

"A tour de force unlike any other on this hugely significant topic."

—DEREK W. H. THOMAS



FROM AGE TO AGE

THE UNFOLDING OF
BIBLICAL ESCHATOLOGY

KEITH A. MATHISON

“For those schooled in the likes of Vos, Ridderbos, and Kline, the apprehension of eschatology broadly conceived is like Dorothy’s move from black-and-white Kansas to Technicolor Oz. But for too long this gift has been the buried talent of its modest circle of possessors. Keith Mathison goes a long way in unearthing this gift in *From Age to Age*. He ambitiously surveys the whole Bible book by book, yet with substantial detail at some of the most critical points, and does so with scholarly care, exegetical soundness, and philosophical breadth. Where one might vary from individual conclusions here and there, his survey of options is representative and his analysis well argued. Scholars, pastors, students, and learned laypeople need this kind of analysis, which relates a unified, coherent—albeit variegated—history of redemption and reminds the broader church that God is the Lord of time.”

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P U B L I S H I N G

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to
Dr. R.C. Sproul

Contents

Preface	ix
Abbreviations	xii
Introduction	1
Part 1: The Old Testament	
1. The Pentateuch (1): Genesis	17
2. The Pentateuch (2): Exodus to Deuteronomy	49
3. The Historical Books	80
4. The Psalms, the Wisdom Books, and the Song of Songs	115
5. The Eighth-Century Prophets (1): Jonah, Amos, Hosea, and Micah	149
6. The Eighth-Century Prophets (2): Isaiah	178
7. The Seventh-Century Prophets: Nahum, Zephaniah, Habakkuk, Joel, and Jeremiah/Lamentations	205
8. The Exilic Prophets: Obadiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel	238
9. The Postexilic Prophets: Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi	285
Excursus: The Intertestamental Period	315
Part 2: The New Testament	
10. The Gospel of Matthew	339
11. The Gospels of Mark and Luke	388
12. The Gospel of John	425

Contents

13. The Book of Acts	452
14. The Pauline Epistles (1): Galatians and Thessalonians	493
15. The Pauline Epistles (2): Corinthians and Romans	538
16. The Pauline Epistles (3): The Prison Epistles and the Pastoral Epistles	587
17. The Book of Hebrews and the General Epistles	614
18. The Book of Revelation	641
Conclusion	699
References	704
Index of Scripture and Extrabiblical References	755
Index of Subjects and Names	794

Preface

This is the fifth book I've written with my two index fingers and right thumb. I do take some comfort in the fact that J. R. R. Tolkien typed the successive drafts of his great book *The Lord of the Rings* with only two fingers, but there were times during the composition of my work when I sorely wished I had learned to type. In spite of its slow progress, however, the writing of this book has been a blessing. Every time we prayerfully dig into the Word of God, we are instructed, encouraged, and exhorted, and my own study has been no exception.

Several friends have asked why I have chosen to write another book on the subject of eschatology. This is a fair question that deserves a reasonable response. In the first place, my interest in biblical eschatology began not long after I became a Christian, and it has continued to this day. This book is, first and foremost, the result of this personal interest. The ongoing controversies concerning eschatology are another reason for the writing of this book. When the church has been arguing about a subject for as long as it has been arguing about the subject of eschatology, it can never hurt to go back to the Word of God and see if any fresh insight can be found.

The process of writing this book, although an encouragement and blessing, has not been without challenges. The pathway has included unexpected detours as well as wrong turns and dead ends. I have been forced many times to rethink previous conclusions. Sometimes such rethinking has resulted

Preface

in the confirming of my convictions. At other times, further reflection has led to the discovery of mistakes in need of correction.

I am encouraged by the words of Augustine, who wrote, “I freely confess, accordingly, that I endeavor to be one of those who write because they have made some progress, and who, by means of writing, make further progress.” Augustine went on to explain how he dealt with errors found in his earlier works (NPNF, 1:490).

I certainly do not consider this book to be the last word on the “last things,” or even *my* last word on the last things. It is merely my attempt to contribute to the ongoing theological conversation. It is my sincere hope and prayer that it will be of help to other students of Scripture.

There are a number of people whose help has been invaluable and without whom I could not have finished this project. I would like to thank first of all a man who is my pastor and my mentor, Dr. R. C. Sproul. His ministry and his example have been a great encouragement and great example to me for many years now, and he has continually encouraged my research and writing. His admonition to teach what the Bible teaches and not what we might want it to teach is one we would all do well to heed. It is for these reasons that I gratefully dedicate this book to him.

There are several others to whom thanks are due. First, I thank Allan Fisher for asking me to begin this daunting project. I’m not sure I would have taken the first step had it not been for his encouragement. I also thank my colleague Chris Donato, who read large portions of the manuscript and who offered many helpful suggestions. Another colleague, Kevin Struyk, saved me countless hours by picking up numerous books and articles at the local seminary. And once again, I owe special thanks to Grace Mullen at the library of Westminster Theological Seminary. I have lost count of the number of bibliographical references she has helped me track down and verify and the number of articles she has located that I could not find anywhere else. I also thank my parents for their encouragement throughout the long process of writing this book. Finally, I thank my wife Tricia and my children Sarah and Joseph for bringing so much joy to my life.

A brief word about translation and transliteration is necessary. Unless otherwise noted, I have used the English Standard Version of the Bible throughout this work—with one important exception. Where the ESV translates the Hebrew divine name (*YHWH*) as “LORD,” I translate it consistently as “Yahweh.” Most English versions follow the same practice as

Preface

the ESV, translating the divine name as “LORD.”¹ I agree with Michael Williams, however, that to translate it in this way obscures the fact that it is God’s revealed name, “not a title or an office.”² For the apocryphal books, I have used the New Revised Standard Version. With the exception of occasional instances in quotations from the works of other authors, I have transliterated all Hebrew and Greek words in the body of the text. In the footnotes, I have sometimes provided the Hebrew or Greek text in addition to the transliteration.³

1. Very few English versions translate the divine name as a name. The Darby Bible (1884/1890) and the American Standard Version (1901) translate the divine name as “Jehovah.” The New Jerusalem Bible translates the divine name as “Yahweh.”

2. Williams 2005, 28.

3. For Hebrew transliteration, I have used the general purpose style outlined in the *SBL Handbook of Style* (§5.1.2).

Abbreviations

General

A.D.	anno Domini
B.C.	before Christ
DSS	Dead Sea Scrolls
Gk.	Greek
Heb.	Hebrew
LXX	Septuagint

Bible

Old Testament

Gen.	Genesis
Ex.	Exodus
Lev.	Leviticus
Num.	Numbers
Deut.	Deuteronomy
Josh.	Joshua
Judg.	Judges
Ruth	Ruth
1 Sam.	1 Samuel
2 Sam.	2 Samuel
1 Kings	1 Kings
2 Kings	2 Kings
1 Chron.	1 Chronicles
2 Chron.	2 Chronicles

Abbreviations

Ezra	Ezra
Neh.	Nehemiah
Esth.	Esther
Job	Job
Ps./Pss.	Psalms
Prov.	Proverbs
Eccl.	Ecclesiastes
Song	Song of Solomon
Isa.	Isaiah
Jer.	Jeremiah
Lam.	Lamentations
Ezek.	Ezekiel
Dan.	Daniel
Hos.	Hosea
Joel	Joel
Amos	Amos
Obad.	Obadiah
Jonah	Jonah
Mic.	Micah
Nah.	Nahum
Hab.	Habakkuk
Zeph.	Zephaniah
Hag.	Haggai
Zech.	Zechariah
Mal.	Malachi

New Testament

Matt.	Matthew
Mark	Mark
Luke	Luke
John	John
Acts	Acts
Rom.	Romans
1 Cor.	1 Corinthians
2 Cor.	2 Corinthians
Gal.	Galatians
Eph.	Ephesians
Phil.	Philippians

Abbreviations

Col.	Colossians
1 Thess.	1 Thessalonians
2 Thess.	2 Thessalonians
1 Tim.	1 Timothy
2 Tim.	2 Timothy
Titus	Titus
Philem.	Philemon
Heb.	Hebrews
James	James
1 Peter	1 Peter
2 Peter	2 Peter
1 John	1 John
2 John	2 John
3 John	3 John
Jude	Jude
Rev.	Revelation

Scripture Versions

ASV	American Standard Version
ESV	English Standard Version
KJV	King James Version
NAB	New American Bible
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NEB	New English Bible
NIV	New International Version
NJB	New Jerusalem Bible
NKJV	New King James Version
RSV	Revised Standard Version

Josephus

<i>Ant.</i>	<i>Antiquities of the Jews</i>
<i>J. W.</i>	<i>Jewish War</i>
<i>Life</i>	<i>The Life of Flavius Josephus</i>

Secondary Sources

Journals, Periodicals, Major Reference Works, and Series

AB	Anchor Bible
ABD	D. N. Freedman (ed.), <i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i>

Abbreviations

ACNT	Augsburg Commentaries on the New Testament
AnBib	Analecta biblica
ANET	J. B. Pritchard (ed.), <i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts</i>
AOTC	Apollos Old Testament Commentary
APOT	R. H. Charles (ed.), <i>Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament</i>
AUSS	<i>Andrews University Seminary Studies</i>
AUMSR	Andrews University Monograph Studies in Religion
AUSDDS	Andrews University Seminary Doctoral Dissertation Series
BCOTWP	Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms
BDAG	F. W. Danker (rev. and ed.), <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament</i>
BDB	F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, <i>Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i>
BDF	F. Blass, A. Debrunner, and R. W. Funk, <i>A Greek Grammar of the New Testament</i>
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
<i>Bib</i>	<i>Biblica</i>
BIS	Biblical Interpretation Series
BLS	Bible and Literature Series
BNTC	Black's New Testament Commentaries
<i>BSac</i>	<i>Bibliotheca Sacra</i>
BSC	Bible Student's Commentary
BST	The Bible Speaks Today
<i>BTB</i>	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>
BZAW	Beihefte zur ZAW
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CC	Continental Commentary
CCom	Communicator's Commentary
CGTC	Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary
<i>DBI</i>	L. Ryken et al. (eds.), <i>Dictionary of Biblical Imagery</i>
DSB	The Daily Study Bible
<i>DTIB</i>	Kevin J. Vanhoozer (ed.), <i>Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible</i>
EBC	Expositor's Bible Commentary

