

Journey through the Old Testament

Understanding the Purpose,
Themes, and Practical Implications
of Each Old Testament
Book of the Bible

Justin Gatlin
THOM S. RAINER, SERIES EDITOR

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Preface

Scope and Structure of This Study

THE FIRST THIRTY-NINE books of the Bible intimidate many Christians. The long genealogies, unpronounceable names, obscure laws, and complex prophecies seem all but incomprehensible to them. Even pastors sometimes appear to treat the Old Testament as little more than a stockpile of illustrations for whatever topic they've chosen to preach, or they stick to the familiar narratives about heroes of the faith.

What a tragedy! The Old Testament is a rich resource for understanding God's truth, character, and ways. It's the Bible that Peter, Paul, John—and Jesus—had in their day. The New Testament didn't spring forth out of nothing; it has deep roots in the fertile soil of the Hebrew Scriptures. Neglecting these books or misunderstanding them invites disaster.

Scope of This Work

In a book of this size, I cannot pretend to answer every question someone might have about the Old Testament. Neither can I discuss the Old Testament without considering how it looks forward to the New Testament and the hope we have in Jesus Christ. Think

of this as a field guide for the working Bible student—a handbook to help you identify important themes and features as you read the Bible text.

Each chapter has four sections. First, “The Big Picture” summarizes the main ideas of the book, the setting of its composition, and the time and places described. Second, “Digging Into” gives an outline of the book and an overview of each subdivision. Third, “Living It Out” shows some of the major theological themes of the book, designed to help you apply its truths to your life. Finally, “Questions for Review” provides some structure for reflecting on the contents of the chapter.

Structure of the Old Testament

The Old Testament includes a diverse collection of books, spanning the genres of history, poetry, wisdom literature, prophecy, and apocalypse. It typically has been arranged in one of two schemes, both of which have strengths and weaknesses. English-language Bibles follow the structure of the second-century BC Greek translation of the Old Testament, known as the Septuagint (LXX). Under this scheme, the Old Testament has five sections: Pentateuch (Genesis—Deuteronomy), History (Joshua—Esther), Poetry (Job—Song of Songs), Major Prophets (Isaiah—Daniel), and Minor Prophets (Hosea—Malachi). For this book, we will use instead the traditional Jewish order, the one Jesus probably used. It has three parts: Law (Genesis—Deuteronomy), Prophets (including the Former Prophets: Joshua, Judges, 1 Samuel—2 Kings; and the Latter Prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Hosea—Malachi); and the Writings (Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and 1–2 Chronicles).

PREFACE

This study will spend roughly equal time on each of the three genres—Law, Prophets, and Writings. Our approach will allow us to consider each genre as a whole before delving into each section, and to reflect on presenting Jesus from each type of literature. In studying Exodus, for example, you can quickly read the chapter on the Law to orient yourself to that genre, then read the chapter on Exodus to get specifics, and then the chapter on “Jesus in the Law” to help you apply it.

As you begin your study, remember that no substitute exists for spending time in the text of the Bible itself. Think of this book as a map or tourist guide to help you find your way around. Nothing, however, can compare to walking around and experiencing it for yourself. The Bible is unique because you can always talk to the author. Saturate your time in prayer, stay close to the Word of God, and use this book as a tool to help you become the person God has made you to be, for his glory.

Introduction

The Story of the Old Testament

MANY RELIGIONS HAVE created myths that try to explain a spiritual world separate from physical reality. Stories of their gods describe how things came to be, unattached to any specific moment in history.

Israel's Scriptures do not work that way. They do not describe symbolic events or a cycle repeating forever without resolution, but instead tell a *story*—a story with a beginning, a middle, and hints of a coming end. Trying to understand the Old Testament without understanding this story is like listening to a Winston Churchill speech without knowing about the Second World War. You might understand his words, notice the clever rhetorical devices he used, and admire the strength of his oratory, but you would never really understand what he said and why. He delivered his speeches at specific moments in history, after some key events and before others. He gave them to specific people with particular needs, strengths, and weaknesses. When we understand what Churchill's speeches meant in their own time, they take on a timeless quality. The Bible is much like that. To understand its parts correctly, we must gain some sense of its chronology.

In the beginning, God created. God created physical reality as a cathedral of his glory, not as an inconvenience we need to escape. As David put it in Psalm 19:1: “The heavens proclaim the glory of God. The skies display his craftsmanship.” The crown jewel of this creation was humanity, made in God’s image, designed to represent him to the rest of the universe. The Lord made man from the dust of the earth below and filled him with the breath of God above. God placed him as a bridge between the two spheres of reality: reigning over the creation and worshiping the creator. The man and his wife lived in peace and plenty in a garden planted in Eden (the Hebrew word for paradise). God blessed them to be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, govern it, and enjoy every plant as food.

