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Genesis 1–11 in its Ancient Context

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Introduction

Genesis 1–11 is the grand prologue to the Old Testament account of God and his people Israel. Here Israel's God is introduced, not as another tribal or national deity, but as the creator of all that is, who forms and sustains the created order and entrusts the welfare of the earth to humans, to whom he grants unique status and authority in relation to the rest of creation. There is no mention of Israel in these chapters, not even in the 'table of nations' (ch 10), but the storyline leads on through 'fall' and flood and the emergence of clans and nations to the call of Abraham as the ancestor, through Isaac, of the Israelite people. This is momentous both for the people of the Old Testament and also for the theology of the New Testament, according to which Abraham is 'the father of all those who believe' (Rom 4.11).

In these few chapters, sometimes known as the 'Genesis protohistory,' we encounter major topics and themes that mostly reverberate throughout the rest of the Old Testament: the true worship of God; humans as moral beings accountable to their creator; paradise and its loss; the beginnings of human civilization; the cataclysm of the flood; history thereafter based on a covenant between God and humanity; and the rise of people groups and of language differentiation.

A range of literary material—principally narrative, but also including genealogies, the table of nations, and even snatches of poetry—is represented in these chapters. Modern academic study of the Pentateuch has for the most part concluded that Genesis 1–11 is composite, in the sense that it comprises more than one literary source. Certain differences, including that of perspective, between the first and second creation narratives in chapters 1 and 2, would certainly suggest that earlier sources lie behind the present text, even if the common assertion that 'Genesis has two accounts of creation' is an oversimplification. Nevertheless, it is the finalized text as it has come down to us, with its clear indications of structural planning and thematic development, which should form the basis for interpretation and discussion.

Just the Beginning

Although the use of a term such as 'protohistory' might suggest that Genesis 1–11 forms a separate unit within the Book of Genesis, the biblical text itself does not indicate a break at the end of Genesis 11. That is why, for example,

we are told in the brief 'family history of Terah' in 11.27–32 that Abra(ha)m's wife Sarai (later Sarah) was unable to conceive: this anticipates a major feature of the story of Abraham and Sarah in the chapters that follow.

There are also headings dotted throughout Genesis that indicate that the whole book is to be read as a unity. The so-called '*Toledot* formulae'—'These are the generations (*toledot*) of…' (or, 'This is the account of…')—occur at 2.4; [5.1]; 6.9; 10.1; 11.10, 27, and at several other points in later Genesis. This idea of an unbroken narrative does not stop with Genesis. In fact, Genesis 1–11 stands at the head of a continuous biblical storyline that begins with creation and runs on into historical time, continuing right down to the destruction of the Israelite kingdoms and the emergence after the Babylonian exile of the Jewish province of Yehud.

The Near Eastern Context

As we read Genesis 1–11 we should remember that these chapters have as their religious and cultural background the world of the ancient near east. It is important to give attention to this near eastern context for at least a couple of reasons. First, not to do so would be as blinkered and unsatisfactory as studying the history of an English county without ever taking into account the existence and influence of larger entities such as England and the United Kingdom. Secondly, it is in making comparisons and contrasts between one text or tradition and another that we are able to see most clearly those features that are special to the Old Testament text. It is in such features that we are most likely to find the unique contribution—the message—of the biblical writer. It is a common assumption among non-specialists that these Genesis texts predate most of the ancient near eastern traditions with which they are compared in academic literature. This is not so. Much of what we shall be considering on the near eastern side comes from, or can be shown to have its roots in, the long period of documented near eastern history before the first biblical texts were composed. This alone makes comparative study between the biblical and non-biblical material both a highly desirable line of approach and also a rich source of information and insight into what the biblical writers wished to convey.

Comparative study of the biblical and non-biblical material provides a rich source of information and insight

The message of the biblical writers is by no means limited to positive statements and portrayals of people and events. Just as important sometimes are the criticisms, explicit or implicit, of views commonly held among neighbouring peoples (and sometimes among Israelites as well). As Helmut Thielicke observed, 'Faith believes *against* as well as *in*' (italics mine). It is not the practice of Genesis to flag up the points

at which it reflects or, more often, rejects the world views of its neighbours, but many comparisons and contrasts are there to be discovered. Creation from dust or clay, the well-watered paradise, the malign serpent, long-lived antediluvians, and the great flood in chapters 6–8 are among the more obvious features that can be paralleled in other near eastern texts.

To have some idea of the ways in which the biblical writers *differ from* the prevailing near eastern 'doctrine' is, as we have noted, crucial for a proper understanding of what they may or may not be saying. This relates closely to the question of authorial purpose or intention, and it is especially important when considering a text whose readers in most periods of history have tended to overburden it with purposes or meanings, whether in the interests of theology or history or the prevailing science. Texts often have more than one purpose but, if we recognize that one of the purposes of Genesis 1–11 is to unsay widely held views, the pressure to identify other purposes (that may never have been intended anyway) may be reduced.

The unsaying of established views can be seen at a number of points

The unsaying of established views can be seen, or at the very least suspected, at a number of points. On the subject of creation, for example, Genesis differs from its neighbours and even from other parts *of the Old Testament* in key respects. In the account of creation in the Babylonian text *Enuma Elish* ('When on high'), the heavens and the earth come into being after a struggle between the young aspiring god Marduk and the sea monster Tiamat. This idea of the combat myth is reflected in poetic passages in the Old Testament: 'By his power he stilled the Sea; by his understanding he struck down [the monster] Rahab' (Job 26.12 NRSV; see also Ps 74.13–14; 89.9–10; compare Isa 27.1). But what was acceptable in the world of poetic imagination in these passages does not feature in the sober prose statement about origins in Genesis 1.