Abbreviations

ECC	Eerdmans Critical Commentary
<i>EDT</i>	W. A. Elwell (ed.), <i>Evangelical Dictionary of Theology</i>
<i>EvQ</i>	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
<i>ExpTim</i>	<i>Expository Times</i>
FOTL	The Forms of Old Testament Literature
GKC	<i>Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar</i> , ed. E. Kautzsch, trans. A. E. Cowley
GNS	Good News Studies
<i>HALOT</i>	W. Baumgartner et al., <i>Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i>
HNTC	Harper's New Testament Commentaries
HSM	Harvard Semitic Monographs
<i>IBHS</i>	Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, <i>An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax</i>
ICC	International Critical Commentary
<i>IDB</i>	G. A. Buttrick (ed.), <i>Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</i>
ILPT	International Library of Philosophy and Theology
<i>Int</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
IRT	Issues in Religion and Theology
<i>ISBE</i>	G. W. Bromiley (ed.), <i>International Standard Bible Encyclopedia</i> , rev.
ISFCJ	International Studies in Formative Christianity and Judaism
IVPNTC	The IVP New Testament Commentary
<i>JAOS</i>	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JETS</i>	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
<i>JNES</i>	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>
Joüon	Paul Joüon, <i>A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew</i> , trans. T. Muraoka
<i>JSNT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
JSNTSup	JSNT Supplement Series
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	JSOT Supplement Series
<i>JSP</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha</i>
JSPSup	JSP Supplement Series
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>

Abbreviations

LCC	Library of Christian Classics
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LEC	Library of Early Christianity
MLBS	Mercer Library of Biblical Studies
MPS	The Master's Perspective Series
NAC	New American Commentary
NCB	New Century Bible
NCBC	New Cambridge Bible Commentary
NIBC	New International Biblical Commentary
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
<i>NIDNTT</i>	Colin Brown (ed.), <i>New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology</i>
<i>NIDOTTE</i>	W. A. VanGemeren (ed.), <i>New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis</i>
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NIVAC	NIV Application Commentary
<i>NovT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NovTSup	Novum Testamentum, Supplements
NPNF	Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers
NSBT	New Studies in Biblical Theology
NTC	New Testament Commentary
NTM	New Testament Monographs
NTP	New Testament Profiles
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
NTTS	New Testament Tools and Studies
OBS	The Oxford Bible Series
OTL	Old Testament Library
PNTC	Pillar New Testament Commentary
PTMS	Princeton Theological Monograph Series
SacPag	Sacra Pagina
<i>SBET</i>	<i>Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology</i>
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
SBLDS	SBL Dissertation Series
SBLMS	SBL Monograph Series
SBT	Studies in Biblical Theology
SBTS	Sources for Biblical and Theological Study

Abbreviations

SHS	The Scripture and Hermeneutics Series
<i>SJT</i>	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
SubBi	Subsidia biblica
<i>TCGNT</i>	B. M. Metzger, <i>A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament</i>
<i>TDNT</i>	G. Kittel and G. Friedrich (eds.), <i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i>
<i>TDOT</i>	G. J. Botterweck et al. (eds.), <i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i>
<i>Them</i>	<i>Themelios</i>
<i>TLOT</i>	E. Jenni and C. Westermann (eds.), <i>Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament</i>
TNTC	Tyndale New Testament Commentaries
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries
<i>TrinJ</i>	<i>Trinity Journal</i>
<i>TWOT</i>	G. Archer et al. (eds.), <i>Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament</i>
<i>TynBul</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
<i>VT</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
VTSup	Vetus Testamentum Supplements
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WCS	Welwyn Commentary Series
WEC	Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary
WPC	Westminster Pelican Commentaries
<i>WTJ</i>	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
<i>ZAW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>

Introduction

At various times in her history, different doctrines have been at the center of the church's attention. In the first few centuries after the death and resurrection of Christ, for example, the church struggled mightily to formulate accurately the biblical teaching concerning the Trinity and the person of Christ. The fruit of this struggle is found in the writings of numerous church fathers and in the Nicene Creed and the Definition of Chalcedon. Many centuries later, during the Reformation, soteriology and ecclesiology became the central focus of much of the church's attention. Debates surrounding those doctrines continue to this day. Eschatology, on the other hand, while not ignored in earlier centuries, truly moved to the forefront of the church's attention in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. From the emergence of popular dispensationalism in the late nineteenth century to the influential writings of Albert Schweitzer, C. H. Dodd, Jürgen Moltmann, and others in the twentieth century, it is clear that eschatology has risen to a place of prominence in biblical, theological, and historical studies.

Defining Eschatology

What do we mean when we speak of “eschatology”? The English word is based on a combination of two Greek words: *eschatos* (“last”) and *logos* (“word”). Traditionally, eschatology has been defined as the “doctrine of the last things” in relation to both the individual (e.g., death and the intermediate state) and cosmic history (e.g., the return of Christ, the general

resurrection, the final judgment, heaven, and hell).¹ Because of this definition, most studies of eschatology have limited themselves to a discussion of events that have yet to occur—events at the end of the individual’s life or events at the end of history.²

Eschatology in a broader sense, however, concerns what Scripture teaches about God’s purposes in Christ for history. As such, eschatology does include a study of the consummation of God’s purposes at the end of history, but it also includes a study of the stages in the unfolding of those purposes.³ This understanding of eschatology affects the content of this volume in a number of ways. If, for example, the first coming of Christ inaugurated “the last days,” then a study of biblical eschatology must include a study of Christ’s first advent as well as his second. It must also include a study of God’s preparation in history for the eschatological first advent of Christ. In other words, eschatology must involve a redemptive-historical study of the entire Bible. This book is written with this broader understanding of eschatology in mind.

Biblical Theology

The subtitle of this book is *The Unfolding of Biblical Eschatology*. The subtitle indicates something about the basic approach I have taken to the subject under consideration. The inspiration for this approach lies in the works of Reformed biblical theologians such as Geerhardus Vos and Herman Ridderbos, as well as others such as William Dumbrell.⁴ Following their lead, I have approached the subject of eschatology from the perspective of biblical theology. There are many outstanding works that approach the subject from the perspective of systematic theology, but this book is not one of them.⁵ It is important to note that biblical theology should not be understood as a substitute for systematic theology. Both are necessary.

1. Hoekema 1979, 1.

2. E.g., Hendriksen 1959; Helm 1989.

3. Smalley 1998, 265.

4. See Vos 1948, 1991; Ridderbos 1962; Dumbrell 1985, 1994.

5. E.g., Hoekema 1979; Venema 2000. Those works that approach the subject from the perspective of systematic theology are organized topically. Each section or chapter will summarize everything the Bible has to say on any given eschatological topic. There will, therefore, be sections or chapters on topics such as death, the second coming, the millennium, and the final judgment.

Biblical theology is simply a different, and complementary, approach to the same biblical teaching.

But what exactly is “biblical theology”? Many trace the origins of biblical theology to the inaugural lecture of the theologian Johann Gabler in 1787, in which he distinguished biblical theology from systematic theology.⁶ Gabler, however, was deeply committed to a rationalistic approach to the Bible, so his understanding of “biblical theology” necessarily differs from the understanding of those who accept Scripture as the inspired Word of God. Some identify “biblical theology” with the so-called biblical theology movement of the mid-twentieth century. This movement, however, was strongly influenced by neoorthodoxy and accepted the methodology of higher criticism. It ultimately collapsed under the criticisms of Langdon Gilkey and James Barr.

Setting aside these inadequate versions of “biblical theology,” how should we understand it? The Reformed theologian Geerhardus Vos provides a helpful introductory definition. “Biblical Theology,” he writes, “is that branch of Exegetical Theology which deals with the process of the self-revelation of God deposited in the Bible.”⁷ A helpful expanded definition is provided by Paul Williamson:

Biblical theology is arguably best thought of as a holistic enterprise tracing unfolding theological trajectories throughout Scripture and exploring no biblical concept, theme or book in isolation from the whole. Rather, each concept, theme or book is considered ultimately in terms of how it contributes and advances the Bible’s meta-narrative, typically understood in terms of a salvation history that progresses towards and culminates in Jesus Christ.⁸

When we view biblical theology from this perspective, it could be argued that this approach had its true precursors in the work of the early Reformed covenant theologians, particularly men such as Johannes Cocceius (1603–69).⁹

Many attempts at biblical theology have failed because of an exclusive focus on the human authors of Scripture. Particular books and/or authors

6. See *DTIB*, 84.

7. Vos 1948, 5. For a fuller explanation of the idea of biblical theology by the same author, see Vos 2001, 3–24.

8. Williamson 2007, 17.

9. See Golding 2004, 14–16.

are studied in isolation from the larger biblical context. The Bible is a collection of sixty-six books written by various authors over a vast period of time, but it is also a single book inspired by God.¹⁰ Charles Scobie explains the significance of this fact for our approach to biblical theology:

This means that the individual books and authors are to be studied not only in their original historical contexts, but also in the context of canonical Scripture as a whole. This does affect the way books are interpreted; the canonical Bible is more than the sum of the sixty-six books that it contains. The OT is read in light of the NT, and vice versa.¹¹

In other words, a biblical theology that takes seriously the divine inspiration of Scripture will be a “whole-Bible biblical theology.”¹²

The fact that there is one ultimate author of the whole Bible also means that it is not futile to seek an underlying unity among the sixty-six books. Numerous biblical theologians have despaired of finding any unifying principle for the Old Testament alone, much less the entire Bible. Gerhard Hasel, for example, says, “It has been demonstrated that any attempt to elaborate an OT theology on the basis of a center, key concept, or focal point inevitably falls short of being a theology of the entire OT, because no such principle of unity has as yet emerged that gives full account of all the material in the Bible.”¹³ This conclusion stems not only from a failure to take into account the Bible’s one ultimate author, but also from a failure, ironically, to consider how the different types of books in Scripture are related.