God forbade them from eating the fruit of only one tree: the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Respecting that boundary was a way of acknowledging God’s right to reign. Rejecting the limit and setting themselves up as gods would cut them off from his blessing and lead to death for both them and their descendants. As we know from our imperfect world, they chose wrongly.

A serpent tempted the woman in the Garden of Eden, planting in her mind seeds of doubt about God’s goodness. Would they *really* die? Was God *really* so generous? Or did he just feel threatened by the idea of mankind becoming like him? The word God had spoken at the beginning created life and order, but the serpent’s words brought only death and chaos. The identity of this serpent remains unclear throughout the Old Testament, but Revelation 20:2 finally names the culprit: “the devil, Satan.” Adam and Eve chose the devil’s words over God’s, the couple was sentenced to die, angels expelled them from the Garden, and God cursed the whole of creation.

We might expect this to end the story. The rebellious man and

woman deserved immediate death. Had that occurred, of course, then I would not be alive to write this book and you would not be around to read it. God's immediate reaction to their sin, even in his judgment, was mercy. The man would struggle to bring food from the ground in a world now cursed with thorns and thistles, but he would survive. The woman would endure great pain in childbirth, but she would bring forth children, humanity would endure, and a descendant of hers would one day crush the head of the serpent. Adam named his wife Eve, the mother of all who live, confident that God would fulfill his promise. Responding to his faith, God provided the couple with a covering of animal skins, even as he exiled them. Sin has consequences, but God took the initiative to show grace to the unworthy.

Banished from the Garden, Adam and Eve began to carry out their responsibility to multiply. Their firstborn son, Cain, murdered his younger brother, Abel, and God exiled Cain. The couple's hope moved to their next son, Seth. Would he be the seed of Eve, destined to defeat the serpent? Sadly, no. Genesis 5 picks up a sad refrain, repeated over and over again: "and then he died." Adam died. Seth died. Enosh died. Kenan died. And so death reigned in a world tarnished by rebellion. Worse still, death did not solve the problem of sin. Even though every burial proclaimed its consequences, the world continued to worsen until God decided to wipe the slate clean. Noah, a man of faith and righteousness on a planet "corrupt" and "filled with violence" (Genesis 6:11), built an ark. That boat carried Noah, his family, and representatives of all the animals through a flood that destroyed everything else.

God did not need to keep Noah and these animals alive. The one who spoke the world into existence could just as easily have started again, but he didn't. He maintained a remnant of the descendants of Adam and Eve to ultimately crush the head of the

serpent through Eve's child, because God never breaks his promises. God delivered Noah and his family, reformed the world, and made a solemn vow never again to destroy it with a flood. He then renewed his original promises: Noah would rule over the creation (now humans could eat meat, apparently for the first time), and he should be fruitful and multiply to fill the earth.

When Israel's pagan neighbors made a covenant—a special agreement that created a family bond between two parties—they typically asked their gods to enforce it. But Israel uniquely believed that their God chose to enter into covenant with human beings, binding himself to a special relationship with them, which he would never break.

After such a dramatic episode, how long would the world remember the lesson that sin brings death and disaster? Not long. After about five generations, humans had refused to refill the earth. They decided instead to build a tower to bring themselves fame and stability. Once again, people rejected the responsibility God had given them and chose to try to take his place. God cast down the tower of Babel, confused the people's languages, and sent them out to populate the earth—but even this judgment reflected his mercy. By dividing humanity, God advanced his plan to reconcile with humanity. Rather than dealing with all human beings at once, he called Abram (about 2140 BC) to serve as his instrument to restore humanity's role as a royal priesthood.

Abram and his wife, Sarai, had no children and no kingdom, and their names would have faded into the mists of history had God not graciously chosen them. By faith, Abram journeyed to an unfamiliar land that God promised to give to his descendants. Before, God had covenanted with all humanity, but now he dealt with a single family. The promise to Abram included the blessing of fruitfulness, a new home, and assurance that he would be a

blessing to every nation on the earth. In many ways, God's covenant with Abram (eventually renamed Abraham) echoed what had existed before. But this is no case of the wheel of history spinning forever. Through Abraham, God took another step toward the revolution that would one day rescue the whole world.

