ago, this became known as the “royal we,” as interpreters claimed God was talking to himself in the plural. However, God only did this three times; the others are *Genesis* 3:22 and 11:7. This runs completely counter to Moses' intention of establishing God *alone*. This leaves a tiny crack in Moses' monotheism for the concept of the Trinity.

God Rests—2:1–3

On the seventh day, God rests, or ceases, from all his work; the Hebrew word equally means *rest* and *cease*. This emphasizes that nothing else will follow after the creation of humankind.

This also establishes the idea that the seventh day should be considered a holy day of rest. The Law will set this down as firm rule, where no work of any kind should be done on the seventh day. *Sabbath* comes from the Hebrew word for *rest*.

Certain numbers came to have symbolic significance to the Israelites; in particular, seven represents something that is full or complete.

Science and the Creation Account

Please feel free to skip this section if science doesn't interest you.

Science currently says that the universe suddenly came into existence 13.8 billion years ago. Recently, scientists have determined that the universe doesn't undergo endless cycles of expansion and collapse; in fact, the fabric of the universe is expanding at an increasing rate and will eventually tear itself apart. This means that the universe has a definite beginning and an eventual end.

The Solar System formed about 4.5 billion years ago. As Earth cooled from molten rock, a shallow sea covered it. The atmosphere was saturated with water vapor, and no light could reach the surface because of the dense fog and dust between the Sun and Earth.

The solar wind cleared the dust, and changes in the atmosphere allowed sunlight to reach the surface, but the Sun itself couldn't be seen. A layer of clear air formed at the surface, forcing the still dense clouds up from the surface.

A convection cycle inside Earth pushed material up from the mantle at one end and sucked material back into the mantle at the other end. At the downward end, lighter material floated on top as suction pulled denser material down. When the dynamics of the core changed, the single convection

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cycle split into multiple smaller cycles, and the end of Earth where material had been pushing up sank back, leaving a depression. The ocean waters flowed into the newly formed dip; the waters drew back on the other end, exposing the accumulated lighter material as dry land.

Shortly after the appearance of dry land, the first life appeared. This happened either on the border between sea and land or in the deep sea, some 3.5 or even 4 billion years ago. These organisms weren't technically plants, but they had more in common with plants than with animals. Over billions of years, these organisms produced oxygen that changed the composition of the atmosphere. The dense clouds finally broke, allowing the Sun, Moon, and stars to become visible from the surface.

Life started in earnest in the oceans some 700 million years ago and then moved onto land. Dinosaurs eventually ruled the land; modern birds are the direct descendants of the dinosaurs. Meanwhile, mammals slowly developed in the background.

Around 65 million years ago, catastrophic events caused the extinction of the dinosaurs, allowing mammals to emerge and to dominate. Humankind entered the scene very recently.

Moses' poetry, although its sequence of events sounds strange, is an accurate outline of the development of Earth, especially given that it is limited to perspectives from 3,500 years ago. Certainly, Moses knew nothing of this. In fact, it wasn't until the 1960s that scientific knowledge reached a point where this correlation started to become apparent.

Chapters 2:4–6:1–8—The Origins Of Humankind

Moses followed the first creation account with a second parallel account that describes the creation from a very different perspective. The first account stands alone, it is impersonal, it ends with humankind, and it looks at the creation from a big picture view. The second account flows smoothly into what follows, it is personal, it begins with humankind, and it looks at specifically at people.

At first, all is well. The first couple lived in peace and innocence in a park. God gave them only one restriction, to stay away from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. He told them that if they ate its fruit, then they would die.

Temptation soon leads the first couple to disobey. They eat, and immediately guilt and fear replace their innocence. God drives them from the garden and sends them out to work the land, which he cursed.

The first couple have children, but sin leads one son to murder his brother. Violence increases, and men begin to subjugate women. After ten generations, God regrets creating humankind and plans to wipe them out.

However, some people seek God, leaving hope that God will leave someone alive to save humankind.

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The First Couple—2:4–2:25

This section describes the creation itself from a completely different perspective than the first account. The focus is on the perfection of what God has made. Humankind, typified by a man and a woman, are completely innocent, and the world they live in, typified by a park, is ideally suited for them.

The Second Creation Account—2:4

This verse introduces the second creation account. Note how much it varies from the first one; all the two accounts have in common is that God does the creating. As an example of the differences, the creation happened in one day, not six.

Moses introduced a personal name for God that means “I am” or “He Is.” God gave himself this name in *Exodus* 3:13–15 when he first appeared to Moses, and Moses later worked it into his writing. Instead of stating his impersonal role, god/ruler, this name says something about God's nature, that he is eternal and unchanging.

The Hebrew word is spelled *YHWH*. Ancient Hebrew didn't contain vowels, so there is considerable uncertainty about the pronunciation. Scholars determined it is most likely *Yahweh*.

English translations commonly translate *Yahweh* as *LORD*. They use small capitals to indicate that this isn't a translation but a convention. This tradition started with the Jews, who decided that God's name was too holy to say in ordinary speech; in fact, they kept the pronunciation a closely guarded secret.¹ This Jewish tradition crossed over into English translations. Unfortunately, this is exactly the opposite of what Moses intended; for example, the Israelites were to swear their oaths in Yahweh's name. (See *Deuteronomy* 6:13, 10:20, *Joshua* 2:12.)

Both Elohim and Yahweh are present in many Old Testament names:

- Isaiah : Yesha'yahu = Yahweh is salvation
- Joel : Yo'el = Yahweh is God
- Elijah : 'Eliyyahu = My God is Yahweh
- Israel : Yisra'el = God contended

Moses put the two names together as Yahweh Elohim (LORD God) some 20 times in chapters two and three. This tightly connects the personal name with the impersonal one, in the same way that the New Testament connects Jesus and Christ. Starting in chapter 4, Moses typically referred to God using one name or the other.