If we look carefully at the content of the biblical books, we notice that some of them present an ongoing redemptive-historical narrative. The Pentateuch and the historical books, for example, provide a historical account that proceeds from creation to the restoration of Israel from exile. In the New Testament, the Gospels and Acts function in the same way. These books, which outline redemptive history, form the narrative backbone or framework of the Bible. Other books assume that framework as their context.¹⁴ Most of the Old Testament prophets, for example, wrote their books during the

10. Waltke 2007, 10.

11. Scobie 2003, 74–75.

12. Hafeman and House 2007, 15.

13. Hasel 1982, 93.

14. Ciampa 2007, 255.

history narrated in 2 Kings. The apostle Paul wrote most of his epistles during the history narrated in the book of Acts. All of the biblical books that are not historical narrative were written during the times described in that narrative. Many of them interpret the events that are described in that narrative. It is in this historical narrative, this backbone of the Bible, that we see a unifying principle in the history of the outworking of God's plan to establish his kingdom. This plan involves his covenants with man and his work of redemption, and it culminates in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Hermeneutical Considerations

Before proceeding further, it is necessary to deal briefly with some basic hermeneutical issues. The term "hermeneutics" is used to refer to "the study of those principles that should guide our work of interpretation."¹⁵ Hermeneutics has been considered an important issue throughout the history of the church, but it is hardly an exaggeration to say that it is *the* issue in much of the Western church and culture today.¹⁶ Contemporary hermeneutical discussions are often quite sophisticated and complex, and to enter into this larger discussion in detail would require a separate volume of considerable size.¹⁷ However, while a detailed explanation of these issues is beyond the scope of this book, it is necessary at this point to explain briefly some of the factors that influence my interpretation of Scripture.

The Reformed Tradition and Scripture

In the first place, I acknowledge without apology that I approach the interpretation of Scripture as a Christian believer who stands within the Reformed tradition. The word "Reformed" is typically used to distinguish the Calvinistic branch of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation from the Lutheran and Anabaptist branches.¹⁸ The doctrines of the Reformed Protestant churches were most clearly expressed in confessions and catechisms such as the Gallican Confession (1559), the Scots Confession

15. Silva 1996b, 15.

16. See Lundin 1993.

17. For an introduction to some of the many issues involved, see Thiselton 1980; Cotterell and Turner 1989; Thiselton 1992; Silva 1996b; Vanhoozer 1998; Lundin, Walhout, and Thiselton 1999; Osborne 2006.

18. See *EDT*, 921.

(1560), the Belgic Confession (1561), the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), the Second Helvetic Confession (1564), and the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647).¹⁹ Some of the most important theologians in the history of the Reformed tradition are John Calvin, Francis Turretin, John Owen, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Hodge, Benjamin B. Warfield, Herman Bavinck, and Louis Berkhof.

It is important for the readers of this book to understand that I stand within this Reformed confessional tradition. Every reader of this book stands within his or her own basic theological (or atheological) tradition, be it Reformed, Lutheran, dispensationalist, or something else. These traditions profoundly influence and shape our basic worldview and assumptions, which then affect the way in which we approach theological and biblical questions. In fact, they often dictate the very questions that we ask. In describing myself as a Reformed Christian, I am simply informing the reader as well as consciously reminding myself of the theological tradition within which I stand as I proceed to examine this topic.

Philosophy and Scripture

Even a cursory reading of the history of Christian hermeneutics and theology will quickly reveal the effects philosophical presuppositions have had on biblical interpretation and theological reflection. From the neo-Platonism of certain early church fathers to the nominalism of many late medieval scholastics, from the neo-Kantianism and existentialism of Rudolf Bultmann to the deconstructionism of John Dominic Crossan, philosophical presuppositions are unavoidable. Those who believe they do not have any philosophical presuppositions when they approach Scripture are simply unconscious of them and more easily misled by them.

Those of us who were born in the West in the twentieth century have been raised in a culture whose very way of seeing the world has been shaped by numerous philosophical strands of thought.²⁰ We simply cannot change the fact that we live after Descartes and Hume, after Kant and Hegel, after Marx and Nietzsche, and after Rorty and Derrida. The intellectual world in which we live has been affected in various ways, not only by rationalism

19. See Cochrane 2003.

20. Of course, various philosophical strands of thought have also influenced those born in the East.

and empiricism, but also by pragmatism, naturalism, existentialism, and relativism. We live in an era in which the confident arrogance of modernism is gradually giving way to the skeptical arrogance of postmodernism. These various philosophies affect the way we think about God, man, language, revelation, history, science, ethics, politics, and more. Although we cannot pretend that these various strands of thought have not been part of the very intellectual air we breathe, we can make every effort to become self-consciously aware of the ways in which they influence and affect us. Only then are we able to detect these influences in our own thinking and critically examine them.

Certain philosophical strains of thought that arose during the Enlightenment resulted in a fierce antisupernaturalism that entailed the rejection of the possibility of special revelation. The Bible began to be seen as a merely human book whose teachings should be measured against the ultimate standard of autonomous human reason. The traditional Christian view of revelation, sometimes referred to as the *propositional* view, was then rejected.²¹ In contrast with the modernist view, I affirm that the traditional view of revelation is defensible, and I affirm that God has in fact revealed himself and his will in the Bible.²² I approach Scripture, therefore, as the inspired, infallible, and inerrant Word of the living God.

Because of the nature of scriptural revelation, a word must be said about language. The literature that exists on issues related to this topic is enormous, and it is not possible in this brief space to list every relevant issue, much less discuss all of them. It is necessary, however, to mention a few basic issues relevant to the purpose of this section. In the early twentieth century, two of the most significant challenges to the traditional Christian understanding of language were those set forth by logical positivists on the one hand and neoorthodox theologians on the other. Logical positivists attempted to make the case that all religious language is cognitively meaningless because it claims to speak of things that are not empirically verifiable.²³ Neoorthodox theologians raised different questions about the adequacy of human language because of their belief that revelation is essentially a

21. This traditional view is often caricatured as the belief that *all* revelation is propositional or that everything in Scripture is a proposition. For a response to this caricature, see Nash 1982, 44–45.

22. A thorough defense of this basic presupposition is beyond the scope of the present volume. For a defense of the traditional view of revelation, see Nash 1982, 43–54; see also Jensen 2002.

23. E.g., Ayer 1952.

nonpropositional personal encounter with God.²⁴ These challenges to the traditional Christian understanding of language are not at the forefront of the debate today. Logical positivism and the verification principle upon which it rests have repeatedly been shown to be self-referentially incoherent.²⁵ The neoorthodox doctrine of revelation and its claims about the inadequacy of human language, while still popular in many circles, have also been shown to be seriously flawed.²⁶

In the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century, deconstructionists such as Jacques Derrida and neopragmatists such as Richard Rorty are presenting the most serious philosophical challenges to a Christian understanding of language. Both Derrida and Rorty reject the idea that we can know whether our language refers to any kind of extralinguistic reality. Derrida rejects what he refers to as logocentrism, “the belief that there is some stable point *outside* language—reason, revelation, Platonic Ideas—from which one can ensure that one’s words, as well as the whole system of distinctions that order our experience, correspond to the world.”²⁷

The neopragmatic philosophy of Richard Rorty has been applied to literary criticism most effectively by Stanley Fish, who argues that meaning is not found in a text or in the intention of an author. Instead, readers produce meaning in the act of reading.²⁸ The views expressed by each of these authors are much more complex and nuanced than can be explained in this short space. Suffice it to say that the philosophies of Derrida, Rorty, and their disciples are incoherent. Despite objections to the contrary, their views inevitably result in a linguistic nihilism that renders pointless both writing and reading.²⁹ Their views are incompatible with a Christian understanding of revelation.

History and Scripture

Questions related to history and biblical interpretation are numerous and important.³⁰ One of the most obvious of these questions concerns the historicity of the events recorded in Scripture. Until the seventeenth and

24. E.g., Brunner 1946.

25. See Evans 1982, 141–44.

26. See Jensen 2002; Nash 1982, 35–41; Packer 1980.

27. Vanhoozer 1998, 53.

28. See Fish 1980.

29. For an informed critique of both views, see Vanhoozer 1998.

30. See Bartholomew et al. 2003.

eighteenth centuries, most within the church simply assumed that the events described in Scripture were historically accurate. The first rumblings of real discontent with the traditional view began to be felt with the rise of philosophical rationalism in the writings of Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz, and with the rise of skeptical empiricism, particularly in the work of David Hume. Among those who attempted to formulate a rationalist religion in response to these philosophical movements were the English deists.³¹

The deists insisted “that the supernatural cannot be admitted as a factor in history.”³² This fundamental assumption affected many influential scholars. The work of Hermann Reimarus, for example, which was posthumously published by Gotthold Lessing, expressed grave doubts about the historical value of Scripture. The philosophical writings of Immanuel Kant raised doubts about whether it is even humanly possible to discover history as it actually was. His writings contributed to the growing historical skepticism of the age. The influence of Kant’s thought upon biblical studies continued to be felt well into the twentieth century.³³ It continues to be felt even today.