Again, it is often suggested that Gen 1.14–19 contains a kind of counter-statement against the idea that the sun and moon were deities, and not simply luminaries in the sky. The ordinary names for these heavenly bodies doubled as the personal names of the corresponding deities, so the withholding of the names in this passage could be significant. We read instead of 'the greater light' and 'the lesser light.' Since this way of referring to the sun and moon has a very occasional parallel elsewhere in near eastern texts, a polemical explanation is not universally accepted; nevertheless, there are several instances of naming earlier in the chapter (vv 5, 8, 10), and the absences in v 16 could be seen in that light. The throwaway manner in which the stars are mentioned at the end of v 16—'and the stars'—is also compatible with the idea that the heavenly bodies are being dismissed as nothing other than luminaries.

There also appears to be at the least some quiet unsaying of established viewpoints going on in Gen 1.26, 'Let us make humankind in our image.' Whatever precisely the expression 'in our image' implies, a contrast with more demeaning views of humans as lackeys of the gods seems to be involved. According to an apparently widespread view in the near east, the gods made humans to relieve themselves of some of the daily drudgery of maintaining boundary ditches and the like. Even the tilling and keeping of the Eden garden in 2.15, which was for the benefit of the humans themselves, was a cut above this kind of servile labour. And while Genesis 1 is offered as a scientific statement, however basic, of how human, animal and plant life came to exist on the earth, that gives no reason to doubt the author's ability to combine one serious intention (scientific) with another one (contrastive/counter-statement). He could 'walk and chew gum.'

As we shall see, a very credible approach to 6.1–3, the prelude to the story of the flood, is to read it as anti-mythological, as a rejection of the idea that divine beings could cohabit with humans and establish a breed of demigods or superheroes. Finally, and most pointedly of all, the story of the building of Babel in 11.1–9 subjects the great imperial city of Babylon to ridicule, portraying it as the Babel-builders' 'folly.' Here, as Genesis 1–11 is about to give way to the patriarchal narratives, we may come nearest to actual polemic. Whether or not 'polemic' is an appropriate term for any of what we have described, there can be little doubt that at various points Genesis 1–11 is 'inferentially undermining the philosophical basis for pagan myth.'[1]

The storyline of Genesis 1–11 follows a basic sequence that we find in other Mesopotamian texts

Genesis 1–11 is related to the wider world of the near east in another kind of way, for its storyline follows a basic sequence of events that we find in other Mesopotamian texts about beginnings. This featured creation, long lifespans and population growth, and punishment by deluge. The missing element in this sequence is, of course, the so-called 'fall,' which is not truly paralleled in the other traditions and is the point at which Genesis introduces a moral emphasis that is characteristic of the Old Testament as a whole.

Other Dimensions

As well as showing awareness of the near eastern dimension, the ideal reader of Genesis 1–11 will also be sensitive to the diverse kinds of material that it presents, and hence to the different ways—literary, historical, theological, comparative, inner-biblical, and so on—in which it can be approached. This might sound like an impossible undertaking, but in practice many of the insights associated with such approaches are open to any reader simply ap-

plying good sense and judgment in their reading. And if such insights do not pass the test of good sense and judgment they might be questionable anyway.

Genesis 1–11 is characterized by an economy and simplicity of language that has enabled it to reach out beyond its own cultural context to hearers and readers across the globe and down the centuries. At the same time, the biblical writers were self-consciously writing literature, and they took appropriate pleasure in crafting their texts. This can be seen in the attention given to form and structure in, for example, the creation narratives and the account of the flood, and, at a more lowly level, in the wordplay that features throughout Genesis 1–11, as in many other parts of the Old Testament. Although, historically, Hebrew emerges as a distinct language and member of the Semitic language family no earlier than the late second millennium BC, the wordplays in Genesis 1–11 are already constructed in terms of Hebrew. Adam is so called because he was taken from the ground (*ʾᵃdāmâ*, 2.7), and Eve (*ḥawwâ*) is so named because she is the mother of all living (*ḥay*, 3.20). The match is not exact in the second case, just as in a good number of other biblical etymologies (we might compare Noah, derived from the verb *nāḥam,* comfort, in 5.29). Sometimes it is difficult to be certain that the wordplay is intentional, just as might happen in speech or writing in any language. For example, when 'the woman' (*hāʾishshâ*) says, 'The serpent deceived me (*hishshîʾanî*)' (3.13), we may suspect wordplay; other verbs for 'deceive' were available to the author.

The story of Cain and Abel has a number of verbal sophistications, including instances of wordplay. The first is the linking of Cain's name with the Hebrew verb *qānâ* ('get, acquire,' 4.1). A slightly less obvious one might underlie Cain's retort on being asked the whereabouts of his brother Abel. 'Am I my brother's keeper?' (4.9) could, in view of the association of shepherding with 'keeping,' form a sarcastic reply along the lines of 'Am I to be a keeper's keeper?' Again, the conclusion to the story in 11.1–9 includes a particularly effective piece of wordplay in the form of a mocking etymology of the name Babel—on which see below.

2 The Creation Narratives

The three terms—almost standard by now—of creation, fall and flood cover most of Genesis 1–11, since even the table of nations in chapter 10 is a genealogy constructed on the flood survivors Japheth, Ham and Shem, the sons of Noah. According to Josephus, the Babel story in 11.1–9 also has a flood connection; the builders of Babel constructed their tall tower in case there was a repetition of the deluge!

The Heavens and the Earth

In Gen 1.1–2.4a, the first of the two creation narratives, the making of the heavens and the earth is described in simple, rhythmic prose that sometimes verges on the poetic. Throughout this narrative the more general word for God (*Elohim*) is used, possibly because the reach of the narrative extends far beyond the world of ancient Israel; one God stands behind the creation. 'Creation' includes the heavenly bodies that other peoples worshipped, the produce of the ground for which they sought the favour of nature deities, and the monsters of the deep that featured in their mythologies.