But how could God keep that promise? Not only did Abraham have few descendants; he and Sarai had none at all. After many years and many more twists and turns, God changed her name to Sarah and gave the elderly couple a son named Isaac. God's special relationship would not continue with any child but Isaac. Isaac had two sons, Jacob and Esau, and God continued his special relationship with Jacob. This narrowing stopped for a time in Jacob, renamed Israel. His twelve sons became the nation spotlighted in the rest of the Old Testament.

It should not surprise us to learn that things did not go well. When the brothers became jealous of their father's favorite son, Joseph, they sold him as a slave. Traders took him to Egypt in about 1900 BC, and he lived as a slave until his master's wife falsely accused him of attempted rape. Joseph then spent several years in prison.

Does it seem like all this pain and sin hints that God's plan had gone off the rails somewhere? It hadn't; the Lord still had everything well in hand. The king of Egypt had some troubling dreams that neither he nor his servants could interpret. The royal cupbearer, formerly imprisoned alongside Joseph, told the king that Joseph had correctly interpreted his own dream and that he might help Pharaoh. Servants hurriedly brought Joseph before the king, and Joseph said that though *he* could not interpret dreams, God could. Joseph then predicted seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine and advised the Egyptians to stockpile their resources to prepare for the difficult days to come. Joseph, the

former slave and a prisoner, at that moment became the second-highest ruler in Egypt, below only the king. When the predicted famine arrived, the sons of Jacob traveled to Egypt to buy food. In God's mercy, their sin had saved their lives. They eventually reunited with Joseph, and the whole family came to live in Egypt.

Egypt, though, was not the land God had promised to Abraham, nor was it to be the family's final home. The family remained there for four hundred years while the sins of those living in the Promised Land continued to pile up. During this long wait, the Egyptians went from honoring the Israelites to enslaving them. In time, God raised up a deliverer, Moses. God revealed himself to Moses as Yahweh, customarily translated as "the LORD." Through ten miraculous signs, the Lord showed the Egyptians he was the true God and that all of their idols were merely powerless imposters. Pharaoh himself, worshiped as a god, became the focus of the climactic tenth plague, when the Israelites smeared the blood of sacrificed lambs on their doors so God's wrath would pass over them. That night every Egyptian firstborn died, from Pharaoh's house down to that of the lowest slave. And again we see the truth: Sin leads to death and chaos, while following God's word brings blessing and life.

The Lord himself led the Israelites out of Egypt, revealing his presence through a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. God parted the Red Sea, enabling the Israelites to walk to freedom on dry ground; but he closed the water on the Egyptian army, drowning them all. God gave Israel a great victory without them ever raising a spear. The Lord took them to Mount Sinai and made a covenant with them, summarized in the Ten Commandments. The people immediately broke these commandments, choosing to make a golden calf to worship. Again, they abandoned their proper post as God's representatives and tried to

reign on their own. And once more, God faced a decision: Should he start over? Moses prayed for the Israelites and asked God to continue to use this flawed nation. God did so, leading them to the land he had promised to Abraham.

Unfortunately, once the people reached this land, they refused to go in. They feared the giants they saw in the land, convinced themselves they could not triumph, and doubted God would fulfill his promises. Both judgment and grace came in response. The generation that made this decision—everyone forty and older, except Joshua and Caleb, who knew God would keep his word—would die in the desert and never enter the land. Nevertheless, God would continue to go with Israel, provide for them, and ultimately give the land to their children. Forty years later, when another sin excluded even Moses from the land, Joshua led the people into the spot they had longed for.

During Joshua's lifetime, things went well. After he died, a series of short-term deliverers, called *judges*, led the nation. The people continued in a cycle of idolatry, judgment, repentance, and deliverance. Repeatedly, the people forgot what God had done for them and turned back to the manmade gods who could offer them no help. The last of these judges, a prophet named Samuel, appointed Israel's first two kings. In response to the people's pleas, he anointed Saul as the first king of Israel. After Saul failed, God appointed a new king, David, "a man after [the Lord's] own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14). God made a covenant with David that he would give him an eternal dynasty, protect the nation's land, and bless them with rest from their enemies. If this trio of blessing, land, and descendants sounds familiar, it should! These were the same covenant promises given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

The New Testament tells us that one particular descendant of David would fulfill these promises. Jesus, the son of a virgin,

conquered the serpent, perfectly kept the terms of the Law, and as a descendant of Abraham blessed every nation. The covenant God made with David continues to advance the story line of history, bringing together through Jesus all the promised blessings and obligations.