¹ When Jewish scribes introduced vowel marks into the Hebrew Old Testament in the Early Middle Ages, they deliberately used the vowels from *adonai*, the Hebrew word for *lord*. This led to “Jehovah” in early English translations.

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The First Man—2:5–15

In this account, God created the man before he created even bushes, plants, or rain. This indicates that God made these things for the benefit of the man.

God formed the man's body from some dust from the ground and then breathed the breath, or spirit—in Hebrew, the same word means both *breath* and *spirit*—of life into the body. This represents that people's bodies are merely physical and no different from those of other animals. People are distinct because of the spirit that God breathed into them.

The text uses two Hebrew words for *man*, *adam* and *ish*; however, *adam* also mean *humankind*. Although the Old Testament uses *ish* more often overall in the Old Testament, *adam* is used more often in this account.

Although *adam* is frequently translated as a proper name, that doesn't appear to be Moses' intent in the original text. The giving of a name indicated authority over the thing named. God left the man unnamed, representing the man's independence.

After making the man, God built a park in which the man would live. In Mesopotamia, a park was a walled retreat for the very wealthy. The Persian and Greek words for *park* are both *paradise*. God filled the "paradise" with fruit trees, including the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God built the park in Eden, which means *pleasure* in Hebrew.

Four rivers had their headwaters in the park. Rivers were critical to early civilization as they supplied water for agriculture. The Pishon can't be positively identified. The second river is the Nile; Cush is the ancient name for what is now Sudan. The Tigris and the Euphrates are the great rivers of Mesopotamia. The garden All these supplied all these great rivers; this represents the abundant provision of water God made for it. This was especially significant for the Israelites, who had left the Nile delta for the deserts of Sinai.

God then placed the man in the park to work it and to care for it. He didn't create the man and then drop him off in a field somewhere; instead, he made a perfect place for the man to live. God also gave the man responsibility and work to do. Purposeful activity was part of God's provision for the man; this implicitly condemned idleness.

One Restriction—2:16–17

God placed only one restriction on the man. The man might eat the fruit of every tree in the park, even the tree of life was available, except one. God forbade eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The consequences of eating the fruit of this tree were certain, the man would die.

God had created the man and then created a perfect place for him to live, a park with abundant water and all sorts of fruit trees. However, there was one tree among all the rest that the man must avoid, or he would die, almost as if its fruit were poisonous. God sternly warned the man to avoid it. Why was it so dangerous? God had created the man to be innocent, and the knowledge of good and evil would destroy that innocence and open the door to sin.

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The Woman—2:18–23

For the first time, God saw something that wasn't good, the man was alone. Therefore, God decided to make a suitable helper for him.

God had already created every animal and bird. During the process, God presented each creature to the man so he could give it a name. Giving names shows the man's authority over the animals and emphasizes his primacy over the creation.

However, among all the animals and birds there was no suitable helper. This exercise emphasized to the man how special this new helper would be. God created the woman from one of the man's ribs. When the man woke, he seemed quite excited.

Lessons about Marriage—2:24–25

There are several important lessons here:

God created the institution of marriage and set that relationship over even a man's relationship with his parents. The Israelites considered that the father remained the ruler of his sons until his death. Without setting this rule aside, men were to consider marriage as absolutely binding and of the greatest importance.

God created sex and equated it with marriage. Sex is natural and part of the goodness of God's creation. At the same time, it is holy, and God implicitly bans sex outside marriage.

Men should treat women as life-partners, not as servants or property. This was a foreign concept in ancient times.

God created the man and the woman in a state of complete innocence. The Israelites considered nakedness shameful, and the text uses their nakedness and lack of shame to show that the man and woman had no concept that it was wrong. They were pure in heart and completely ignorant of evil.

The text contains another lesson. God created the man, then everything else, and then the woman. The man wasn't complete without the woman, and the woman was made to be a helper for the man.

Note that, up to this point, the man hadn't named the woman; he didn't have a sense of authority over her. For the Israelites and their male-dominated society, this meant that men should hold women in far higher regard. At the same time, the man is called to lead, and the woman to help. As the leader, the man is ultimately responsible for both of them, and the woman should respect his decisions on their behalf. These roles, and the man and woman's failure to embrace them, played a major part in what would soon happen.

Now the creation was truly complete. Everything was perfect, and the man and the woman were set up to live in harmony with God, each other, and the creation. There was no sin and not even the concept of it. The man and the woman were completely innocent. This was what God intended. To the Israelites, and to us, the contrast between this idyllic picture and reality couldn't be more stark.

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Deception, Disobedience, Dispossession, Death—3:1–24

The creation account in the previous chapter leaves us hanging. The world is perfect. In any generation, this begs a question. What happened, to the innocence, to the park, to the harmony?

Deception and Disobedience—3:1–7

First, who was this serpent? To the ancients, snakes symbolized cleverness and guile, along with danger. Moses and the Israelites saw only a sly, deceitful snake with words more dangerous than its bite. We must keep in mind that Moses wanted to instill a message of God alone. The Israelites needed this simplistic view of the Heavenly realms in order to cure them of the idea of many competing gods.

God eventually allowed the concept of Satan, and angels, to enter the Old Testament over 800 years later, during the time of the Exile. In hindsight, we see the serpent as Satan, the adversary of humankind.

The serpent approached the woman while the man watched. He started by asking her a twisted question about God's prohibition regarding the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, encouraging the woman to correct him. The serpent then went on the offensive. First, he openly contradicted God's warning. He then claimed that God was withholding good things from the man and the woman because he didn't want them to become his equals. With just a few words, the serpent portrayed God as lying, jealous, and holding out on the man and the woman.

The woman took these words to heart, and her attitude toward the fruit of the tree changed. She rationalized that it was good for food, attractive, and desirable for wisdom, and she ate it. She also gave some to the man, and he ate it as well.