In this account, creation is presented as the outcome of a week of divine activity. The complexities of natural process and development have been miniaturized in this orderly portrayal of a series of creative acts. On each of the creation days God speaks (compare Ps 33.6, 'By the word of the Lord the heavens were made') and, after the speaking of light into existence on the first day, verbs of separation, creating or making describe how the word of command was given effect. The verb *bārā'* ('create') occurs several times in the account, and over forty times in the Old Testament, always with God as subject. It does not contain the idea of creation out of nothing, though it is compatible with that idea. At the end of each day (apart from the second) the creator pronounces satisfaction with what he has done, and the formulaic 'There was evening and there was morning' rounds off the section.

The recurrent 'And God saw that it was good'—and finally 'very good' at the end of the creation week (1.31)—fits the presentation of God as the divine workman or artificer. Illustration of this comes from Isa 41.7, where the making of an idol is described. One of the craftsmen involved expresses satisfaction with the soldering that helps hold the idol together: 'It is good,' he declares. These expressions of approval in Genesis indicate that each finished aspect

of the creation week is fit for purpose. They are not meant to address more characteristically modern questions about disorder or death as elements in the natural cycle. It has long been observed that there is a degree of symmetry in the arrangement of days one to three and days four to six, with day one corresponding to day four and so on. Earlier commentators saw this correspondence in terms of form and content, with the first three days attending to form (for example, land in day 3) and the second set supplying the content (animals, humans, day 6). The symmetry is not perfect (for example, the firmament which contains the heavenly lights is created on the second day, not the first), but it nevertheless seems to be a structuring element in Genesis 1.

Let Us Make Humans

Genesis 1 proceeds in fairly uniform manner through the first five days and into the first part of the sixth. However, when God comes to create humans they are treated differently, for they are the apex of his creation. Now he does not utter a command ('Let the earth bring forth humans') but speaks in the first person plural as if others are in attendance (1.26). The phrase 'like one of us' a little later, in 3.22, supports the idea that here in Genesis 1 a plurality of some sort is in question, rather than a Hebrew version of the royal 'We.'

Traditional Christian interpretation has found an anticipation of the doctrine of the Trinity in 1.26, but it is much more likely that the widespread idea of the council of the gods explains this usage. The concept has been divested of its polytheistic associations and now fulfils a role in the description of the creation of the first humans. 'Let us make' ends the sequence of 'fiat and fashioning' (as in vv 6–7, 'Let there be…and God made') and indicates the special importance of what is now taking place. The creation of humanity originated, then, as a resolution of the divine council. Elsewhere the Old Testament happily uses the idea of the divine council in connection with, for example, the commissioning of prophets (Isa 6.1–13) or even, in a daring paradox, to declare that in the history of religion the polytheistic idea of the divine council has been superseded (Ps 82.1–8; see also 1 Kgs 22.19–22; Jer 23.16–22; Zech 3.1–10). In Gen 1.26 we may envisage God addressing his heavenly host (angels, perhaps) as he determines to create human beings. Significantly, the plural language soon gives way to the third person singular ('God created,' v 27; 'God blessed,' 'God said,' vv 28–29).

Imaging the Divine

The special status of the humans is also expressed in their being constituted 'in our image, according to our likeness' (1.26). In Egypt and Mesopotamia they sometimes referred to humans as being images of the gods, but it was mostly rulers who were thought of in this way. The concept is widened in Genesis

to include the whole of humanity. This image-bearing has often been taken to imply a moral or spiritual likeness to the creator. Since the word 'image' is normally used of a sculpted or carved image this very abstract sense for 'in our image' is not conclusively obvious, hence the attraction of understanding the Hebrew to mean '*as* our image.'

In that case, 'in (or, as) our image,' rather than being a statement of what humans *are*, would be filled out in the following references to what humans *do* ('rule,' 'subdue'); they are expected to exercise authority as the visible representatives of God on the earth. That would still be very noble, but not quite what the numerous quoters of Gen 1.26 often want to imply. Sometimes 'image' and 'likeness' are interpreted as suggesting shape or form on the part of the deity, in the way of Ezek 1.26 where God is represented as 'a figure like the appearance of a man.'[2] The full implications of humans being 'in' or 'as' the divine image plainly are elusive; nevertheless, something very exalted is obviously being said about them, as the accompanying statements in vv 26b–28 make clear.

The full implications of humans being 'in' or 'as' the divine image are elusive

The humans are mandated to populate the earth and they are given a position of supremacy over the rest of the created order. Two quite strong verbs are used in this connection: 'Fill the earth and *subdue* it; *rule* over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, and over every living creature that moves on the ground' (1.28). These two verbs have incurred a lot of blame for contemporary environmental problems, as if they have been the inspiration for the industrialization of the West and the environmental damage that has followed. But in context the terms are perfectly unexceptionable. The writer was living in a world where struggle and toil were a part of daily existence: and even to dig or hoe the ground is to involve action describable by 'subdue' and 'rule' and yet at the same time compatible with 'to work it and to keep it,' the purpose for which the man was put in the garden, according to 2.15. We might then ask why, if texts relating to the environment are to be quoted, 2.15 is not quoted rather than, or at least alongside, 1.28.

Seventh Day Finale

The finale of the first creation narrative comes with the instituting of the Sabbath (referred to only as the 'seventh day') which, unlike the ostensibly related *shapattu*—the fifteenth day of the month—in Babylonia, is not tied to the lunar calendar. The importance of this is that God's Sabbath rest (see Exod 31.17) after his work of creation becomes the model for human cessation from labour on one day in seven. While there is no specific reference to the seventh day as a rest day for humans in 2.1–3, the fact of its being 'hallowed,' or 'sanctified,' by

God would seem to imply the significance filled out in the fourth commandment (Exod 20.8–11). In recent discussion of day seven it has been suggested that the whole of Genesis 1 has to do with the making of a cosmic temple for God, who takes up residence in this temple at the end of the creation week. However, it is difficult to substantiate this from the Genesis text.