It would not happen quickly, however. Under the reign of David's grandson, the nation tore itself apart, with ten tribes becoming the nation of Israel in the north and the two southern tribes in the south calling themselves Judah (after the predominant tribe). The Lord raised up prophets to rebuke both nations for their failure to obey the Mosaic covenant, but the people generally refused to repent. Ultimately, Assyria conquered the northern kingdom around 722 BC, while Judah fell to Babylon around 586 BC. The Babylonians captured the last ruler of David's dynasty and destroyed Jerusalem, including the Temple. It seemed sin had finally thwarted God's promises.

Even then, however, God announced seventy years of judgment, not national annihilation. In the meanwhile, various prophets continued to speak of a future restoration when God would make a new covenant with the people, not written on stone tablets but on their hearts. That covenant would bring forgiveness, fellowship with God, and peace. In this new covenant, the whole world would come to know the Lord through Israel, thus bringing to a climax the promise made to Abraham. This new covenant would fulfill all the promised blessings that came before it.

In about 538 BC, the first wave of exiles returned to Israel. Under the leadership of individuals such as Ezra, Nehemiah, and Zerubbabel, the people rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem and the Temple. This Temple, however, did not much resemble the one Solomon had built; the oldest among them wept at the sight of its vast inferiority. This world hardly looked like the last age

predicted by the prophets, when the woman's seed would rise up and crush the serpent, and God would write his law on people's hearts, destroying sin forever. Judah continued to rebel, and the final prophets denounced many of the same vices the first prophets had.

And yet, the Old Testament does not end with defeat, but with a cliff-hanger. God will remember the righteous, judge the wicked, and set his people free. But first he will send Elijah to come and prepare the nation for his return. The Old Testament ends with bated breath, waiting for the coming of the Lord, who will bring about a new covenant and fulfill all his promises.

For four hundred years, the people waited for history to move forward, until it finally did in the ministry of John the Baptist. But still their eyes strained forward, hoping for the day when the King himself would reign in their midst and renew heaven and earth.

PART I
THE LAW

THE BIBLE BEGINS with a section called the Torah. Traditionally, *Torah* has been translated into English as “Law,” which while correct is also inadequate. For us, the word *law* means a set of restrictions and the penalties for disobedience. These books certainly include that, but they also hold much more.

The first five books of the Bible contain laws, stories, poems, descriptions of ceremonies, and even calendars. Understood correctly, the Hebrew word *Torah* means “Instruction.” Through it, God trains the nation how to live, including laws in the narrow sense (don’t murder, make this sacrifice under these circumstances) and much more. Though few explicit laws appear in Genesis or at the beginning of Exodus, these books are still Torah. We might consider them sacred history, showing how things are and how they ought to be. Even in the books containing more explicit laws,

narrative constantly interrupts to both shape and interpret the ordinances.

This legal code makes sense only in the context of a people confident that their God had revealed himself and would continue to move in history. In a way, the whole Bible is Torah; and in fact, the word sometimes means exactly that (Isaiah 1:10; John 12:34). The Pentateuch fulfills this role uniquely, however, introducing the principles and perspectives that the rest of the Bible fleshes out.

Genesis (“In the Beginning” in Hebrew), the first book of the Law, describes the creation of the world and the lives of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. Four centuries pass between the end of Genesis and the beginning of Exodus.

Exodus (“These Are the Names” in Hebrew) describes God’s deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt and God’s covenant with the nation at Sinai.

Leviticus (“And He Called” in Hebrew) describes many of the practical elements of Israelite worship.

Numbers (“In the Wilderness” in Hebrew) recounts the four decades of the nation’s rebellious wandering in the desert.

Deuteronomy (“These Are the Words” in Hebrew, but “Second Law” in Greek) consists of Moses’ farewell to the Israelites and the reaffirmation of the covenant with the new generation that would enter the land.

Author and Date

For most of history, scholars accepted Moses as the author of the Law. Within the Old Testament itself, the Law is called “the instructions Moses had given them” (Joshua 8:32). In the New Testament (John 5:45-47; Matthew 19:7-9), Jesus affirms this understanding. A handful of passages, however, undermine a simplistic understanding of Mosaic authorship. The clearest example

occurs in Deuteronomy 34:5-6: “So Moses, the servant of the LORD, died there in the land of Moab, just as the LORD had said. The LORD buried him in a valley near Beth-peor in Moab, but to this day no one knows the exact place.” It seems strange that Moses would record his own funeral, and stranger still that he would say that no one knows his burial place “to this day.” Clearly, the Torah has a few later editorial additions, but the biblical testimony seems plain that Moses is the primary human author of the Law.

If we take seriously the account of Moses’ life in Exodus, we see he would have been uniquely qualified to write the Torah. Stephen reminds us in Acts 7:22, “Moses was taught all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was powerful in both speech and action.” Moses’ direct encounters with the Lord gave purpose to his Egyptian academic training, adding to the latter spiritual truths from God himself. And while wandering with his people in the desert for forty years, he had plenty of time to write.