In 1835, David Friedrich Strauss’s *Life of Jesus* was published and proved to be a hugely controversial book that changed the face of biblical scholarship.³⁴ Strauss argued that biblical accounts of the supernatural were instances of “mythical” language.³⁵ His work caused no small controversy both in Germany and England and profoundly influenced numerous scholars in subsequent generations. Rudolf Bultmann, for example, is well known for his twentieth-century project of demythologization.³⁶ Since Strauss’s time, it has become commonplace in critical biblical scholarship to deny the historical nature of much, if not all, of the biblical record. The most well known contemporary example of this tendency is found in the work of the Jesus Seminar.³⁷

The historical claims of these skeptical critical scholars are based upon faulty philosophical assumptions, and they are also based upon a failure

31. Brown 1990, 202–7.

32. Brown 1990, 212.

33. See Thiselton (1980, 205–17) for a discussion of the Kantian influence on the work of Rudolf Bultmann.

34. Strauss 1972.

35. See Neill and Wright 1988, 13–20.

36. Bultmann 1961.

37. See Funk and Hoover 1993; Funk 1998.

to deal with the actual evidence. Numerous scholars have addressed the problematic philosophical assumptions of the critics.³⁸ The actual positive evidence confirming the historical accuracy of Scripture has also been dealt with in numerous works.³⁹ The “assured results” of skeptical biblical criticism have been demonstrated time and again to be anything but assured.

Exegesis of Scripture

As a Reformed Christian I confess that Scripture, as the inspired and inerrant Word of God, is our sole source of written divine revelation. The fact that Scripture is inspired, however, does not mean that it is written in some mysterious and esoteric heavenly language. It is not an ahistorical document that fell from the sky. The human authors of Scripture were real men who wrote in real human languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek) within real historical contexts. What this means is that the proper interpretation of Scripture requires some understanding of the nature of human language in general, the languages of Scripture in particular, and the broader historical context within which the various books were written and received.⁴⁰ In other words, it requires an understanding of both text and context.

Human beings are created in the image of God, and as such have been given the gift of language in order to communicate with their Creator and with one another. John Searle rightly observes that to speak a language—any language—is to engage “in a (highly complex) rule-governed form of behavior.”⁴¹ When those rules are mastered and when language is functioning properly, human beings are able to understand and to be understood. In other words, they are able to communicate through the spoken word and through written texts.

In order to understand any text, one of the first steps that must be taken is to determine its genre.⁴² Since language is governed by certain rules, and since many of those rules depend on genre, it is important to understand

38. See, for example, Provan, Long, and Longman 2003, 37, 43–49; Coady 1992; see also Plantinga 2003. For a specific critique of the faulty methods and assumptions of the Jesus Seminar, see Wilkins and Moreland 1996; Wright 1999b.

39. E.g., Kitchen 2003; Bruce 1981; Blomberg 1987; Evans 1996.

40. For helpful introductions to Old and New Testament exegesis, see Stuart 2001; Bock and Fanning 2006; see also Carson 1996.

41. Searle 1969, 12.

42. As Hirsch (1967, 76) explains, “All understanding of verbal meaning is necessarily genre-bound.”

what kind of communicative act is taking place in a given text.⁴³ The importance of understanding the genre of a particular communicative act may be illustrated by reference to the *War of the Worlds* panic in 1938. When Orson Welles began reading a dramatic adaptation of H. G. Wells's story over the radio, many listeners mistook one genre (drama) for another (a factual news report) and thus believed that Martians were invading the earth. Those who panicked that night understood the meaning of the individual words and sentences. They understood the grammar and syntax. But that was not sufficient. Because they failed to recognize the correct genre, they completely misinterpreted what they were hearing. The same kinds of problems can occur when the text of Scripture is being interpreted. If poetry is interpreted as historical narrative, for example, or if historical narrative is interpreted as parable, misunderstanding is inevitable.

In order to determine the genre of a text, both the text itself and certain contextual factors must be taken into consideration. Kevin Vanhoozer helpfully defines context as "the various factors one has to take into consideration together with the text in order to understand the author's intention."⁴⁴ The context can help us to determine, for example, whether a particular biblical author is speaking literally or figuratively. If the context indicates that the author is writing poetry, there is a strong likelihood that figurative language will be used.

Canonical and historical contexts are also important in the task of exegesis. If the Bible as a whole is understood to be a complete and unified text communicated by God, then the various books of the Bible cannot be fully understood as merely self-contained individual texts. They must be understood within the context of the whole Bible. Individual texts must also be interpreted within their historical context. As an example, it is important to know whether a particular Old Testament prophecy was written before, during, or after the exile.

The building blocks of larger texts are words and sentences. An understanding of both the smaller building blocks and the larger contexts is necessary for proper interpretation. In fact, to understand one requires an understanding of the other. As Anthony Thiselton explains, "understanding a whole stretch of language or literature depends on an

43. Questions of genre are closely related to the kinds of issues discussed in various works on speech-act theory (e.g., Austin 1962; Searle 1969, 1979).

44. Vanhoozer 1998, 250.

understanding of its component parts, while an understanding of these smaller units depends, in turn, on an understanding of the total import of the whole.⁴⁵ The interpreter, then, must continually move from one to the other.

The purpose and role of individual words in the actual use of language have often been misunderstood with negative exegetical results.⁴⁶ It is important to observe, for example, that the basic unit of linguistic meaning is the text as a whole taken in its broader context. The basic unit of meaning is not the individual word taken in isolation.⁴⁷ Most individual words are polysemous, that is, they have a range of possible meanings.⁴⁸ Which of those possible meanings is the specific meaning of a word is determined by the use of that word in a particular sentence.⁴⁹ It must also be remembered, however, that the meaning of an individual sentence is also determined by its context.⁵⁰ In short, proper exegesis requires a careful examination of the details (e.g., vocabulary, grammatical and syntactical issues) as well as the larger picture (e.g., genre, historical context).

Two final issues that must be addressed concern the necessity of faith for proper interpretation and the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit. According to some authors, such as Moisés Silva, “a right relationship with [the] divine author is the most fundamental prerequisite for proper biblical interpretation.”⁵¹ This statement is supported by biblical passages such as 2 Corinthians 3:14–16 and 4:4, which seem to presuppose the necessity of faith for proper understanding.

45. Thiselton 1980, 104.

46. See Carson 1996, 27–64.

47. Vanhoozer 1998, 310–11.

48. A cursory glance at the entries in any substantive dictionary will reveal the truth of this statement. The English word “round,” for example, has some seventy distinct possible meanings listed in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

49. The meaning of the word “board,” for example, depends on whether we are speaking of the materials found in a carpenter’s shop, a company’s group of managing directors, or the act of getting on a bus, train, ship, or airplane.

50. The sentence “I saw her duck” can mean either “I saw her duck her head,” or it can mean “I saw a duck that belongs to her.” The context will determine the precise meaning. The meaning of the sentence “Students hate annoying professors” depends on whether the word “annoying” is being used as a verb or an adjective. Only the context will reveal the intended meaning. The potential ambiguity of sentences has often been used to humorous effect. Many are familiar with Groucho Marx’s one-liner: “I once shot an elephant in my pajamas.” The ambiguity is revealed in the punch line: “How he got in my pajamas, I’ll never know.”

51. Silva 1996b, 15.

Because Scripture is to be interpreted in and by the community of faith, faith is a necessary prerequisite for a full and proper interpretation of Scripture as a whole. However, this does not mean that an unbeliever is unable to understand anything in Scripture. Both the believer and the unbeliever can understand the basic propositional content of a given biblical text. They are both able to use the available linguistic tools to gain an understanding of Hebrew and Greek vocabulary, grammar, and syntax. They are both able to study the historical context and determine the genre of a text. However, to use a term coined by the speech-act theorists, the text has a different “illocutionary effect” on the believer than it has on the unbeliever.

Here an illustration may prove helpful. Imagine that you move into an old home and find a dusty box of letters in the attic. In the box, you find a love letter written by a Mr. Jones to a Mrs. Jones in 1858. You can read the letter and understand the propositional content in the same way that Mrs. Jones was able to understand the propositional content in 1858. But the force and effect of the letter are different for you because it was not directly addressed to you. Something similar occurs when an unbeliever interprets Scripture. The unbeliever can understand the propositional content, but the unbeliever does not believe that God is the author of the text, and he certainly does not believe that the text is directed in any way to him.⁵²

The illuminating work of the Holy Spirit is also necessary for full and proper interpretation of Scripture. The Spirit was sent to teach the church (John 14:26) and to guide the church into all truth (John 16:13). The Spirit is given in order that believers might know and understand (1 Cor. 2:12). As the one who inspired the Scriptures, the Spirit is also the one who reveals its full meaning to the people of God. The illumination of the Spirit should not, however, be understood as an alternative to careful exegetical study. We should not expect the Spirit to reward intellectual laziness by providing grammatical, syntactical, and contextual information that we have failed to learn. Because the illuminating work of the Spirit is both necessary and mysterious, those who would interpret the Word of God rightly must be in prayerful communion with God.