Immediately, their innocence vanished, and they scrambled to make skirts to cover their nakedness.

We can take several lessons from this.

- Negative messages, even if they are clearly untrue, produce doubts
- When God warns of consequences, he means it; ignoring his warnings is dangerous
- We aren't content with God's abundant provisions; we always want more
- We *love* to think we know better than God, especially when it comes to prohibitions
- Discussing a big decision never hurts

What did God mean when he said they would die? Instead of falling down dead, the text says their eyes opened. What they had experienced up to this point is the first manifestation of death, the loss of innocence.

The account seems to put the blame on the woman, but the man was clearly standing by and watching. God gave the man a leadership role, but the man didn't lead. Instead, he passively allowed

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his wife to disobey and then joined her in that disobedience. All he had to say was, “Let’s talk about this first.” One could argue that his failure was greater.

Dispossession—3:8–24

The man and the woman heard God walking through the park, so they hid. This is the second manifestation of death; they felt shame, fear, and the need to hide. This was very familiar to the Israelites, as *Exodus* and *Numbers* describe.

God played along, as if he didn’t already know what had happened. God remembered that he made the man the leader, and he specifically called out the man. When God confronted him, the man responded with excuses and then tried to blame the woman. When God rebuked the serpent, perhaps the man thought he was off the hook, but God was simply saving the most responsible party for last.

God started by cursing the serpent. The implication is that God deprived him of his legs, forcing him to slither around on his belly. God also placed hatred between the seed of the serpent and of the seed of the woman; “seed” is the literal meaning of the word often translated as “offspring.”

When the Israelites heard this, their response was, “What?” Ancient people thought that males produced seed and females incubated them. Moses thought the same; the statement itself is evidence that God inspired Moses in what he wrote. Most likely, neither Moses nor the Israelites understood what this meant; only in view of Mary conceiving the Messiah by the Holy Spirit does it make sense.

God snuck in two predictions, the virgin birth and the ultimate victory of his Son over the Devil, that became clear only after the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

God turned to the woman and cursed the two things most important to women in ancient times, child bearing and marriage. Pregnancy would be a burden and giving birth would be painful. Furthermore, she would long for her husband, but he would no longer treat her as his partner but as his subject.

Finally, God addressed the man. God had made a park filled with fruit trees to sustain the man and to provide him with productive work. Therefore, God cursed the ground, so that only through hard labor would it produce food instead of thorns. Rather than fruit, the man would be forced to sustain himself on vegetables. God replaced the rewarding work tending the park by dreary toil that would end only when the man returned to the dust from which God made him.

Shut out from the surreal, blessed park, things began to look familiar. Life was hard, and the marriage relationship was much less than what it seemingly should be. On the other hand, God was relatively lenient with the man and the woman, and humankind still had a future, even if it was drear.

The man gave the woman a name, just as he did the animals; *Eve* is the Hebrew word for *life* or *living*. Giving a name symbolizes authority, and this act shows that the man’s attitude toward his wife had changed, just as God had told her.

The man and Eve still lacked proper clothing, so God made clothing for them from animal skins. This marks the first shedding of blood to cover the sins of humankind. The shedding of the blood of

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animals to cover sin was a core part of the worship Moses instituted for the Israelites, and it would continue until Jesus finally shed his own blood, once for all, on the cross.

Last of all, God drove the man and the woman from the park into the wilds. They had gained the knowledge of good and evil, so God blocked them from the tree of life to prevent them from obtaining eternal life.

In an interesting parallel with the first creation account, God again spoke as if he was talking to his peers.

The Full Meaning of Death—4:1–26

God told the man that he would surely die, but, up to now, the consequences don't add up to such a severe penalty. The full meaning of God's warning is about to be revealed.

Two Offerings—4:1–7

As the man and Eve settled into life's routine, Eve gave birth to two sons. The ancients linked sexual relations and conception. The Old Testament reflects this, as in verse 1. However, in verse 2, Eve simply gave birth to another son. This implies that they were twins.

The older brother, Cain, becomes a farmer, while the younger, Abel, becomes a shepherd. As the oldest son, Cain was preeminent over his slightly younger brother; however, the Israelites were shepherds when they entered Egypt while the Egyptians were farmers, so the Israelites tended to favor Abel.

Cain was the first to decide to bring an offering to God, and Abel followed Cain's lead. In a twist, God accepted Abel and his offering, but he didn't accept Cain and his. As tempting as it is to find fault with *what* Cain offered, the quality of each offering was essentially the same.

The problem lay with Cain, as we can see by his reaction. He became angry and sullen, and there was no indication that he approached God to make things right. Instead, as Cain sulked, God approached him, confronting him about his attitude and warning him about the dangers of sin. Either Cain would rule over his sin, or it would consume him.

Cain and Abel are the first examples of God choosing the younger over the older in *Genesis*, and this continued with Isaac over Ishmael, Jacob over Esau, and Ephraim over Manasseh. Tradition said that the oldest son became the leader of the clan upon his father's death, and he thus received a double portion of the inheritance. God repeatedly demonstrated that his purposes overrode human tradition. Here, God clearly had a reason for his choice.

Envy, Murder—4:8–16

Cain fully revealed his heart. Consumed with envy, he lured his twin brother away and murdered him. Even in the violent world in which the Israelites lived, murdering one's brother, especially over such a trivial matter, was shocking and despicable. The knowledge of good and evil had filled Cain

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with sinful desires, and he succumbed to them. This illustrates what God meant by death. People, whom God created to be completely innocent, were filled with sinful desires that produced depravity.