The overwhelming consensus of Mosaic authorship stood until the nineteenth century, when a documentary hypothesis arose. In its basic form, this theory holds that four groups of people wrote the Law in layers, represented by the letters JEDP. These scholars generally doubt the historical reliability of the Old Testament. In their view, the Law came into existence much later than Moses’ era, with each succeeding layer reflecting new developments in Jewish theology. Though a complete analysis of the documentary hypothesis lies far beyond the scope of this book, we should note that advocates of the theory disagree on which parts of the Law come from which supposed source. Their highly subjective distinctions conveniently support whichever theory of Jewish origins the author may hold. Conservative Bible students who believe an all-powerful God has revealed himself in the Scriptures have no reason to abandon the traditional view. Later contributors, perhaps

Joshua, made additions and edits, also under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. We can affirm both the unity of the Torah and its diversity.¹

History in the Law

If we accept Mosaic authorship, then we have eyewitness testimony for the events of Exodus 3 to the end of Deuteronomy. Since “the LORD would speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend” (Exodus 33:11), Moses could write knowledgeably about anything God told him (see also 2 Timothy 3:16). The books of the Law, of course, do not satisfy a modern historian’s definition of history. Think of Genesis alone. In eleven short chapters, Moses glosses over all of human history up to Abraham. In the next thirty-nine chapters, he tells the story of Abraham up to his great-grandchildren. Genesis skips altogether the rise of the Egyptian monarchy, the development of written language, and the invention of weapons of war. Instead, it details a family squabble over which son would receive the greater inheritance. Moses shows no interest in fair and balanced reporting of world history. We might better think of him telling a theological story or preaching a sermon about how God acted for his people in and through the past. These events really occurred in space, time, and history, but Moses has little interest in satisfying our curiosity about them. Instead, through the failures and successes of those who have gone before us, he wants to teach us about God and ourselves.

Sometimes that means the Bible does not report things the way we would. It uses round numbers (compare Genesis 15:13 and Exodus 12:40). It calls places by names not used until later (compare Genesis 12:8 and Genesis 28:19). We see examples of figurative language and anthropomorphism (Exodus 15:8). We lose something vital, however, if we dismiss the Bible as ahistorical

simply because it lacks the modern historical style. The reality of events portrayed in the Law lays the foundation for the rest of the Bible. The Lord did not command the Israelites to turn from idols because of some abstract idea, but because he had brought them out of Egypt (2 Kings 17:36). Isaiah rooted his trust that God would return his people to the land in the truth that nothing could be too hard for the one who stretched out the heavens (Isaiah 44:24). Because the Israelites believed their God had acted in history, they expected him to act again.

Genesis

The White Rabbit put on his spectacles.

“Where shall I begin, please your Majesty?” he asked.

“Begin at the beginning,” the King said, very gravely,

“and go on till you come to the end: then stop.”

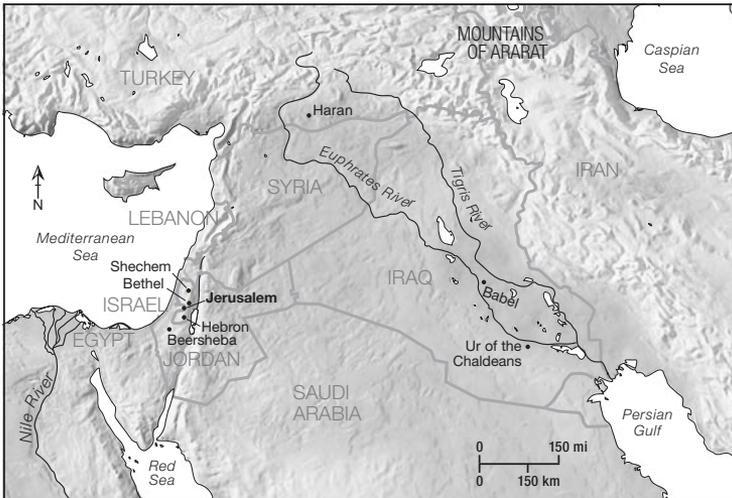
LEWIS CARROLL

Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland

The Big Picture

Moses wrote Genesis (“In the Beginning” in Hebrew) during the Exodus (circa 1440 BC). It covers history from the creation of heaven and earth to the death of Joseph (circa 1860 BC). This single book surveys a longer period than the rest of the Bible combined.