52. Thiselton 1992, 598.

Structure and Approach

The contents of this book follow a generally canonical order, with two exceptions. First, in the chapters dealing with the Old Testament prophetic books, the individual books are dealt with in chronological order. This allows us to see the messages of the various prophets within the broader narrative context of redemptive history, as both Israel and Judah spiraled down toward exile. Second, in the chapters dealing with the Pauline Epistles, the individual epistles are also dealt with in chronological order. Again, this allows us to see the epistles more clearly against their narrative background in the book of Acts.

The approach I have taken throughout the book can be described as a “narrative method,” a method that traces “the theological development of the ideas in a book.”⁵³ Grant Osborne explains well the strengths and weaknesses of such an approach: “This [method] has enormous value in helping students see how themes emerged and intertwined in the development of the book, but it can often degenerate into a glorified survey of the contents of the book.”⁵⁴ In one sense, this is a weakness. However, when examining a theme, such as eschatology, it can be beneficial to survey the contents of the biblical books, emphasizing where and how each book develops this theme. A survey in which the unified message of Scripture is emphasized can also be helpful in countering the widespread assumption that the Bible is merely a collection of disparate writings.

I have attempted to alleviate the potential problem to some degree by adapting the approach somewhat. If we compare the content of Scripture to a pathway through a large forest, the bulk of each chapter consists of a more or less detailed look at the trees on a particular section of the path. Throughout the bulk of each chapter, we are using a zoom lens, as it were, looking at the specific eschatological themes as they are developed in the individual books. At the end of each chapter, however, we pull back with a wide-angle lens to get a broader perspective of where we are in terms of the big picture of the biblical narrative. The reader will gain the most benefit from this approach if he or she prayerfully reads the relevant section of Scripture prior to our discussion of it.

53. Osborne 2006, 369.

54. Osborne 2006, 369.

P A R T **1**

THE OLD
TESTAMENT

1

The Pentateuch (1)

Genesis

Most people, when reading a book, do not begin with the final chapter. In fact, the contents of a book's final chapter will usually make little sense if the reader does not know what has preceded it. Many Christians, however, in their desire to understand what the Bible teaches about the last days, begin by turning to the book of Revelation. The book of Revelation is certainly important for an understanding of the outworking of God's redemptive work in history, but the book of Revelation is, so to speak, the final chapter. In order to understand biblical eschatology, we must understand the entire Bible. It is true that biblical eschatology focuses on the end of redemptive history, but the end of that history can only be understood within the context of the whole of that history. The redemptive events described in the New Testament are the fulfillment of the promises found in the Old Testament. These ancient promises go back to the very beginning, to the five books of Moses.

The Pentateuch in Context

Christians and others have used the term “Pentateuch” since at least the third century to refer to the first five books of the Bible. In Jewish tradition, however, these books are usually referred to as the Torah and are the first section of the Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible.¹ The overarching genre of the Pentateuch is historical narrative, but it also contains other genres such as law and poetry. The historical narrative of the Pentateuch, like that of the other historical books of the Old Testament, may best be described as theological history. In other words, the Pentateuch is a historical account written for a specific purpose, namely to reveal the nature of Israel’s God.²

The books of the Pentateuch themselves nowhere indicate the name of their author, but the New Testament and Jewish tradition both attribute authorship to Moses (Matt. 19:7; 22:24; Mark 7:10; 12:26; John 1:17; 5:46; 7:23).³ In the nineteenth century, this traditional understanding of the authorship of the Pentateuch was challenged with the rise of the documentary hypothesis. According to this hypothesis, the Pentateuch is composed of four distinct sources: the Yahwistic source (J), the Elohist source (E), Deuteronomy (D), and the Priestly source (P). These sources were gradually combined and edited, eventually resulting in the final form of the Pentateuch in approximately the fifth century B.C. It is well beyond the scope of this work to provide a critique of the documentary hypothesis.⁴ Suffice it to say, however, that while more conservative scholars have always rejected the hypothesis, critical scholars are now reevaluating it as well. The literary unity of the Pentateuch is now much more widely acknowledged.⁵

Among those who accept not only literary unity but also Mosaic authorship for the Pentateuch, there is a general consensus regarding its original audience and the historical occasion for its writing. These five books were written and originally addressed to the people of Israel during that time in their history following the exodus from Egypt when they were on the

1. Alexander 2002, 3.

2. Dillard and Longman 1994, 64.

3. Both Jewish and Christian scholars have also acknowledged that some later minor editing occurred.

4. For a traditional conservative Christian critique of the documentary hypothesis see Allis 1949; see also Harrison 1969, 1–82. For a helpful Jewish critique, see Cassuto 1961. For more recent studies see Kikawada and Quinn 1985; Wenham 1988; Garrett 1991; and Whybray 1994.

5. Reevaluation of the documentary hypothesis by critical scholars, however, has not led to their acceptance of Mosaic authorship.

plains of Moab, east of the Jordan River preparing to enter the Promised Land.⁶ Moses, their leader since the exodus from Egypt, would not be entering the land with them (Num. 20:12). But because he knew what his people needed, he composed the Pentateuch. Within these five books, Moses explains to the people of Israel who they are, why God brought them out of Egypt, and what God expected of them in terms of his covenant with them. The Pentateuch, then, was originally addressed to a specific people (Israel) within a specific historical context (the eve of their conquest of Canaan).

For the sake of convenience, it is helpful to deal with each of the five books of Moses as separate documents. It should be noted, however, that the five books of the Pentateuch are in actuality a unified literary entity. As T. D. Alexander observes, the later books of the Pentateuch presuppose knowledge of the earlier books, while the earlier books are incomplete without the later ones.⁷ In addition, the Pentateuch as a whole has a distinct thematic connection with the books of Joshua to 2 Kings. As we look at the individual books and the smaller sections within each of these books, this larger literary context must always be kept in mind.

Genesis

The book of Genesis may be divided into two major sections: the primeval history (1:1–11:26) and the patriarchal history (11:27–50:26). Within this broad outline there exists a distinctive literary structure. Following a brief prologue (1:1–2:3), the book is divided into ten sections of varying length that are indicated and introduced by variations of the phrase “These are the generations [*toledot*] of . . .” (2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10; 11:27; 25:12; 25:19; 36:1; 37:2). Some of the *toledot* headings introduce extended historical narratives, while others introduce genealogies.

The Primeval History (Gen. 1:1–11:26)

Of the fifty chapters of Genesis, the first eleven narrate what is often referred to as the primeval history. These chapters recount history from creation to the time of Abram’s call. The amount of space the author devotes to the primeval history (eleven chapters) compared to the amount of space

6. Sailhamer 1992, 5–6.

7. Alexander 2002, xv n. 3.

he devotes to the patriarchal history (thirty-nine chapters) indicates that the primeval history is essentially introductory and preparatory. The patriarchal narratives are the author's primary interest. The first eleven chapters of Genesis place the patriarchs into a broader creational context. They reveal, as Gordon Wenham observes, that the "God who called Abraham was no local divinity but the creator of the whole universe."⁸ Genesis 1–11, then, provides the historical and theological background to Abram's call and ultimately to the birth of Israel. These chapters reveal the hopeless situation of fallen man without the gracious intervention of God, and they set the stage for the revelation of God's covenantal promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. These promises are the means by which God will begin to fulfill his original purposes for all of creation.⁹

When read in its ancient Near Eastern context, it also becomes evident that the primeval history of Genesis 1–11 presents its readers with a worldview that is dramatically different from that of the surrounding cultures.¹⁰ It directly challenges the contemporary pagan views of deity, the universe, and the nature and purpose of mankind. Israel had only recently been redeemed from the idolatrous environment of Egypt and was soon to come into contact with the equally idolatrous environment of Canaan. The primeval history reveals to Israel the truth about God, creation, and sin that the people would have to understand in order to counter and resist the false pagan worldviews surrounding them on every side.

The Creator and His Creation

An examination of the structure of Genesis indicates that the creation account in Genesis 1:1–2:3 functions as a prologue or introduction to the book as a whole. In this prologue, the people of Israel learn that their God, the God who brought them out of Egypt, is not merely some local tribal deity. He is not like the false gods of the surrounding nations. Instead, he is the Creator of the universe and the only true God. He is the sovereign King over all. This passage beautifully describes God's creation of all things followed by his rest from his labors.

8. Wenham 1987, xxii.

9. Wenham 1987, 1; see also Sailhamer 1992, 81.

10. Livingston 1974.

In Genesis 1:1 we read: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” The temporal clause “In the beginning” points to the fact that the space/time universe in which we live had an absolute beginning.¹¹ It is not eternal. The subject of this first sentence of Genesis is “God,” the one who created the universe. The word translated “God” here is *’elohim*, and it is used some thirty-five times in the prologue alone. This chapter is predominantly about him. God is said to have created “the heavens and the earth.” In other words, God created the universe and all that is in it. The universe did not come into being by spontaneous generation. Everything that is owes its existence to God (Neh. 9:6; Rev. 10:6; Col. 1:16).¹² As the Creator, God is also the sovereign King over all that he has made, and all that he has made exists to glorify him (Col. 1:16; Rev. 4:11).¹³ He is the Great King, and the creation is intended to be his kingdom.

Genesis 1:2 describes the universe as “without form and void.”¹⁴ With the universe in this condition, the Spirit of God hovers over the formless deep. On the first three days of creation God creates light (1:3–5), the sky and seas (1:6–8), and dry land and plants (1:9–13). On the last three days of creation, these separate spheres are filled as God creates the heavenly lights (1:14–19), the birds and fish (1:20–23), and finally the land animals and man (1:26–31).¹⁵ There is a parallel, then, between the creative work of the first three days and the creative work of the last three days. In contrast to those pagan religions and philosophies that believe the physical world to be inherently evil, God repeatedly describes the created material world as “good” (1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31).¹⁶

On the fourth day, God creates the sun, the moon, and the stars. Aside from the creation of man on the sixth day, more attention is given to this aspect of creation than to any other. The probable reason for such detailed attention is that the sun and the moon were considered to be important gods in ancient Near Eastern thought while the stars were believed to

11. Kelly 1999, 57. For a comprehensive defense of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* or “creation out of nothing,” see Copan and Craig 2004.