Made from Dust

The second creation narrative reverses the terms 'heaven and earth' (1.1; 2.4a), in keeping with its focus on the earth as the habitat in which the first human pair are to flourish (see 2.4b). Adam (strictly, 'The Man') is formed from the dust of the ground. God himself infuses him with the breath of life, but, even so, this is a lowlier perspective on humans than is reflected in 1.26–28—for animals as also having the breath of life see 7.15, 22–23—and already may hint at the judgment of 3.19 ('to dust you shall return'). Adam's responsibility is the pleasurable one of caring for the garden. Certain features of the description of the garden and its environs appear to some writers to lend it the character of a temple or sanctuary; these include the tree of life, paralleling the stylized tree in the tabernacle (Exod 25.31–40), and the cherubim mentioned in 3.24.

Features of the description of the garden appear to some to lend it the character of a temple or sanctuary

The account dwells hardly at all on the felicities of Eden (whose probable meaning is 'luxuriance' or 'delight'), apart from the fruitful trees with which it was populated. The two trees of destiny, the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, are introduced early (2.9). Though all is congenial enough, the existence of the tree of knowledge in the garden sets before the human occupants (Adam in the first place, v 17) a moral test by which their right to remain in the garden will be decided. The significance of the expression 'good and evil' in this setting is much discussed; it is probably to be related to the 'wisdom' of 3.6. The acquisition of such knowledge marks an encroachment upon what properly belongs to God alone (see 3.22).

In Genesis 2, God is greatly concerned about Adam's social isolation, so he creates animals and birds. Then, as if fulfilling the representative role assigned to humans in 1.28, Adam gives them their names as they are brought before him (2.19–20). But Adam still has not found a suitable companion, and finally Eve appears as the result of a special creative act. The literal sharing of bone and flesh by the two makes them prototypical of all conventional marriage partners (2.23–24). In presenting the first couple as ancestral to the whole human family (monogenesis), Genesis does not reflect the commoner near eastern view that the first humans were created *en masse* (polygenesis). This, with its implications for racial theory, chimes with the divine imaging of (all)

humans in 1.26–27 (*cf* 9.6), since, if all humans derive from the same parents, they should all enjoy the same status.

3 The Loss of Eden

In Genesis 3 the second creation narrative moves towards the tragedy that seems to have cast its shadow almost from the beginning. The serpent, the agent of temptation in the story, is already being described as 'crafty,' which is hardly meant in a positive sense. It makes its approach through the woman and casts doubt on the divine warning about eating from the tree of knowledge. Possibly because of the nature of the exchange between the serpent and the woman, the divine name YHWH is not used in 3.1–5 (compare Num 22.7–21, where the narrative framework insists on talking of 'God,' whereas Balaam refers to 'the Lord'—even calling him 'the Lord my God,' v 18).

When Adam and Eve disobey and eat fruit from the tree of knowledge, they do not physically die on that very day, as 2.17 is often taken to say that they would. This has prompted questions about what was originally meant and whether it was God or the serpent that spoke the truth. The suggestion that the serpent spoke more truly than God is quite common in recent writing on the subject. Yet it is highly unlikely that a biblical writer would have attributed untruth to God and truth to the serpent. Certainly, if instantaneous physical death had been inflicted, the whole human project would have come to an end: there would have been no humans to carry on. John Milton assumes in *Paradise Lost* that the death sentence was mitigated to expulsion from the garden, but a no less viable alternative explanation is that the death is metaphorical, involving immediate loss of privileges enjoyed in the garden, and ultimately the loss of life itself.

Upward Fall?

Another much debated issue is whether Adam and Eve are to be regarded as immortal in Eden, but as subsequently forfeiting this status. Perhaps we are to understand them as possessing contingent immortality—that is, enjoying life in Eden indefinitely, just so long as they maintain obedience to the creator. On the other hand, it has become fashionable to describe the consequences of their disobedience in surprisingly positive ways, as if they had hit upon true freedom by striking out in independence of God, or had come of age when, by eating from the proscribed tree, they acquired the knowledge of good and evil. However, the danger with such readings is that Genesis 3 is turned into pure whimsy, governed by none of the usual rules of grammar or logic, whereas

so much in the chapter points to loss, pain, servitude, social alienation ('the woman whom you put with me,' v 12) and death—and all aptly described by the traditional term 'fall.'

The mere fact that the story of Cain in the next chapter is modelled on the Eden narrative and is itself an account of sin and its punishment provides a useful interpretative clue on the earlier narrative. The portrayal of the king of Tyre in Ezekiel 28 is also apropos. Here the downfall of the Tyrian king is presented as an Eden-like expulsion from the mountain garden of God, and is nothing short of a 'fall' (v 16).

The further question arises whether Genesis 3 is to be interpreted as an 'every-man story,' illustrating the moral and ethical choices that potentially confront every human who lives on the earth. While the chapter can profitably be read in this way (compare Rom 7.7–12), the developments that it describes clearly set in motion the string of woes that befall humanity in the chapters that follow.

Cain's Crime

Genesis 4, which is principally about Cain (and so only his name is given an explanation in vv 1–2), continues the storyline of chapters 2–3 but presupposes a more developed stage in human society. The brothers Cain and Abel are in agriculture and pastoralism, and appear to be supplying the needs of more than the nuclear family of Adam, Eve and themselves. When Cain murders his brother and is confronted with his crime he fears revenge from unspecified persons. And later he (or his son) builds a 'city,' which implies the existence of sufficient people to occupy a small biblical city or settlement. In the past, the Cain narrative has been read as an aetiology explaining the origins of the Kenite tribe, whose name bears close resemblance to that of Cain. Even if this were justified, however, there is much more to the chapter than tribal aetiology.