Genesis contains two basic units: Genesis 1–11 deals with everyone on earth, while Genesis 12–50 focuses on Abraham and his descendants. Though we cannot precisely determine the geography of the first eleven chapters, the saga of Abraham and his descendants moves from Ur of the Chaldees (present-day Iraq) to Haran (present-day Syria) to Canaan (present-day Israel) and finally to Egypt. The New Testament references Genesis more than



Modern names and boundaries are shown in gray.

Key Places in Genesis

two hundred times, and this first book of the Bible lays out the major themes developed in the rest of Scripture.¹

The Bible spends little time on things that intrigue many modern people (the age of the Earth, the Fall, the Flood, and the tower of Babel). Instead, God emphasizes one man and his family—but this is not just *any* family. He highlights Abraham’s descendants, who will bless the whole world. From the line of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, a Savior came who offers us all a new beginning (Galatians 3:16).

Digging Into Genesis

Structure

Ten uses of *tôledôt*—a Hebrew word rendered “the account of” in the New Living Translation and “the generations of” in older translations—organize the book of Genesis. Genesis 11:27, for

example, says: “This is the account of Terah’s family” before introducing the story of Terah’s son, Abraham.

1. Creation (Genesis 1:1–2:3)
2. The Heavens and the Earth (Genesis 2:4–4:26)
 - a. Life in Eden (Genesis 2:4-25)
 - b. Fall of Humanity (Genesis 3:1-24)
 - c. Consequences of the Fall (Genesis 4:1-26)
3. Descendants of Adam (Genesis 5:1–6:8)
 - a. Genealogy from Adam to Noah (Genesis 5:1-32)
 - b. Corruption of Noah’s Society (Genesis 6:1-8)
4. Life of Noah (Genesis 6:9–9:29)
 - a. Noah Rescued from the Flood (Genesis 6:9–8:22)
 - b. God’s Covenant with Noah (Genesis 9:1-17)
 - c. Noah’s Curse of Canaan (Genesis 9:18-29)
5. Descendants of Noah (Genesis 10:1–11:9)
 - a. Table of Nations (Genesis 10:1-32)
 - b. Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9)
6. Descendants of Shem (Genesis 11:10-26)
7. Descendants of Terah (Genesis 11:27–25:11)
 - a. God’s Blessings on Abraham (Genesis 11:27–15:21)
 - b. The Consequences of Sin in the Chosen Family (Genesis 16:1–20:18)
 - c. Life of Isaac (Genesis 21:1–25:11)

8. Descendants of Ishmael (Genesis 25:12-18)

9. Descendants of Isaac (Genesis 25:19–35:29)
 - a. Jacob and Esau (Genesis 25:19–28:9)
 - b. Jacob in Exile (Genesis 28:10–32:32)
 - c. Jacob Back in the Promised Land
(Genesis 33:1–35:29)

10. Descendants of Esau (Genesis 36:1–37:1)

11. Descendants of Jacob (Genesis 37:2–50:26)
 - a. Joseph in the Promised Land (Genesis 37:2-36)
 - b. Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38:1-30)
 - c. Joseph in Egypt (Genesis 39:1–41:57)
 - d. Reunion of the Chosen Family
(Genesis 42:1–47:31)
 - e. The Blessings and Death of Jacob and Joseph
(Genesis 48:1–50:26)

From Creation to Terah (Genesis 1:1-11:26)

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,” Moses writes (Genesis 1:1). Moses does not explain or justify God; the Lord is simply there, ready to act according to his own will and by his own power. Unlike in many pagan myths, God fights no battle before creating, needs to defeat no enemies, and gathers no materials. God merely speaks to make the world from nothing. He creates the basic structures in the first three days (light, sea/sky, land/vegetation) and fills each of them during the next three days (sun/moon/stars, fish/birds, animals/people). Repeatedly, he declares this new creation “good.”

The world God creates points to the glory of its maker. It also serves as a temple of his glory, but what is a temple without worshipers? God crowns his creation with worshipers on the sixth day, when he makes humanity in his image. Theologians debate the meaning of the “image of God.” At least, the term suggests that people represent God and are made like him to worship and govern his creation. God decrees the world “very good” and rests on the seventh day.

God gives his representatives one requirement: They may “freely eat the fruit of every tree in the garden—except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Genesis 2:16-17). A serpent (identified as Satan in Revelation 12:9) deceives the woman by tempting her to doubt God’s goodness and choose herself instead, an idol who would be “like God.” Adam, although not deceived, follows her into sin (1 Timothy 2:14). For this rebellion, God exiles the pair and curses the world they steward. Cursed, yes, but not forsaken.