Cain thought he would keep his sin a secret, but God immediately confronted him, again asking a question to which he already knew the answer. Cain actually tried to avoid the question, so God laid out the charges and the punishment. Against all expectation, God didn't put Cain to death. Instead, God sent him into exile where he would live as a foreigner. This illustrates both God's benevolence and humankind's precious nature in God's sight, even in their depraved state.

Cain's response showed a total lack of remorse and complete self-centeredness. His main concern was that, without God's protection, someone would murder him what he had murdered his brother.

Amazingly, God addressed Cain's fears by placing a mark on him as a warning that God would avenge any harm done to Cain seven-times over. Seven represents that the consequences would be full and complete.

Cain's Descendants—4:17–24

Cain went out and became the father of a line of descendants. Counting the man and Cain, the total number of male descendants listed is ten. The significance of this becomes clear in the next chapter.

Lamech is the seventh descendant, representing that the full nature of Cain's offspring will be apparent in him. Lamech boasted to his wives that he killed a young man who had struck him. This illustrates that Cain's violence wasn't an isolated incident but a trend; in the following accounts, violence typifies the corruption of humankind. Thus, Cain became the father of the corrupt, who are characterized by their violence.

This is also the first mention of polygamy. When God instituted marriage, it implied monogamy, but Lamech had two wives. This is the second indication that sin was breaking down God's plan for women and the sanctity of marriage.

The Godly Line of Seth—4:25–26

Meanwhile, Eve gave birth to another son, Seth, who also fathered a son. In association with these events, people began worshiping God. Thus, Seth became the father of the godly.

These verses answer an important question. Why did God allow humankind to continue when they corrupted themselves? Through Seth, God still had hope for humankind.

Godly Descendants—5:1–32

The genealogy of the man through his son Seth creates a literary break. This is the first of several genealogies found in Moses' writings. The Israelites' common ancestry gave them their identity as a nation, and the genealogies provided proof that an individual was indeed an Israelite, or later, a Jew.

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Through the time of Jesus, the Jews maintained exhaustive genealogies at the Temple in Jerusalem. The genealogy provided here allowed the Israelites to trace themselves all the way back to the original man through the godly line of Seth.

The genealogy contains ten generations, starting with the first man and ending with Noah, who will be the main character of the Flood account. We generally think of the number ten as representing a round or full amount; however, to the Israelites, the number seven played that role. In the books of the Law, ten, when used symbolically, represents trial or testing.¹ Considering the Flood account that follows, these ten generations represent the time during which humankind, as they were commanded, went forth and multiplied, but they also tested God's patience to its limit.

The great age of these men couldn't be lost on the Israelites. Their longevity gives the pre-Flood era an ethereal sense, serving as a reminder that this was a time not far removed from the utopian conditions that prevailed in the beginning but that were rapidly disappearing.

The genealogy draws attention to the last four of Adam's descendants. Like Lamech, Enoch was the seventh descendant in the line of Seth. The text twice states that Enoch walked with God, which was a sharp contrast to Lamech. Secondly, God "took" Enoch at a relatively young age. The text is cryptic, since the Israelites had no concept of life after death, and they generally viewed dying at a young age as a punishment. However, the implication is that God showed Enoch special favor by taking him away from hard labor among godless men.

Methuselah stands out because he lived longer than anyone else. Reading ahead, he became a living countdown clock; the Flood occurred in the year of his death. The fact that he lived longer than anyone else demonstrates God's restraint in putting off his reckoning with humankind's sin.

Lamech lived far shorter than his forefathers, apart from Enoch; in fact, Methuselah lived for five years after Lamech died. In addition, Lamech makes a prophecy regarding Noah, whose name means *Rest*, stating that his son would bring relief from the toil of working the ground God that had cursed.

Finally, the text mentions that Noah fathered three sons at an advanced age. This implies that these three sons have a special place in the genealogy.

Doing some simple math, Methuselah died when Noah was 600 years old. We can thus expect that the Flood will occur at that time.

The Intolerable Result—6:1–8

This brief section describes the result of everything that has happened up to this point. God found the condition of the people he created intolerable.

Note

These verses are hard to understand because the Hebrew words can be translated different ways. The problems come from the terms *sons of God* and *Nephilim*.

1 See *Genesis* 31:7, 41, the ten plagues on Egypt, *Numbers* 14:22. Note also that God gave the Israelites ten commandments that the Israelites were never able to keep.

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One common interpretation of “sons of God” is that angels are God’s sons. Some angels left Heaven and mated with women, producing the Nephilim, who were demigods. This idea fits well in ancient legends, especially those of Greece. However, Moses was trying to uproot this sort of thinking, and he wouldn’t put such fantastic ideas here.

Furthermore, the Bible never describes angels as God’s sons. Hebrews 1:5, speaking about how Jesus is superior to the angels, says,

5For to which of the angels did he ever say, “You are my son, today I have begotten you,”
and again,

“I will be a father to him, and he will be a son to me.”?

Clearly, angels are not God’s sons. We need to find a different interpretation.

The formula “sons of X” was a common way of referring to a class of people with a common characteristic. For example, Mark 3:17 says that Jesus called James and John, whose father was Zebedee, “sons of thunder.” By this, Jesus most likely meant that they were bad-tempered.

The Hebrew word *elohim* is almost always translated as a name for God; however, it generally means “gods.” Ancient people considered kings to be minor gods, and here, *elohim* refers to kings and rulers. The expression “sons of elohim” simply refers to human rulers as a class and expresses the enormous gap between the rulers and commoners.

The meaning of Nephilim is uncertain. One possibility is “fallen ones,” which seems to fit with angels leaving Heaven. However, if that were true, it was the angels who were fallen and not their sons.

Another possibility is “extraordinary ones.” It is used only here and in Numbers 13:33, where it is used to describe certain inhabitants of the land of Canaan who were exceptionally large. In both places, it simply means exceptionally large, powerful warrior-rulers.