The attitude and state of mind of Cain himself may be in question

The story hinges on God's rejection of the offering that Cain presents to him, and on Cain's capitulation to anger and the urge to kill Abel, whose offering has been accepted. No reason is given for Cain's rejection, though the fact that his cereal offering is more directly related to the cursed earth than is Abel's animal offering may provide a clue (see 3.17). The wording, 'looked with favour on Abel and his offering'/'did not look with favour on Cain and his offering' may, however, suggest that more than a ritual technicality or a reprise of the Eden cursing of the ground is envisaged. The attitude and state of mind of the worshipper himself may be in question—a commonplace in prophetic texts about ritual that is performed without reference to personal and social ethics (*eg* Isa 1.10–17; Jer 7.1–8). This is the first occurrence of wor-

ship in Genesis and it plainly gets off to a bad start, as may be implied at the end of the chapter where, somewhat later, people 'began to call on the name of the Lord' (v 26).

Cain's crime comes about because he fails to overcome the impulse to do wrong, and it illustrates the growth and spread of sin as the human family develops in early Genesis. Sin is now not only replicated in the offspring of Adam and Eve, but is intensified into destructive tendencies against one's fellow human—even, in this instance, against a man's own brother (note the six occurrences of 'his/your/my brother' in vv 8–11). Unlike Abel, Cain is thwarted in his attempt to approach God by means of sacrifice; still he must resist the murderous envy stirring within him. This is the general sense of the difficult v 7, in which sin is compared to an animal lying at Cain's door, waiting to entice or ensnare him. Because of a possible connection between the Hebrew word *rābaṣ* ('lie down') and the term *rābiṣu* ('croucher demon') in Babylonian, some writers think that the verse is comparing sin to a fiendish predator waiting to pounce on Cain. Gen 4.7 is also noteworthy as having the first explicit mention of sin in the Bible, and the story of Cain figures prominently in later Jewish philosophical discussion of the evil impulse and the human proclivity towards wrongdoing.

Expulsion, Second Phase

For all his arrogance, summed up in his retort, 'Am I my brother's keeper?' (v 9), Cain strikes a pathetic figure in the rest of the story. Ultimately, he survives under divine protection; the 'mark of Cain,' far from being a scarlet letter proclaiming his guilt, is a distinguishing mark to warn off any potential attacker (*cf* Ezek 9.4–6). This preservation of Cain has important consequences later in the chapter, as we shall see.

Just as the story of the flood introduces the categories of clean and unclean animals long before the era of Israelite priestly law, so the Cain story appears to depend for some of its dynamic on the later idea of the holy land of Israel where God's presence is found, outside of which his people are exposed to deadly danger. Cain's lament that he has been driven out from 'the ground' and will be 'hidden from your presence,' and so will be in mortal danger (v 14), exactly mirrors David's fears when he has to flee his homeland to avoid harassment by Saul: 'They have now driven me from my share in the inheritance of the Lord…Now do not let my blood fall to the ground far from the presence of the Lord' (1 Sam 26.19–20). David was driven out, and very soon he was in 'the land of the Philistines' (1 Sam 27.1).

Cain and His Descendants

Gen 4.17–24 gives us genealogical material and is the first of the many genealogies in the Old Testament (for Genesis see also chapters 5, 10, 11, 25, 35, 36, 46). In this case, the simple linear genealogy, proceeding directly from one generation to the next, also contains information on early societal and cultural developments. Cain's survival in spite of his capital offence sees him associated—somewhat in counterpoint to his banishment to restless wandering—with the building of a city and, through his descendants, with developments in farming and technology.[3] Earlier exegetes reckoned that it was fear and a desire for security that spurred him on to city building, but, whether it was defiance or fear, the mention of a city agrees well with the elements of 'civilization' introduced in vv 20–22—not that the accomplishments mentioned there are uniquely tied to city life.

Cain's descendants are credited with advances on several fronts, notably in raising livestock, music-making and metal-working. The association of these developments in early society with Cain and his vengeful descendant Lamech seems to betray an Israelite suspicion of technological achievement, as if it may even become more curse than blessing unless it is harnessed to religious purposes. At any rate, we do not read of Noah including 'members of every skill and craft' among the passengers on his ark, as we do of Utnapishtim in the Gilgamesh flood story (compare also Atrahasis in this respect). As if to illustrate the point further, in the account of the making of Israel's Tent of Meeting (or Tabernacle) every facet of skill and ability required for the task is attributed to the special enabling of the divine Spirit (see Exod 31.1–11). By contrast, the Solomonic temple, whose role in Judahite and Israelite history was viewed more ambivalently by biblical writers, has significant non-Israelite input (see 1 Kgs 5.6, 18; 7.13–14), and there is no talk of special divine equipping of those involved in its construction.

There was an Israelite suspicion of technological achievement

Genesis clearly does not view the cultural advances of 4.20–22 as direct gifts from God to humanity, or as bestowals by sages or heroes acting on behalf of God (contrast the role of the seven sages, the *apkallū*, in Mesopotamian mythology). Indeed, neither the textual evidence nor the archaeological record supports the idea that the ancient Israelites were in the van of technological development in the ancient near east. But their technological shortcomings—1 Sam 13.19–21 is often cited in this connection—and the hints in such a passage as Genesis 4 of a supportive ideology for these shortcomings may also resonate with modern misgivings about the mixed blessings of technological advances and improvements that add to the sum of human suffering as well as happiness.

Beginnings of Worship

The Cain chapter ends, however, with a notice of a different sort. In the time of Enosh people began to 'call on the name of the Lord' (v 26). This verse has played a big part in discussions of what the Old Testament implies about the earliest worship of God under the name YHWH (see also Exod 3.13–15; 6.2–3). If not a statement about the earliest recognition of God by the name YHWH, however, it may more simply be saying that it was at this time that the true worship of God got under way. A contrast is thus set up between the earthbound preoccupations of the line of Cain and the religious aspirations of Seth and his circle.