God makes a promise to the woman that her son will crush the head of the serpent (Genesis 3:15). Adam believes this promise and names his wife “Eve” as the mother of all who live. God provides a covering for them, although they cannot stay in his presence anymore. Even in their grief, they have hope.

The consequences of sin spread quickly. Adam’s son, Cain, murders his brother, Abel. Humanity soon grows so wicked that God determines to destroy every living thing with a flood. He warns a man of faith, Noah, and commands him to build an ark capable of rescuing Noah, his family, and representatives of every animal species. For forty days and forty nights, water rises on the earth. When it finally recedes, the survivors land in present-day Turkey, where God makes a covenant (see *Living It Out* below) that he will never again flood the whole world. But the problem

of sin goes too deep to be resolved even by wiping the slate clean. Noah and his sons are still sinners.

The rest of the Bible describes how far God needs to go to rescue us from ourselves. After the flood, God reissues the blessing-command he had given to creation to be fruitful and multiply (Genesis 1:28; 9:1). But within a generation, the people rebel again. In the tower of Babel, they determine to make themselves a name and permanent dwelling instead of filling the earth. God topples the tower, confuses their languages, and scatters them as diverse nations across the world—but this is no final rejection of humanity. Dividing the nations is God’s master strategy for uniting them.

From Abraham to Joseph (Genesis 11:27-50:26)

To rescue the world, God needs to get to the root of the problem: the human heart. To do so, he turns to a man named Abram in the ancient metropolis of Ur. God calls him to leave this place of comfort and go to a land he has never seen. Abram has nothing but God’s promise that his descendants will be a great nation who will be blessed and who will bless all the families of the earth. But God’s Word is enough, and he goes.

Years after their journey, Abram’s wife, Sarai, has grown old but still has no child. God comes to Abram in a vision and reassures him that he and Sarai will have a son. From that son, his descendants will be as uncountable as the stars in the sky. Abram believes God, and the Lord “counted him as righteous because of his faith” (Genesis 15:6). God seals this promise with a covenant ceremony; but though most covenants involve an exchange of commitments between two parties, God completes the ceremony alone, while Abram sleeps. His irrevocable vow is unconditional. The land will be Abram’s, the blessing having been secured by God himself.

As the years roll on with no fulfilled promise in sight, Sarai and Abram imagine they can acquire God's promised blessings in their own way. Abram impregnates Sarai's servant, Hagar. God rejects this approach; Sarai herself will give birth to the promised child, a miracle baby. Their lack of faith does not nullify God's faithfulness. He renames the couple Abraham and Sarah and gives them the covenant of circumcision to symbolize their unique status before him. Isaac, the promised child, is born when Sarah reaches ninety years of age. The fulfillment of the promise has begun.

But in Genesis 22:2, the promise again seems imperiled. God instructs Abraham to go to the land of Moriah and there sacrifice his son, "your only son—yes, Isaac, whom you love so much." Later, God explicitly forbids human sacrifice (Leviticus 20:2-3). But before that revelation, Abraham is ready to comply, believing the promises of God so firmly that he tells his servants, "we will come right back" (Genesis 22:5). At the pivotal moment, God speaks, stops Abraham, and provides a ram to sacrifice in Isaac's place. Of course, this story becomes even more poignant when we read the New Testament and see that God's own Son, his only son whom he loves so much, is the Lamb—but unlike Isaac, there is no substitute for him. He dies in my place, your place, Abraham and Isaac's place.

Isaac grows up, marries Rebekah (Genesis 24), and the couple has two fraternal twins: Esau and Jacob. Esau is the elder and the favorite of Isaac, but God chooses Jacob to carry on the divine promises (Genesis 25:23). Jacob certainly lives up to his name, a pun on the word *deceiver*. When the whole family believes Isaac is on his deathbed, Jacob and Rebekah hatch a scheme to trick Isaac into blessing Jacob in Esau's place (Genesis 27). Fearful of his brother's wrath, Jacob flees to the land of Paddan-aram. What a

depressing turn in the narrative! God has brought Abraham to the Promised Land, and now his grandson is going backward. Jacob falls in love with a woman named Rachel and works for her scheming father for seven years, intending to marry her. But the deceiver is deceived, and instead Jacob is tricked into marrying her sister, Leah. In exchange for another seven years of labor, Jacob is allowed to marry Rachel. Between his wives and their two servants, Jacob fathers twelve sons and a daughter.