Putting this together, people idolized their rulers and their sons, men who ruled because of their great size and strength. The Sumerians thought of Gilgamesh, the king of Uruk, as a brother of the gods and as having legendary strength.

Modern translations generously say that the rulers “took as their wives any they chose”—ESV or even “married”—NIV. However, Hebrew doesn’t have a word for “wife.” What the text says is more blunt.

Powerful rulers took women for themselves, any that they wanted. *Esther* 2:1ff describes such a situation. The king of Persia rounded up beautiful young women so he could choose a new queen. In *Genesis*, Abraham twice feared for his life because of his wife among the Egyptians, 12:10ff, and among the Philistines, 20:1ff, as did his son Isaac among the Philistines, 26:6. In short, the powerful were dragging off the beautiful women for their harems, further degrading women and marriage.

God saw people’s wickedness and how they were set on evil. Exasperated, God set a deadline. He would tolerate humankind for another 120 years, and then he would act. Note that God wasn’t setting an upper limit on how long individuals would live.

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The rulers had children by the women they had taken. These huge, powerful men became famous for their deeds. Alexander the Great, who conquered nations and who destroyed cities at the slightest offense, is an example of these “men of renown.”

God regretted creating humankind and grieved over them because they are they were hopelessly disposed to evil. He decided to wipe out humankind; however, one man, Noah, was pleasing to him.

These verses build on the condemnation of violence, whether taking women and treating them like property or killing and plundering one's neighbors. People romanticized and glorified the exercise of power. God found this appalling, to the point that he decided to wipe humankind from the earth. At the same time, God wasn't entirely giving up on the people he had created in his own image.

Summary

The following are core ideas from chapters 2–6.

- God created humankind to be pure, innocent, and blessed
- Humankind disobeyed God's simple command and brought destruction on themselves
- The man and the woman blame shifted, but God was unimpressed
- God responded firmly but with restraint and benevolence
- People soon treated each other with violence and oppression, with women suffering the worst of it
- God regretted creating humankind; he determined that, in 120 years, he would wipe them out
- In the midst of this, a few walked with God and found favor with him

Some ask why God created humankind in the first place, when he knew that they would turn to evil and grieve him. This question doesn't have a simple answer, but here are a few thoughts.

God greatly desired to have a pure and intimate relationship with people, and he created people with the capacity to have that relationship with him. Part of that relationship required free will and the ability to think, and he wanted us to choose to obey him. Obedience consisted of following one simple command, but people chose to disobey.

That God went forward with his plans shows how deeply he desired us and how much he was willing to sacrifice for our sake. Rather than give up on us, or not start at all, he chose to suffer with us until he was able to bring about a solution to our corruption.

Chapters 6:9–9:29—The Flood

The preceding section made clear that God intended to take drastic action in response to humankind's wickedness. It also left open the hope that God didn't intend to give up on humankind, whom he had created in his own image.

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This section describes how God followed through on his intention to wipe out humankind, while he also preserved a remnant through Noah and his family. It goes on to show that God's attempt to regenerate humankind through a righteous seed failed to work. Sin was too deeply rooted in humankind's nature.

God Calls Noah—6:9–12

These verses again introduce Noah and summarize the situation. They tie Noah to Enoch as a man who walked with God, and commend Noah as a righteous man who was blameless among the people of his time.

The word *blameless* has the idea of *whole* or *complete*, which speaks to Noah's integrity in the midst of corrupt people. The fact that Noah found acceptance with God shows that humankind was corrupt by their own choosing and not because God's expectations were impossible.

Noah Builds a Vessel—6:13–7:5

God spoke to Noah and announced that he would soon exterminate humankind, explicitly mentioning violence as a symptom of humankind's corruption.

God then told Noah to build a *tebah* out of specific sort of wood, possibly cypress. *Tebah* isn't a Hebrew word, and only Moses used it in the Old Testament.

It is commonly translated *ark*, but *ark* comes from a Latin word for a wooden chest, such as the Ark of the Covenant, which is a completely different Hebrew word. By around 275, when Jewish scholars translated the Old Testament to Greek, the Jews had either forgotten what the word meant or they couldn't translate it, and they called it a *chest*.

The only thing we can say for sure is that whatever it was that God told Noah to build, the Israelites didn't have a word for it. Moses also used *tebah* to describe the pitch-coated basket that his mother made when she set him adrift in the Nile when he was a newborn, saving him from death in the Nile River.

Tebah was similar to the Egyptian word for *coffin*. The Egyptians believed that the coffin was a vessel that carried the soul from this life to the next. Possibly, Moses had this in mind when he described a vessel that protected the lives of the occupants.

As God continued to describe this vessel, it was something no Israelite had ever seen. It was to be 450 feet long, 75 feet wide, and 45 feet tall. In addition, it was to have a roof and the inside was to have lower, middle, and upper decks. Noah was to split the space between the decks into compartments. We recognize this as a reasonable design for a ship, but such a thing hadn't been conceived in Moses' time, and certainly not one of this size.

Among all the details, we should stop and think about how enormous this vessel would be. Sitting on a football field, it would hang over both end zones, take up half the width of the field, and be four stories tall.

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God then explained why Noah should build such a thing. God planned to bring a flood upon the earth that would destroy *everything* that wasn't inside the vessel. He would wipe the earth clean and start over, and it was Noah's job to preserve the people and the animals that would repopulate the earth.

Noah responded by doing all that God told him.

The size of the task Noah would face in building size the huge vessel dwarfed the vessel itself. Imagine simply trying to coat the vessel with tar, inside and out.

At the time Moses was writing, the Israelites faced with the seemingly impossible task of driving the Canaanites out of the land God had promised to Abraham. Noah's example illustrated the “trust God and do it” attitude the Israelites needed.