'And he died'

In Genesis 5 a separate genealogy running from Adam through Seth to Noah and his sons is used to bridge the gap between the Adam family and the account of the flood in chapters 6–8. First, however, comes the important statement that the divine image (in whatever sense) that was conferred upon humankind in 1.26 is, despite the expulsion from Eden, refracted through Adam to his descendant Seth (vv 1, 3, this latter verse adjusting the wording of 1.26 to read, 'in his own likeness, according to his image'). This idea of the replication of the divine image in humans is restated in the post-deluge arrangements in 9.1–7(6).

The typical entry in the linear genealogy in this chapter has the elements born–begat–died, and, despite the long lifespans given, contributes to the theme of death as a consequence of the judgment sentence in 3.17–19. Death reigns, as the eight occurrences of 'and he died' demonstrate.

Enoch is an exception within this death march: he 'walked with God' and God 'took him' (vv 22, 24). Later this was understood as a beneficent act of God in removing his faithful one without the pain of dying (so the Septuagint translation of the verse; compare Heb 11.5), and this may be the original intention of the Hebrew text itself. Enoch would then represent that line of thinking within the Old Testament that, without reference to afterlife in Sheol or to physical resurrection, works from the idea of the righteous person living in fellowship with God in the here and now to the recognition that the full flowering of this companionship is assured in the world to come. There is a small group of texts in the Old Testament that speak in this way of God 'taking' (Hebrew *lāqaḥ*) his favoured to himself at the end of the present life (see also Ps 49.15; 73.24; and 2 Kgs 2.3, 9, 10; Lk 9.51).

Failed Experiment

The genealogy in chapter 5 forms the backdrop to the strange account in 6.1–3 of the 'sons of God' and 'daughters of men.' The usual sense of the expression 'sons of God' would make them divine beings, whether minor deities, as in some non-Israelite texts, or angels, as in Job 1–2. This little section therefore appears to be taking up the idea, familiar in ancient mythology more generally, of divine beings cohabiting with humans. In the present context, these unions may be seen as attempts to break the depressing 'lived and died' sequence in chapter 5. In other words, the story shows that even uniting the divine and the human in this way cannot overcome the inheritance of death that has been decreed for humanity. Verse 3 pronounces sentence in the appropriate terms. The divine life-giving spirit that animates the humans will not 'abide' (or, according to another explanation, will not 'be strong') in them since, after all, they are creatures of 'flesh'; their lifespan will be limited to one hundred and twenty years (this does not come about immediately in Genesis).

There is also mention in v 4 of the Nephilim being on the earth in those days. These are not explicitly identified as offspring of the cohabiting mentioned in the preceding verses, though they have often been explained in this way. Whatever they are, they are at best 'heroes,' 'men of renown'—not deities or divine—and they are background to the oncoming flood. Verses 5–8 make a more direct link between the moral state of humanity and God's decision to destroy the earth. This is essentially the Genesis perspective on the flood. Humanity is held morally responsible for its actions and for the kind of society that results. As is often noted, in the Mesopotamian Atrahasis flood story the human population grows and becomes so noisy as to incur the god Enlil's anger, because his sleep is disrupted. Genesis, by contrast, attributes a moral causation to the disaster.

4 Flood, Table and Tower

The Deluge

The flood described in Genesis 6–8 appears to be worldwide, and indeed the account would lose its point within the larger Genesis story if it were not. It is about the end of 'all flesh' (the word 'all' occurs several dozen times in Gen 6–8), and we are to understand that the human race that develops after the flood is descended from Noah and his family. If, in the interests of plausibility, we think of the flood affecting only the known world, not much is gained, since all humanity and all living creatures are assumed to be within this known world. In comparison with other near eastern traditions, Genesis is, as we have noted, much more concerned with the degeneracy that caused the flood, and with the flood itself as judgment on the degeneracy. Moral and religious observations flank the flood narrative in Genesis 6–8 (see 6.5–8; 8.21).

There are literary aspects of the flood narrative worthy of mention. As noted earlier, the account is structured to represent the symmetry that would naturally occur with Noah's entering and leaving the ark, the rise and recession of the flood waters, and so on. This symmetry is observable regardless of whether the present narrative represents a splicing of two originally separate Hebrew sources on the flood tradition, as is commonly thought to be the case. There is also an instance of wordplay in the chapter leading up to the flood itself. The play is on two senses of the verbal root *shāḥat*, which may, according to context and the form used, mean 'be corrupt' or 'destroy' (see 6.11, 12, 13, 17). This suggests an element of the measure-for-measure retaliation found elsewhere in the Old Testament (as in 'Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, the Lord has rejected you', 1 Sam 15.26).

The account of the flood is sparing of the kind of circumstantial or psychological information given in its Mesopotamian counterparts. There is no insight into the feelings of Noah who, indeed, says nothing at all until the sordid episode described in 9.20–27. Until then he is a model of silent obedience to God's directions. The description of the effects of the flood has only the most generalized reference to the human and animal populations that suffered as a result; there is no mention of cities, buildings or the like. Nor does the Genesis account show interest in—much less does it gloat over—the fate of those

judged, which contrasts with some other biblical and post-biblical references to the fate of the wicked when under judgment.

This all may be significant in assessing the biblical writer's use of the flood tradition. It is valued for the broad point that it makes about human responsibility and divine judgment, and about new beginnings under more generous conditions than had applied previously. In 8.21 there is a statement of particular theological moment within the developing story of the relationship between God and his human subjects. Human wickedness has been given as the cause of the flood (6.5–7), but here God recognizes that humanity remains deeply flawed, and so he will mercifully adjust his expectations of them and temper his response to their failings.