12. Wenham 1987, 36.

13. This doctrine of sovereign creation will be echoed in later eschatological texts that refer to God’s creation of a “new heavens and a new earth” (Isa. 65:17; Rev. 21:1).

14. Heb. תֹהוּ וָבֹהוּ (*tohu wabohu*).

15. For information on the debate over the nature of the days of creation, see Hagopian 2001.

16. Kelly 1999, 87.

impact human lives. In its account of the fourth day of creation, Genesis makes it clear that the sun, moon, and stars are a part of God's creation called into being by his mighty word.¹⁷ They are not gods to be worshiped or consulted.

On the fifth and sixth day, God creates birds, fish, and land animals, each according to its own kind. The climax of the creative work of God, however, is reached with the creation and blessing of man.¹⁸ In Genesis 1:26, God says, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness."¹⁹ The words *tselem* and *demut*, translated "image" and "likeness" respectively, are generally synonymous in this context.²⁰ Their use in this verse indicates that man is like God in certain respects, but their use also indicates that there is a distinction between the Creator and the creature. Likeness is not identity. Man is like God in that he is a rational and moral being who is personal and relational. Man is unlike God in that he is, among other things, a finite creature.

Verse 27 reveals that the creation of man in God's image entailed the creation of man and woman. The man and woman are created for union and communion with their Creator as well as with each other. As a consequence of being made in the image of God, man is given dominion over the rest of creation (Gen. 1:28; Ps. 8:6–8). This "dominion mandate" is the first clear hint in Scripture of God's creational purpose. The first man, created in the image of God, exercises a representative kingship role.²¹ Man is created in God's image and is given "dominion." He is a "vicegerent," or representative, ruling as king on behalf of God.²² This text indicates that God's plan is to establish his kingdom on earth.

God is said to have "blessed" the man and the woman he created in his image, commanding them to be fruitful and to multiply (Gen. 1:28). John Sailhamer rightly notes that "at the center of God's purpose in creating

17. Wenham 1987, 21.

18. Wenham 1987, 38; Dempster 2003, 56–57.

19. For an extended discussion of the meaning of "the image of God," see Hoekema 1986, 11–101. See also Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.15, and Berkhof 1939, 202–10.

20. For example, Genesis 1:27 and 9:6 use only the word *tselem* to describe the concept of the image of God, while Genesis 5:1 uses only the word *demut*. Genesis 5:3 uses both words but reverses their order and the order of the prepositions used in 1:26. This seems to indicate that either word, or both, can be used to describe the concept of the image of God.

21. Dumbrell 1984, 34.

22. Wenham 1987, 33.

humankind was his desire to bless them.”²³ In order to understand Genesis, it is crucial to recognize the prominence of the theme of blessing throughout the book. Out of the approximately 400 occurrences of the Hebrew root *brk* in the entire Old Testament, 88 (almost one-fourth) are found in Genesis.²⁴ The word “blessing” is used in several contexts in Scripture, but as Christopher Mitchell observes, when it is used in the context of God blessing man, as in verse 28, it may be defined as “any benefit or utterance which God freely bestows in order to make known to the recipient and to others that he is favorably disposed toward the recipient.”²⁵

After blessing the man and the woman and giving them their mandate to be fruitful, to fill the earth, and to have dominion, God beholds the work of his hands and declares it to be very good (1:28–31). Following the creation of the heavens and the earth, God then rests on the seventh day (2:1–2). Scripture informs us in this text that God “blessed” the seventh day and “made it holy” (2:3). God blesses and sanctifies the day that represents the consummation of his creative work.²⁶ We see then that the prologue of Genesis 1:1–2:3 moves from God’s creative work to God’s blessed rest, the goal of creation.

The Garden and the Fall

Genesis 2:4 introduces the first major section of the book: the “generations [*toledot*] of the heavens and the earth.” This section of Genesis (2:4–4:26) explains what happened to God’s good creation. Genesis 2:4–7 describes God’s creation of the man (*’adam*) from the dust of the ground (*’adamah*). Verses 8–14 then paint a vivid picture of the garden planted in Eden by God, the garden in which he placed the man he had created. The garden is the place of God’s unique presence much like the tabernacle and the temple at a later point in Israel’s history.²⁷ In fact, as G. K. Beale

23. Sailhamer 1992, 405.

24. See *NIDOTTE*, 1:757; Mitchell 1987, 185.

25. Mitchell 1987, 165. Mitchell also observes that in the context of man blessing man in the Old Testament, blessing means either “declarations that God has blessed and/or will bless the person to whom the benediction is addressed,” or “wishes or prayers for God to bless” (pp. 167–68). When man blesses God, blessing refers to “man’s natural response to God’s benefaction” (pp. 169–70).

26. There is some indication in the text of Genesis and other passages of Scripture that God’s creation Sabbath is eternal (see Collins 2006, 88–93).

27. Waltke 2001, 85. Also see the comments on Exodus 25–31 in chapter 2 for a more detailed discussion of the similarities between the tabernacle and the creation narrative.

observes, “the Garden of Eden was the first archetypal temple in which the first man worshipped God.”²⁸ In the midst of this garden stand the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (2:9). These trees, in particular the latter, become central to the following narrative.

God gives to the man he has created a command, telling him that he may eat of any tree in the garden, but he is forbidden to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (2:15–17).²⁹ He is then given a warning: “in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (v. 17). God’s command is not arbitrary. The purpose of the command is “to raise man for a moment from the influence of his own ethical inclination to the point of a choosing for the sake of personal attachment to God alone.”³⁰ God’s command presents Adam with the choice between life and death, between blessing and judgment. If Adam disobeys the command by eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the result will be death (Gen. 2:17). By means of this command, God puts Adam’s obedience to the test. Will he submit to God in faith or will he reject God and assert his own moral autonomy?

What is the nature of this arrangement that God makes with Adam? Is it a covenant? It has been objected that the word “covenant” does not appear in this text, but it is important to note that the presence of a word is not necessary for the presence of a concept.³¹ It may also be objected that this arrangement with Adam does not involve any oaths or ceremonial rituals. However, as C. John Collins observes, this objection mistakenly “takes the features of *certain* covenants and makes them normative for *all* covenants.”³² We shall examine the nature of covenants more fully in our

28. Beale 2004, 66. Beale also suggests that because “Adam and Eve were to subdue and rule ‘over all the earth,’ it is plausible to suggest that they were to extend the geographical boundaries of the garden until Eden covered the whole earth” (pp. 81–82).

29. As Dumbrell (1984, 38) explains, “The phrase ‘knowledge of good and evil’ is better taken . . . as referring to the exercise of absolute moral autonomy, a prerogative which the Bible reserves to God alone.”

30. Vos 1948, 32. See also Robertson 1980, 84.

31. As we shall see, the word “covenant” does not appear in the text that describes the institution of the Davidic covenant either (2 Sam. 7). But that arrangement is elsewhere referred to as a “covenant” (e.g., Ps. 89:3, 28, 34, 39). The same is true in the case of this arrangement between God and Adam. Two other texts (one biblical and one apocryphal) apparently speak of this arrangement as a “covenant.” Although there is some disagreement about the interpretation, it is possible that Hosea 6:7 is a reference to this arrangement. The apocryphal book Ecclesiasticus also speaks of this arrangement as a “covenant” (14:17).

32. Collins 2006, 113.

discussion of the covenantal arrangement with Noah in Genesis 6. Suffice it to say at this point that the arrangement between God and Adam may properly be understood as a covenant.³³

Genesis 2:18–25 details the creation of the woman and her relationship to the man as his helper.³⁴ Then in Genesis 3:1, a new character enters the narrative. The serpent is an instrument of Satan, the adversary of God.³⁵ Genesis does not explain the origin of this deceiver or how he came to be God's enemy; it simply explains that he cleverly tempts the woman to eat that which God had forbidden (3:2–5). The entrance of sin into human history is then recorded in a few short words: "So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate" (3:6).³⁶ By listening to the words of the serpent rather than submitting to the word of God, man allowed Satan to usurp dominion and establish his own kingdom in place of God's.³⁷

God's good creation has now been marred by sin. Evil has reared its head, and God's goal of establishing his kingdom on earth has been challenged by a usurper. An important question has now been raised. Has God's good creation been permanently ruined, or can it be redeemed? If it can be redeemed, how will God accomplish this redemption? The answers to these questions are set forth throughout the remainder of Scripture, but a hint is given immediately following Adam's sin.

God's response to Adam's disobedience is swift. After confronting the man and the woman, who both attempt to shift the blame (3:8–13), God pronounces his judgment first to the serpent, then to the woman, and finally to the man (3:14–19). He pronounces a curse on the serpent (3:14), but

33. The Westminster Confession of Faith refers to this covenant as a "covenant of works" (7.2). The Westminster Larger Catechism (Q. 20) and Shorter Catechism (Q. 12) refer to it as a "covenant of life." For a helpful survey of Reformed writings on the covenant with Adam, see Ward 2003.

34. The Hebrew word עֲזָרָה (*ezer*), translated "helper," appears nineteen times in the Old Testament. Sixteen times it is used in reference to God, indicating that the term does not carry connotations of inferiority.