The Flood—7:6–24

As predicted in the genealogy, the Flood came when Noah was 600 years old. Noah and his family entered the vessel, and all the animals filed in with them. Once they were all on board, God himself sealed the door to the vessel. God then unleashed the Flood on the earth, opening the gates below and above. After forty days of steady rain, the waters covered even the mountains to a depth of over 20 feet, and they remained for five months. Apart from those aboard the vessel, no one and nothing escaped, and God completely cleansed the Earth.

The Waters Recede—8:1–19

God was mindful of those in the vessel, and he caused the waters to subside, so that the vessel came to rest at the end of the five months, perched on the mountains of Ararat. This is an interesting detail, because Mount Ararat is on the far eastern end of modern Turkey. The peak is the second-highest point in the Middle East at over 16,800 feet and over 900 miles from Goshen. Neither Moses nor any of the Israelites had ever gone anywhere near the area; the Israelites may have brought the memory of it with them from Sumer.

The waters slowly retreated over a period of months, and Noah sent out birds to test the condition of the land. Finally, a dove brought back a fresh olive leaf, indicating that God was making the land habitable again. After thirteen months, Noah and the animals finally departed from the vessel.

At this point, God had done everything in his considerable power to set humankind up for success. All the consequences of human wickedness had been swept away, and God was reseeding his creation with the family of a man of proven righteousness.

God Promises, “Never Again”—8:20–9:17

Upon leaving the vessel, Noah immediately made offerings to God of all the clean animals. God expressed his intention to never again wipe out all life; giving the rainbow as a sign. However, he did this accepting humankind's hopeless disposition to evil, resolving to allow things to run their course.

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In doing this, he also acknowledged that his global reset didn't work.

God blessed Noah in the same way that he had blessed the first man and woman, setting them over all the creation and commanding them to multiply. He also gave them a prohibition; they were to abstain from blood, for the life is in the blood. Humans weren't to eat the blood of animals, and God would hold all, both animal and man, accountable for the blood of humankind, for he created humankind in his own image.

At the same time, God commanded that people put to death those who violated this command. Thus, God delegated authority for the enforcement of his commands to people.

Note that God said nothing here about who is authorized to carry out this punishment. The command creates a paradox, in that the person who punishes a murderer themselves sheds blood. The Law, of which *Genesis* is a part, also commanded “an eye for an eye.” Gandhi famously noted, “An eye for an eye only ends up making the whole world blind.” Was God authorizing vigilantism?

God called the Israelites to be his chosen nation, and he gave them a detailed set of commands. He also set up a priesthood, with assistants, to enforce them. God created an orderly system that protected the individual and that ensured that punishments, handed down by the authorities, fit the offenses. Punishments were neither too lenient nor too severe.

God never intended that individuals run around “getting even” with each other, although the Law acknowledged that it was a common practice. Throughout the account leading up to this point, violence typifies humankind's wickedness; God certainly wasn't commanding it.

Summary

The following are the core ideas from this section.

- God followed through on his intention to wipe away humankind, along with the rest of the world
- God preserved a remnant of humankind through a blameless man and his family, along with enough animals to regenerate the world
- Noah survived the Flood only because God preserved him; however, Noah wouldn't have survived if he hadn't diligently obeyed God's command to build an enormous vessel
- Even as God committed himself never again to wipe away humankind in a flood, he knew that humankind would revert to their wicked ways

I also want to discuss the practical lessons for *us* from this section.

First, the New Testament clearly teaches that God will raise *everyone* from the dead and judge them according to what they have done; see *Revelation* 20:11–15. The Flood account warns us that God, and Jesus, are *absolutely serious* about this. We need to understand the severity of the judgment from which Jesus saves us.

Second, we are saved by God's grace through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. No amount of good deeds or ritual observance can cancel our debt of sin. However, like Noah, God and Jesus expect us to pursue God's will in our daily lives, even if it seems impossible to us. In *Matthew* 7:21, Jesus said,

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“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord!’ will enter into the Kingdom of Heaven; instead, it is the one who does the will of my father, who is in Heaven.” God’s grace working in us produces perseverance in living godly lives.

Third, God demonstrates the extent of his grace and patience with humankind in tolerating the ongoing wickedness in the world, which he detests; see *2 Peter* 3:1–8. He does this to allow those who will accept his grace and forgiveness to gain salvation, see *Matthew* 13:24–29, 36–43.

Chapters 9:20–11:32—After the Flood

God had essentially re-created the world and reseeded humankind with a blameless man who had walked with him for over 600 years. Unfortunately, God knew from the start that his reset didn’t work. The events that followed showed that nothing had changed and humankind was still corrupt. At the same time, just as God chose Noah, he again chose a single man, Abraham, to address the crisis.

Noah Curses Canaan—9:20–29

Soon after Noah and his sons left the ark, Noah planted a vineyard, made wine, and then got so drunk that he undressed and passed out in his tent. His youngest son entered the tent and “saw” his father’s nakedness. This was surely a trivial offense if we take it literally, but the Hebrew expression implies a lot more. Note that Noah, upon waking, knew what his son had done. Noah immediately cursed, not the son, but the grandson, Canaan. With this ugly incident, the account of the righteous man who walked with God ends.

Even as God swore to never again to flood the Earth and wipe away humankind, he acknowledged that humankind’s hopeless inclination to evil. Even Noah acted foolishly, and his son, in some way, took advantage and violated him. In response, Noah cursed his own descendants. As people once again spread across the land, there was no doubt that wickedness would go with them.

The cursing of Canaan, rather than his father, makes sense in the context of the Israelites’ situation in Sinai at the time Moses wrote *Genesis*. God had already commanded the Israelites to wipe out the Canaanites and to take possession of their land. Noah’s curse shows that God foresaw that the Canaanites would be particularly wicked and worthy of judgment.

Some falsely claim that Noah cursed Ham and all his descendants, and they use this as the basis for racial discrimination. However, the text clearly limits this curse to Canaan.