The biblical use of the flood tradition makes a broad point about human responsibility, divine judgment and new beginnings

There are various points of comparison between the actual Genesis flood account and the well-known Mesopotamian stories, whether the *Epic of Atrahasis* or the flood account on the eleventh tablet of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. One such is the use of the raven and the dove—in reverse order in *Gilgamesh*—to establish how far the flood waters had receded.[4] One of the most quoted parallels concerns God's appreciative inhaling of the aroma of the sacrifice that Noah offered when he and his family disembarked from the ark (8.21). This feature illustrates the cultural similarities between the biblical and Mesopotamian versions, but it also shows how widely separated they are in their conception of deity. In *Gilgamesh*, the gods, deprived of their food because no sacrifices could be offered to them while the flood continued, 'swarm like flies' once the flood survivor presents his offering, whereas in Genesis God, in a recurring Old Testament anthropomorphism, merely 'smelt the pleasing odour' (compare Lev 1.9, 13), signifying his acceptance of the sacrifice.

New Beginning

The story of the flood, insofar as it echoes some of the terms used in the first creation narrative in Genesis 1, is often thought to be about the *un*creation and *re*creation of the earth. This is true, but only in a broad-brush kind of way. The earth is submerged in water, and we are reminded of the primal waters of 1.1–10, and the familiar classes and categories of the animal and human creation, with the exception of Noah and his family, are wiped out (7.21).

The new beginning is heralded in 9.1–3, when the old creation mandate ('Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth,' 1.28) is reissued. Now the original permission for vegetarian eating is extended to include animal flesh, with a proviso about the consumption of blood that becomes standard in priestly

law (Lev 17.10–12). But Paradise is not regained, and a new and more hostile relationship between humans and the animal world is also indicated (9.2). Even so, the continuance of the divine likeness in humans generally is stated, now with the corollary that it is a capital offence to mar that likeness by killing a fellow-human.

Finally, God's covenant with Noah, flagged in 6.18 and finalized in 9.8–17, brackets the whole story of the flood and forms the basis of the new order. This covenant is unique in the Old Testament in explicitly including both the whole of humanity and the animal creation within the scope of God's benevolent intent. Some other Old Testament texts use similar language as they look to the future, whether it is the future of Israel or of humanity in general (see Lev 26.6; Isa 11.6–9; Ezek 34.25–28; Hos 2.18–20). The sign of the bow—usually taken to indicate the rainbow but also plausibly explained as God's warrior bow in the sky—points to the divine promise that destruction of the earth by flood will never be repeated.

Postscript to Noah

Since chapters 6–8 appear to be describing a universal flood, it follows that Noah, his family and their descendants must populate the world as it is after the flood. This is expressed in the table of nations in chapter 10, but first there is the vignette of 9.18–27, which, from out of its curious domestic detail about Noah, his vineyard and his drunkenness, brings Canaan and Shem into association and shows how episodes such as this one can be used to make an ethno-political point. Canaan, descendant of Ham, is of course also the name of the land into which Abraham comes, and where his descendants eventually settle, and Shem is the progenitor of the Israelites.

Already, then, in the immediate aftermath of the flood, the subservience of Canaan to Shem—that is, of the Canaanites to the Israelites—is being portrayed, though strictly it was Ham, the father of Canaan, who committed the offence against his father Noah (9.22). The section also has an aetiological aspect to it: 'Noah began to be a man of the soil, and he planted a vineyard' (9.20). This appears to put him on the same level as those mentioned in 4.20–21 as 'fathers' of certain types of occupation. Noah's viticulture may be anticipated in Lamech's statement in 5.29 that Noah would 'comfort us in the labour and painful toil of our hands caused by the ground that the Lord has cursed.' However, the mixed blessing of the fruit of the vine becomes apparent in the story of Noah's drunkenness and its sequel. The episode in 9.18–27 also confirms that after the flood Noah remains an ordinary mortal, in contrast to his Mesopotamian counterpart Utnapishtim and his wife, whom the gods reward with immortality once they have survived the deluge ('Henceforth Utnapishtim will be like us gods').

The Rise of Nations

The table of nations in Genesis 10 gives 'an Israelite's view'—a verbal map—of the ancient world, reflecting political, as well as geographical, ethnic and linguistic realities at some point in the biblical period. Approximately seventy names are listed, and this becomes the traditional, or symbolic, figure in later Jewish literature for the number of nations in the world. The table comprises a variety of people names, personal names and geographical locations. The order of presentation is Japheth–Ham–Shem, with Shem coming strategically last, in the way of the so-called segmented genealogies (noting lateral relations, in contrast to the onward-moving linear type of genealogy, as in ch 5), since the Shem genealogy leads on to Abraham and the next phase in the Genesis story.

In the table of nations the diversification of peoples and languages is viewed positively, as a natural development following the preservation of Noah and his family through the flood: 'From these the nations spread out over the earth after the flood' (10.32). There are occasional elaborations on the basic genealogical data, most obviously in the references to the city-building feats of Nimrod and Ashur, both of whom are placed in the Hamite genealogy and are associated with the great Mesopotamian civilizations.

As in earlier references to the development of civilization (4.20–22), the mode of reference is naturalistic, highlighting human achievement rather than claiming divine origination or even so much as divine patronage.[5] Maps ancient and modern, and so verbal maps such as this table, are frequently ideological constructions, and, while Israel itself is not mentioned in the table, the more certain identifications point to a world with Israel as its hub. Israelite interests may also be discerned in the delineation of the boundaries of Canaan in 10.19; these are generously defined in keeping with the larger aspirations that the Old Testament associates with the historical Israelite kingdom(s). But it is with chapter 11 and the introduction of Abraham that the story of Israel proper may be said to begin.