35. Waltke 2001, 90.

36. Dumbrell (1984, 38) explains that by eating the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil "man was intruding into an area reserved for God alone, and the violation of the command is tantamount to an assertion of equality with God, a snatching at deity."

37. See John 12:31; 14:30; 2 Cor. 4:4, where Satan is designated ruler of the world.

in the process of pronouncing this curse, God makes a promise that gives mankind reason for hope. Man's fall has resulted in the need for divine redemption, a need that God immediately addresses. To the serpent he says, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel" (3:15). This verse has often been referred to as the *protevangelium*, or the first gospel. It is grace and mercy in the midst of the ultimate tragedy. It is also a forward-looking promise, an eschatological promise.

God's pronouncement hints that humanity will henceforth be divided into two communities: the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent.³⁸ God promises that he himself will initiate and perpetuate conflict between them. The verb translated "bruise," as Wenham explains, is iterative. "It implies repeated attacks by both sides to injure the other."³⁹ The text, therefore, is profoundly eschatological in that it points to "a long struggle between good and evil, with mankind eventually triumphing."⁴⁰

After pronouncing the curse upon the serpent, God turns to the woman and tells her that childbirth will now be accompanied by intense suffering (3:16). She is also told that her "desire" will be for her husband. The similarities between this statement and that in 4:7 indicate that what God means is that the woman will desire to dominate her husband. God's judgment on the man is the lengthiest (3:17–19). Because he has disobeyed God's explicit command, the ground will be cursed, and the growing of food will now be extremely difficult. The land will now bring forth thorns and thistles. God's natural creation has been corrupted because of man's sin, and it now stands in need of redemption (Rom. 8:19–22). Finally, the man is told that he will return to the ground from which he was taken. In other words, he will die.⁴¹

38. Waltke 2001, 93.

39. Wenham 1987, 80.

40. Wenham 1987, 80. Allusions to this text may be found in the New Testament (Rom. 16:20; Heb. 2:14; Rev. 12:1–17).

41. On the basis of a comparison with 1 Kings 2:36–46, Vos (1948, 38) suggests that this death sentence can be understood as the fulfillment of the threat of Gen. 2:17, if the words "in the day" are understood as a Hebrew idiom meaning "as surely as." Waltke (2001, 87–88) argues that the threat in Gen. 2:17 referred primarily to spiritual death and that physical death was an additional judgment pronounced after man sinned. Whether Vos is correct or not about the Hebrew idiom, it is certain that on the day Adam sinned, spiritual death occurred, and the process of physical death began. See also Collins 2006, 116–19, 160–62; Ward 2003, 113 n. 4.

After graciously providing clothes for the man and the woman (Gen. 3:21), God exiles them from the garden to prevent them from eating of the tree of life and perpetuating their fallen condition forever (3:22–24).⁴² By disobeying God, man has cut himself off from the place of God’s unique presence and blessing. He has allowed Satan to establish his dominion on earth (John 12:31; 14:30; 2 Cor. 4:4). He has separated himself from the one who is life itself (Ps. 36:9). The restoration of God’s kingdom and blessing and the redemption of man will become of primary importance throughout the remainder of the book of Genesis and throughout the entire Bible.⁴³ These are fundamental elements of biblical eschatology.

These first three chapters of Genesis were of particular significance to Israel on the borders of the Promised Land because Israel shared many similarities with Adam. William Dumbrell explains:

Significant for biblical eschatology are the several analogies that can be drawn between the man Adam and the nation Israel: Israel was created, as was Adam, outside the divine space to be occupied—Israel outside of Canaan and Adam outside of the garden. Both Israel and Adam were placed in divine space: Israel in Canaan and Adam in Eden. Israel was given, as was Adam, law by which the divine space could be retained.⁴⁴

The question for Israel was simple. Would she obey the law, or would she, like Adam, disobey and be exiled from the land? If Adam proved unfaithful to God in the perfect environment, could Israel hope to keep the law in a land surrounded by idolaters?⁴⁵

The Spread of Sin

Genesis 4–11 tells of the spread of sin throughout the earth, demonstrating man’s desperate need of God’s redemption.⁴⁶ As Geerhardus Vos explains, this era of history clearly shows the consequences of man’s sin when left to itself.⁴⁷ Genesis 4 concludes the first major section of Genesis (2:4–4:26) by telling the story of the murder of Abel by his brother Cain

42. Dumbrell 1984, 37.

43. Ciampa 2007, 258.

44. Dumbrell 1994, 29.

45. Waltke 2001, 101.

46. Ross 1988, 77–78.

47. Vos 1948, 45.

and Cain's subsequent exile. Genesis 5:1 begins a new section: "the book of the generations [*toledot*] of Adam." The first part of this section (5:1–32) is a genealogy of ten generations from Adam to Noah. The dominant theme throughout this genealogy is death. The words "and he died" are the common refrain, repeated over and over. Because of Adam's sin, the guilt of sin, a corrupted nature, and death have come to all men.

There is, however, reason for hope. When the genealogy reaches Enoch, we do not find the expected words "and he died." Instead, verse 24 says, "Enoch walked with God, and he was not, for God took him." To "walk with God" indicates a special intimacy with God. To say that Enoch was not and that God took him indicates that he somehow suddenly disappeared.⁴⁸ Allen Ross comments, "This one exception to the reign of death provides a ray of hope for the human race, as if to say that death was not the final answer."⁴⁹

The second part of "the book of the generations of Adam" is found in Genesis 6:1–8. The key theme of this section is the wickedness of man. Verses 1–4 speak of the "sons of God" taking the daughters of men as their wives and bearing children with them. This notoriously difficult text has been understood in a number of ways: (1) many have understood the "sons of God" to be fallen angels; (2) others have understood them to be lesser gods in the divine pantheon; (3) some have suggested that they are the descendants of Seth; (4) some have argued that they are despotic and tyrannical rulers descended from the wicked Lamech (4:18–24). The best explanation appears to be one that combines elements of (1) and (4). As Ross explains, "Fallen angels left their habitation and indwelt human despots and warriors, the great ones of the earth."⁵⁰ If this interpretation is correct, the phrase "sons of God" here refers to demon-possessed human tyrants. God looks down on this widespread wickedness and determines to send a cataclysmic judgment upon man and all of creation (6:5–7). There is, however, grace in the midst of this judgment, as one righteous man, Noah, finds favor in the eyes of the Lord (6:8). He will be saved from the wrath to come.

Genesis 6:9–9:29 is the third section of Genesis: "the generations [*toledot*] of Noah." These chapters describe the flood and God's covenant with

48. Waltke 2001, 115.

49. Ross 1988, 174.

50. Ross 1988, 182; see also Waltke 2001, 117.

Noah. God sees the widespread wickedness of man and determines to send a destructive flood as judgment (6:12–13).⁵¹ God informs Noah of what he intends to do and instructs Noah to build an ark (6:13–17). God then tells Noah, “I will establish my covenant with you . . .” (6:18). This is the first instance in Scripture where the significant term *berit* is used, and it is the first instance where the concept of “covenant” is explicitly mentioned.⁵²

Although English versions of the Bible usually translate the word *berit* as “covenant,” there is some disagreement among scholars about the precise meaning of the Hebrew word.⁵³ Part of this difficulty is due to the wide semantic range of the word.⁵⁴ In addition to being used to refer to the various covenants between God and man, the word is used to describe things as diverse as marriages (Mal. 2:14), personal bonds of friendship (1 Sam. 18:3), arrangements between a people and their king (2 Sam. 5:3), vows to put away foreign wives (Ezra 10:3), commitments to dethrone and replace a queen (2 Kings 11:4), and more. In addition, we find references to a *berit* being made with stones and beasts (Job 5:23), with one’s eyes (Job 31:1), with Leviathan (Job 41:4), with death (Isa. 28:15, 18), and with the day and night (Jer. 33:20, 25).

The diversity of contexts in which the word *berit* is found has made it difficult for lexicographers to find a single concept that is common to all of them, a linguistic common denominator as it were. Etymology has not proven helpful, because there is no agreement on the origin of the word.⁵⁵ Many scholars have focused on ancient Near Eastern texts from surrounding nations in an attempt to discover the basic meaning of the biblical

51. In later books of the Bible, the flood becomes a paradigm of God’s eschatological judgment (Isa. 8:7–8; Matt. 24:37–39; Luke 17:26–27).

52. Other terms are used for “covenant” in addition to *berit* (e.g., *’amanah*, *bozeh*, and *’edut*), but the absence of any of these words in a given text does not necessarily mean the absence of the concept. As we have already observed, the word for “covenant” is not found in the historical narrative describing the inauguration of the Davidic covenant, but other texts do describe it as a “covenant” indicating that the concept of “covenant” is present even if the word is not. And as we have already seen, the covenant concept is present in the early chapters of Genesis describing the arrangement between God and Adam.

53. See *HALOT*, s.v. בְּרִית; *NIDOTTE*, 1:747–55.

54. As Grant Osborne (2006, 100) explains, “The semantic range of a word is the result of the synchronic study, a list of the ways the word was used in the era when the work was written.”