Eventually, Jacob returns to the land God has promised his family. Along the way, he encounters God at the river Jabbok; he leaves profoundly changed (but still imperfect), and receives a new name—Israel (Genesis 32). After years of enmity and separation, he reconciles with Esau and eventually makes his way home to discover that his father, Isaac, is still alive. Together with Esau, he later is able to bury Isaac in the same plot of land where Abraham, Sarah, and Rebekah were buried (Genesis 49:31).

The final section of Genesis deals with Israel's sons. Jacob's childhood did not teach him the dangers of a father's favoritism. He loves Joseph more than his other children (as a technique for remembering the order of the patriarchs, notice that their names go in alphabetical order: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph). Israel gives Joseph an expensive robe, provoking the jealousy of his other sons. When Joseph dreams prophecies of his brothers serving him, rage overwhelms them. They sell him into Egyptian slavery and convince their father he has died.

God blesses Joseph even in Egypt. He is soon promoted to supervise other slaves, but his good fortune doesn't last. His master's wife propositions him, and when he rejects her, she falsely accuses him of attempted rape. In prison, he interprets the dreams of two of Pharaoh's servants. One of the two, the cupbearer, is released, just as Joseph predicted. The cupbearer had promised to

put in a good word for Joseph with Pharaoh and secure his release, but the man forgets Joseph for another two years.

Despite it all, God remains sovereign. When the time is right, God sends Pharaoh a troubling dream that none of the royal experts can interpret. The cupbearer remembers Joseph, and Pharaoh calls him from prison to interpret the dream. The dream predicts seven years of plenty, followed by seven years of famine. Pharaoh entrusts Joseph with preparations for the coming calamity and gives him authority over everyone in the kingdom, except for himself. When the years of famine begin, as predicted, Jacob (now called Israel) and his other sons come to Egypt to buy grain. In the mystery of providence, God uses their sin to save their lives. Joseph gives us a picture of Christ, who died even for those who killed him (Luke 23:34).

Joseph reveals himself to his brothers and they reconcile. Israel and his whole family move to Egypt. Israel dies there, but his children take his body to the Promised Land. Joseph also dies in Egypt, where his body is embalmed. He knows the whole nation will one day move to inherit the land God has promised them, and so he instructs the Hebrews to take his body with them when they leave. What faith (Hebrews 11:22)!

Genesis ends on a cliff-hanger. God's promises remain true, despite the failures and sins of his people—but they also remain unrealized. Though God has blessed Joseph and provided for the family of Israel, the best is yet to come.

Living It Out

Family: The family is a key part of God's good plan for us. Adam and Eve are literally one flesh, and in marriage, God makes a husband and wife into one person (Genesis 2:24). The church, Christ's bride, is his body and shares in his righteousness and

blessings (Ephesians 5:25-33). Twice, God commands people to fill the earth with offspring. This is called a blessing (Genesis 1:28; 9:1), but is also an obligation and a gift.

Sovereignty: Genesis does not describe God as one of many gods competing with other great powers. Instead, he is the all-powerful Lord of all. From the first page, where he speaks and makes the world (Psalm 33:6-9), to the last, where even the sin of Joseph’s brothers accomplishes God’s purposes, we cannot escape the truth that God remains in control. The same God made the world from nothing and brought children from the barren womb of Sarah. The problems of the whole world and the plight of one family both fall under his care. Romans 8:28—“And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them”—is no new doctrine for the New Testament, but an eternal truth.

Covenant: Covenants, common in the ancient world, were agreements that created a kinship relationship between two parties, with clearly defined roles and responsibilities for each. Pagan nations around Israel prayed for their gods to enforce their covenants, but the Lord did not merely witness the covenants he made with the Hebrews; he personally entered a sacred relationship with them.² Unlike an ancient king forming a treaty, God needed nothing from his people. He chose to have a relationship with us anyway, giving us promises purely by grace. Whether he made those promises to Noah, Abraham, or us, God’s sovereignty means he can always fulfill his Word—and his holiness means that he always will.

Faith: Closely tied to the idea of covenant is faith, confidence in God’s faithfulness to his covenant. Trust lies behind the scenes

of Noah's long construction project but comes to the forefront in Genesis 15:6: "And Abram believed the LORD, and the LORD counted him as righteous because of his faith." Of the twelve individuals described in the "Hall of Faith" in Hebrews 11, eight come from the book of Genesis. Hebrews 11:39-40 puts it like this: "All these people earned a good reputation because of their faith, yet none of them received all that God had promised. For God had something better in mind for us, so that they would not reach perfection without us."

QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

1. How does the book of Genesis sketch out the major themes of the Bible?
2. Why does the author of Genesis draw attention to the character flaws of his central characters?
3. What conclusions can you draw from the comparative length of chapters 1-11 and 12-50?