Babel Bruis'd

The account of the building of Babel (= Babylon) revisits the theme of population dispersal, but now seeing it as the result of divine intervention and judgment for an early act of human hubris. Early migrants into Mesopotamia are depicted as seeking to consolidate themselves in Shinar (= Sumer, in southern Babylonia) and there establish a reputation for themselves. This is made feasible by another of the technological advances noted in Genesis 1–11, as the Babel-builders, in an area not rich in stone, develop the techniques of burning bricks and using lime as mortar. More sinister possibilities are suggested when the divine building inspector comes down to view their work.

The story has a satirical ring, with Babel-Babylon, the butt of the satire, exemplifying human pretensions pursued independently of God. So, whereas the table of nations in the preceding chapter views language variation as a natural development following the spread of the human race across the earth (see 10.5, 20, 31), this narrative portrays language differentiation and its consequences as a judgment on human pride and ambition. The point is encapsulated in the mocking etymology proposed for Babel (popularly understood in Babylonia to mean 'Gate [or House] of [the god] Ilu') in terms of the Hebrew verb *bālal* ('confuse'). Read in this way, the narrative tilts at the mighty Euphratean city that became Judah's nemesis at the beginning of the sixth century BC. It may also be that the great Esagila temple of Marduk, the chief Babylonian god, is being ridiculed under the figure of the unfinished and ineffectual high-rise tower.

The Babel narrative portrays language differentiation and its consequences as a judgment on human pride and ambition

Some writers have suggested that there is an intra-Israelite dimension to the story, as if this presentation of Babylon conveys an indirect warning to Israelite monarchs (like Solomon) against pursuing grandiose attempts at self-glorification in independence of YHWH. More recently, it has been argued that the story should be read positively, as further illustration of early human achievement, and of the divine intervention by which the humans are encouraged to move onward and outward in order to populate the earth. There is much, however, to commend the traditional reading. The key term 'scatter,' with God as subject, is twice used in connection with the Babel-builders (11.8, 9), and, while perhaps used neutrally of the Canaanites in 10.18, in other comparable occurrences with God as subject it denotes an act of judgment. The absence of moralizing in the narrative, as also the lack of the explicit vocabulary of sin or wrongdoing, may be seen in other biblical narratives where negative portrayal or even authorial disapproval are not in doubt.

The placing of the Babel narrative immediately before the second Shem genealogy (11.10–26; compare 10.21–31), which leads up to the birth of Abraham, sets up a contrast between the efforts of these early near easterners to establish themselves at Babel and the departure of the Terah connexion from Mesopotamia and their eventual arrival in Canaan. The builders' quest for a 'name' (11.4) and the name and renown promised Abraham (12.2) have long been explained as a meaningful contrast standing at the beginning of the patriarchal narratives and the origin traditions of Israel.

5 Suggestions for Further Reading

Commentaries

The following commentaries are excellent all-purpose examples of the genre. They generally rise to the challenge of expounding the biblical text with an eye on its wider cultural context.

Bill T Arnold, *Genesis* (Cambridge University Press, 2009)

Kenneth A Mathews, *Genesis 1–11.26* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1996)

James McKeown, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008)

Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (London: SCM, 1972)

Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987)

Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11: A Commentary* (trans John J Scullion) (London: SPCK, 1984)

The Ancient Near Eastern Background

Translations of relevant near eastern texts are provided by Dalley and Pritchard. Day and Hess-Tsumura include essays on Genesis 1–11 in its wider near eastern setting.

Richard J Clifford, *Creation Accounts in the Ancient Near East and the Bible* (Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1994)

Stephanie J Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh and Others* (Oxford University Press, 1989)

John Day, *From Creation to Babel: Studies in Genesis 1–11* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013)

Irving Finkel, *The Ark Before Noah: Decoding the Story of the Flood* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2014)

Richard S Hess and David T Tsumura (eds), *'I Studied Inscriptions from Before the Flood': Ancient Near Eastern, Literary, and Linguistic Approaches to Genesis 1–11* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994)

James B Pritchard (ed), *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969)

Miscellaneous Studies

The following can be little more than a personal selection from the countless monographs written on numerous aspects of Genesis 1–11.

James Barr, *The Garden of Eden and the Hope of Immortality* (London: SCM, 1992)

Mark G Brett, *Genesis: Procreation and the Politics of Identity* (London: Routledge, 2000)

C John Collins, *Did Adam and Eve Really Exist? Who They Were and Why You Should Care* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011)

Carol M Kaminski, *From Noah to Israel: Realization of the Primaeval Blessing After the Flood* (London: T and T Clark, 2004)

Jon D Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988)

Tryggve N D Mettinger, *The Eden Narrative: A Literary and Religio-historical Study of Genesis 2–3* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2007)

R W L Moberly, *The Theology of the Book of Genesis* (Cambridge University Press, 2009)

John W Rogerson, *Genesis 1–11* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991)

Nahum M Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970)

Mark W Scarlata, *Outside of Eden: Cain in the Ancient Versions of Genesis 4.1–16* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012)

Mark S Smith, *The Priestly Vision of Genesis 1* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010)

John Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis 1: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009)

Notes

1 K Mathews, *Genesis 1–11.26* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1996) p 89.

2 'You saw no form' emphasizes, on the other hand, the auditory character of the revelation of God at Sinai (Deut 4.12, 15).

3 According to another interpretation, it was Cain's son Enoch who built the city.

4 In *Gilgamesh* three birds are used: dove, swallow and raven, in that order.

5 Nimrod the 'mighty hunter before YHWH' (Gen 10.9) may contain a hint of an exception.

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Robert Gordon studied Hebrew and Aramaic at Cambridge. His PhD (also from Cambridge) was written on the Targum to the Twelve Prophets. His first teaching post was at the University of Glasgow, whence he returned to Cambridge in 1979. His research interests include the Hebrew text and ancient versions of the Old Testament.

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