Table of Nations—10:1–32

The genealogies here organized the known nations and tribes into three groups according to Noah’s sons. The sons of Shem included the nations of the eastern portions of Mesopotamia. The sons of Japheth included the nations in what is now Turkey and the Mediterranean seafaring peoples. The sons of Ham included what is now Ethiopia, Egypt, Libya, Arabia, Syria, and the western portions of Mesopotamia. Of the three, Ham was the most prolific, and his descendants formed the great

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empires of the time, Egypt, Babylon, and Assyria. Shem, however, would become the forefather of the Israelites.

One of Ham's sons, Nimrod, received special attention. His name could mean *Rebel* or *Valiant*, and he became a mighty hunter “in the face of Yahweh.” He is credited with founding Babylon and the great cities of Assyria. He continued the pre-Flood trend of mighty men who gained fame by taking women and plundering others.

This division of nations into three groups had more to do with Israelite identity than any actual connection between the nations. Shem became the forefather of the Israelites through Arpachshad, who became a stand-in for Sumer. During Moses' time, Sumer was a distant memory, and it is quite possible that its name became lost.¹ Shem and his descendants represented the “good guys” to the Israelites and reminded them that their roots were in a distant land.

Japheth represented the “other guys” who lived in lands distant from the Israelites.

Ham, and especially his son Canaan, represented the “bad guys.” Moses included the Hittites in this group because some of them lived among the tribes of Canaan. The Israelites had lived among the descendants of Ham since the time of Abraham and had avoided mixing with them. This division of the nations reinforced the idea that the Israelites should have nothing to do with the Egyptians or the Canaanites.

The Israelites also retained unhappy memories of how westerners had invaded southeastern Mesopotamia and contributed to the collapse of Sumer. Note that Moses has Nimrod founding Akkad, also spelled Accad, which conquered Sumer. Also, the Tower of Babel account in the next chapter seems to satirize Babylon, which was established by Amorites from around Canaan.

The Tower of Babel—11:1–9

As Noah and his sons began to multiply, they shared the same language. As their descendants traveled about, some came to *Shinar*, which means *Country of Two Rivers*, or Mesopotamia. There, they settled and began to build a city. However, they weren't satisfied with simply building dwellings for themselves; they decided to build a tower that would reach up to heaven. “Heaven” means both the sky and the place where God resides, and they probably had both ideas in mind. In ancient times, the distinction between great men and gods was blurry, and they intended to establish their greatness.

God came down to inspect their work, and he concluded that they must be stopped, or there would be no restraining them. Interestingly, God again uses “us” as he announced his intention. He decided that hindering them was simply a matter of preventing them from communicating, so he confused their speech, giving them multiple languages. Unable to communicate, they stopped their work and scattered. The city they were building was thus called Babel, which sounds like *confusion* in Hebrew.

This passage indicates several things.

¹ Chapter 11 verses 28, 31 refer to Ur of the Chaldeans as the city of Terah and Abraham. Ur was a city of Sumer and not of Chaldea. In addition, Chaldea didn't come into existence until 300 years after Moses wrote. Most likely, an editor inserted “Chaldea” for the original place name at a much later date.

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- In response to God's judgment, humankind tried to establish themselves in a great city so that God couldn't interfere with them
- God, while concerned about their behavior, showed remarkable restraint in dealing with their arrogance
- God found it trivial to put a stop to their efforts and to scatter them

This story is likely a satire of on the city of Babylon, or Babel. Babylon grew from a village to the largest city in the world under King Hammurabi and then quickly lost influence. The similarity of the name Babel, meaning Gate of God, and the Hebrew Babel, meaning confusion, isn't a coincidence.

The Ziggurat of Marduk in Babylon, called the Etemenanki or "House of the Platform of Heaven and Earth," was 300 feet on each side at the base, composed of seven stories, and reached 300 feet high. It showed Hammurabi's great aspirations and provides an idea of the sort of tower meant by Moses.

For the Israelites, the message was simple. Don't act like the Babylonians, building monuments for your own glory and oppressing others, or God will scatter you.

The Second Genealogy and Terah—11:10–27

This passage contains another genealogy, followed by a description of the last member of the genealogy. Like the genealogy of Seth, it contains ten generations, counting Noah, implying that humankind continued to test God. The ages to which each man lived grew shorter, from 600 years to 205. This provides a transition from the prehistoric times of the flood to the modern times of the Israelites.

Like Noah, Terah had three sons at a comparatively old age. Thus, even as the "sons of Cain" had reverted to wickedness, God had maintained a remnant, "sons of Seth," who held out hope. Through Terah and his sons, God planned a solution that would enable humankind to overcome the knowledge of evil, the desires it unleashed, and the resulting wickedness.

Terah Moves to Haran—11:27–32

Terah lived in the Sumerian city of Ur. One of his sons, Haran, died there, leaving his son Lot in Terah's custody.

Abram's wife, Sarai—later, God renamed her Sarah—was barren. For women in ancient times, this was a curse, as their self-worth came from bearing children. This also brings into question how Abram could be part of God's solution, since he could have no descendants.

Barrenness became a recurring theme in the Old Testament, and it provided God with opportunities to display his power and to shape the course of events.

Terah, for unknown reasons, took his sons Abram and Nahor and his grandson Lot and left Ur, intending to travel to the relatively primitive land of Canaan. However, the family only made it as far as Haran, in the northwest area of Mesopotamia. (Note that, in Hebrew, *Haran* the son and *Haran* the city

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are spelled differently.) Terah died in Haran, leaving Abraham with his barren wife Sarah, Nahor, and his grandson Lot in this foreign city.

Summary

- As soon as Noah and his family left the vessel, they fell into sin
- As people began to repopulate the land, they reverted to their old ways; they even sought to exalt themselves
- God thwarted their plans by breaking up their unity
- The second genealogy parallels the first, which contains the line of righteous men descended from Seth to Noah; it strongly hints that God has another plan to restore humankind

The first eleven chapters end with hope that isn't seen. Terah intended to go to Canaan, but he stopped short and died in Haran. Abram, his oldest son, was married to a woman who couldn't have children. God was working, but what he intended to do next isn't at all clear.

The Big Picture

The following is a review of Moses' purpose and the lessons drawn from the text.

Moses' overall goal was to establish the Israelites as a nation devoted to God. Beyond that, he wanted to establish God and God alone. To accomplish this, he needed to change the Israelites' world-view, laying down teachings about God, the origins of world, humankind, and setting up the Israelites as a people of special calling and destiny. *Genesis* 1–11 starts this process by explaining how God brought the world and humankind came into existence. It goes on to show how humankind corrupted themselves through the knowledge of good and evil, and why God chose Terah and his descendants for a special purpose.

The text consists of a number of smaller accounts, each with its own lessons. At the same time, they flow together to provide a bigger picture that provides the main lessons.

Putting this into a modern paraphrase, God brought the universe into existence, ordering it with what we call natural laws, and he shaped it in stages into what we see today. The ultimate purpose of this effort was humankind, whom God created in his spiritual image. God made his creation to be good; he created people to be innocent, to live in harmony, and to be under his protection.

People, however, encouraged by Satan as represented as a snake, became discontented with God's provisions and willfully violated God's command against gaining the knowledge of good and evil. God, knowing that humankind would be corrupted by this knowledge, withdrew his protection and presence. People quickly became depraved, as evidenced by the oppression of women by men, violence, and the glorification of the violent. At the same time, without God's protection, life became hard and precarious. However, a few people walked with God and remained acceptable in his sight.

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All this sickened God, but he found humankind too precious to give up on them. In a display of both judgment and benevolence, God resorted to drastic measures in an attempt to purge the wicked and to give humankind a new start. He used a godly man, Noah, and his family. God also made a solemn oath not to wipe out humankind; instead, he would tolerate them regardless of their wickedness.

This reset failed, as humankind reverted to their old ways. When they banded together and attempted to glorify themselves, God frustrated their plans. He threw them into confusion and assured that such cooperation would never again be possible.

In the midst of this chaos and wickedness, a new family line emerges. God was once again at work to save humankind, using a man, Terah, and his family. However, how God intended to work through them remained a mystery.

Epilogue

Starting in *Genesis 12*, Moses changed gears completely. He began to narrate events in the life of Terah's son Abraham, starting with great promises God made to him. Abraham would have numerous descendants. God changed Abram's name, which means *exalted father*, to Abraham, which means *father of multitudes*. These descendants would become a nation and possess the land of Canaan as their inheritance. In time, some of those descendants would become kings. Most important, *all nations* would be blessed through Abraham.

Abraham did not see the fulfillment of these promises; instead, he passed them down to his son Isaac, and Isaac passed them down to his son Jacob, whom God named Israel. *Genesis* ends with Jacob/Israel and his twelve sons living in Egypt, not Canaan, a tiny clan of around 70 people.

In *Exodus*, the Israelites had grown into twelve clans totaling perhaps two million, thus fulfilling one promise. God, using Moses, then led the Israelites out of Egypt into the desert of Sinai, where he made them into a nation, fulfilling a second promise. When God commanded the Israelites to take the land of Canaan, they rebelled, and that entire generation, including Moses, spent 40 years wandering in the desert until they all died. Only Joshua and Caleb, who had shown themselves faithful, survived.

Joshua led the next generation of Israelites as they conquered the land of Canaan, fulfilling a third promise. Hundreds of years later, God anointed Saul as king over Israel, fulfilling a fourth promise; God then raised up David as the second king over Israel, cementing that promise.

However, Israel never became a blessing to all nations. In fact, the Israelites became so unfaithful that God punished them severely, taking away their independence; they became a nation in subjection to others. In spite of this, the Israelites, now known as Jews, maintained their identity as God's chosen people. Their prophets had predicted that God would send the Messiah, or Christ, a descendant of King David, to restore David's kingdom, and the Jews longed for his coming.

Finally, 1,400 years after Moses, God sent the Christ, an ordinary man named Jesus, a direct descendant of David and the kings of Judah. God had prepared the Jews for his coming, and many of them accepted Jesus and his teaching. However, Jesus was not the Christ most Jews had expected,

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and many of their rulers did not want a Christ to come at all. The Jewish rulers arrested Jesus and had the Romans execute him on a cross, the most brutal punishment that the Romans used.

However, this was all in accordance with God's plan. Satan struck Jesus' heel, so to speak, but God, after three days and nights, raised Jesus from the dead. Jesus, by his sacrifice, finally broke the power of sin over humankind and thus struck Satan's head. Jesus, descendant of Abraham, fulfilled God's promise to bless all nations.

Why did God take so long to prepare the Israelites/Jews? God needed all this preparation because sin had so hardened humankind's hearts. God spent two thousand years instilling these ideas.

- He alone is God
- He does not need people to feed him; we need to depend on him
- He is not capricious or unreliable; he is holy and upright
- He can't be placated and then ignored; people should center their lives on him
- He is not indifferent; he loves humankind even as he detests our sin

These ideas were totally foreign to ancient peoples, and it is only through the influence of the Jews and then Christians that we understand them today.

During all those years, the Israelites/Jews became aware of their sinful rebellion. God had repeatedly blessed and punished them, but they had remained unfaithful. By the time Jesus came, they understood God and their own sinfulness, allowing some of them to fully accept Jesus' message. Once that message had established itself among the Jews, God was able to work through them to establish it among the nations. Without the Jews, that message would have never taken root.