55. In any case, etymology must be used with caution. The meaning of a given word often changes over time, so etymology may not tell us anything about the contemporary meaning of a word. The meaning of a word is determined by its usage in a given context, not necessarily by its origin (see *NIDOTTE*, 1:752).

word.⁵⁶ None of these studies, however, has led to complete agreement. The standard lexicons and dictionaries reflect the difficulty in the different basic definitions they provide for *berit*.⁵⁷

In the end, the meaning of the word *berit* must be determined by examining its usage in the Old Testament. In all of the various Old Testament contexts, *berit* seems to be used generally to refer to an arrangement involving two or more parties.⁵⁸ The kind of arrangement depends upon the context. It may be either a unilateral commitment⁵⁹ or a bilateral agreement⁶⁰ (i.e., pact⁶¹ or bond⁶²), either of which entails certain obligations.⁶³ Many of these arrangements are ratified by a solemn oath⁶⁴ and/or a ceremonial rite⁶⁵ that either confirms an existing relationship or establishes a new one.⁶⁶ Some of these

56. George Mendenhall (*IDB*, 1:716–17), for example, has looked at ancient Near Eastern secular covenants and discerned four types: the suzerainty covenant in which a superior binds an inferior to certain obligations; a parity covenant in which both parties are bound by an oath; a Patron covenant in which the superior binds himself to an obligation for the benefit of the inferior; and a promissory covenant in which one party simply guarantees the future performance of some obligation. M. Weinfeld (*TDOT*, 2:270; Weinfeld 1970) distinguishes between suzerain-vassal treaties and royal grant treaties.

57. The word is defined as a “pact” (*BDB*, 136–37), an “agreement” (*HALOT*, 1:157–58), an “obligation” (*TDOT*, 2:255; *TLOT*, 1:256), a “mutual commitment” (*NIDOTTE*, 1:752), a “solemn promise made binding by an oath” (*IDB*, 1:714), and an “agreement” involving promises made under oath (*ABD*, 1:1179).

58. More specific definitions do not account for all Old Testament uses of the word.

59. See Mendenhall 1955, 5.

60. *HALOT*, 1:157. As Louis Berkhof (1939, 262) explains, “The word *berith* may denote a mutual voluntary agreement (dipleuric), but also a disposition or arrangement imposed by one party on another (monopleuric).”

61. *BDB*, 136.

62. Robertson 1980, 5.

63. *TLOT*, 1:256–66; McComiskey 1985a, 63. The obligations involved depend on the specific covenant as well as the type of covenant. As we shall see, some covenants closely resemble ancient Near Eastern suzerain-vassal treaties, which contain mutual obligations (Kline 1963). Other covenants closely resemble ancient royal land grants that were given in the form of unilateral promissory oaths, in which the one making the promise unilaterally swears to fulfill certain self-imposed obligations (Weinfeld 1970).

64. Williamson 2007, 39; *TDOT*, 2:256. In some covenants between God and man, God alone makes the oath (e.g., Gen. 15). In other covenants, both God and the human participants in the covenant make oaths (e.g., Ex. 24).

65. *TDOT*, 2:262; Kalluveetil 1982, 11.

66. Kalluveetil 1982, 103. Several scholars understand “relationship” to be part of the basic definition of “covenant” (e.g., Robertson 1980, 5; McComiskey 1985a, 63; Williams 2005, 45). Kline (2000, 5) has argued, on the other hand, that the definition of “covenant” should be distinguished from the relationship that it effects (cf. Hafemann 2007, 26).

arrangements are accompanied by an external sign (e.g., the rainbow in the Noahic covenant, circumcision in the Abrahamic covenant, the Sabbath in the Mosaic covenant).⁶⁷ In Scripture, such arrangements are made between God and man (e.g., Noah, Abraham, David) and between human parties (e.g., Jonathan and David in 1 Sam. 18:3). The specific nature of these arrangements, or “covenants,” will be examined in the course of our study.

During the flood God graciously preserves a remnant of humanity, Noah and his family, from certain destruction (Gen. 7:23).⁶⁸ In the hands of God, the flood becomes an act of re-creation, a watery chaos from which the new world emerges.⁶⁹ After the floodwaters subside, Noah worships God, and God promises to never again “strike down every living creature” (8:20–22). He will preserve the earth until the final judgment (2 Peter 2:4–12; 3:4–7).⁷⁰ This promise, as Paul Williamson explains, “gives us the assurance that God will sustain the creation order, despite the chaos that continually threatens to engulf it.”⁷¹

God then blesses Noah and his sons (Gen. 9:1–7). His blessing here is almost, but not quite, identical to the original blessing of Adam and Eve at creation (1:28–30). The similarities and differences are noted by Roy Ciampa.

In chapter 9 Noah becomes a kind of second Adam, and he receives the same command as was given in Genesis 1:28, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth,” with the creatures of the air, earth and water once again mentioned. But there is something different. Noah is not told to subdue the earth and have dominion over all those creatures. He is told that they will fear him and that they are now given to him for food. There is a new start, but we have not been brought all the way back to the clean slate of Genesis 1.⁷²

In other words, with Noah there is a new start, but Noah is not starting at the same place Adam started. The flood did not permanently solve the problem of sin and death.

67. *TDOT*, 2:263.

68. See Hasel 1974, 135–36. Hasel explains, “The unique event of the total annihilation of the existence of man in the flood actualized the possibility of a continuation of human existence through the salvation of a remnant” (p. 140).

69. Waltke 2001, 127–29.

70. Waltke 2001, 143.

71. Williamson 2007, 67; see also Golding 2004, 149–50.

72. Ciampa 2007, 262.

In Genesis 9:8–17, God formally establishes his covenant with Noah and provides the sign of the rainbow. As William Dumbrell explains, “God’s covenant with Noah can be called eschatological in the sense that it reestablishes the divine plan for creation.”⁷³ It demonstrates clearly the connection between creation and redemption.⁷⁴ The relationship between the universal creational scope of the covenant and God’s redemptive work is significant. Williamson notes, “the universal scope of this covenant implies that the blessing for which humanity had been created and the creation had now been preserved will ultimately encompass not just one people or nation, but rather the whole earth.”⁷⁵ The kingdom of God and his blessing for mankind will be reestablished on earth.

In Genesis 9:18–29, we find a text that was important to the Israelites on the border of Canaan as they were preparing to go into the Promised Land. The theme of this section is blessing and cursing upon Noah’s sons Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Noah, who until this point has been described as righteous, becomes drunk and lies naked in his tent (9:20–21). Ham, the father of Canaan, discovers him there but rather than honor his father by covering him, he tells his brothers. Shem and Japheth then cover their father. When Noah discovers what has been done, he pronounces curses on Canaan and blessings on Shem and Japheth. This is significant because, as Bruce Waltke explains, “The Canaanites succeed the Cainites as the curse-laden descendants of the Serpent.”⁷⁶ Israel had to understand that in order to receive the land and the blessing, this curse on the Canaanites would have to be carried out.⁷⁷

The fourth section of Genesis, “the generations [*toledot*] of the sons of Noah, Shem, Ham, and Japheth” (10:1–11:9), contains two major parts: the table of nations and the story of the tower of Babel. The table of nations lists seventy nations. Fourteen are descended from Japheth; thirty are descended from Ham; and twenty-six are descended from Shem. The nations descended from Japheth have little interaction with Israel during

73. Dumbrell 1994, 31.

74. Robertson 1980, 110–11. As Dumbrell (1984, 27) explains, since a flood would be an appropriate response to man’s wickedness in any age, “mankind has been preserved by grace alone.” More specifically, in 1 Peter, the salvation of Noah from the flood is viewed as a type of Christian salvation (1 Peter 3:20–21).

75. Williamson 2007, 68.

76. Waltke 2001, 150.

77. Ross 1988, 218.

her later history. From Ham, however, would come not only the Canaanites but also several of Israel's most significant enemies including Egypt, Philistia, Assyria, and Babylon (10:6–13). The descendants of Shem will eventually include Israel.

After describing the fruitful multiplication of Noah's sons, the text turns to the last great judgment upon mankind during the primeval history—the tower of Babel (11:1–9). The people have decided to build “a city and a tower with its top in the heavens,” and they say, “let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth” (11:4). This project is an affront to God because the tower is an alternative to his kingdom. It is the city/kingdom of man opposed to the city/kingdom of God.⁷⁸ God immediately judges this act of pride and arrogance by confusing the language of men and dispersing them (11:5–9). Ross explains the significance: “With this story the common history of all humankind comes to an abrupt end, as the human race is hopelessly scattered across the face of the entire earth.”⁷⁹

Genesis 11:10–26 is the fifth section of Genesis: “the generations [*toledot*] of Shem.” This genealogy is a transitional text that narrows the focus of Genesis to Abram. Just as there were ten generations between Adam and Noah, there are ten generations between Shem and Abram. The purpose of this section, then, is to trace Abram's ancestry back to Shem.⁸⁰ It demonstrates that the call of Abram (Gen. 12:1–3) was not arbitrary. Abram was a man “whose ancestors represented faith in the Lord and to whom the promise of blessing had been extended.”⁸¹

Taken as a whole, Genesis 1–11 provides the necessary context for understanding the patriarchal narratives of chapters 12–50. Gordon Wenham helpfully summarizes the importance of these first chapters of Genesis:

With 11:26 the scene has finally been set for the patriarchal history to unfold. The opening chapters of Genesis have provided us the fundamental insights for interpreting these chapters properly. Gen 1 revealed the character of God and the nature of the world man finds himself in. Gen 2 and 3 portrayed the relationship between man and woman, and the effects man's disobedience has had on man-woman and divine-human relations. Chap. 5 sketched the

78. Dumbrell 1984, 61.

79. Ross 1988, 242.

80. Ross 1988, 249.

81. Ross 1988, 250.

long years that passed before the crisis of the great flood (chaps. 6–9), which almost destroyed all humanity for its sinfulness. The table of nations (chap. 10) started the process of Israel’s geographical and political self-definition with respect to the other nations in the world, but Gen 11:1–9 reminded us that the nations were in confusion and that mankind’s proudest achievements were but folly in God’s sight and under his judgment.

However, according to 11:10–26, just five generations after Peleg, whose lifetime according to 10:25 saw the confusion of languages at Babel, Abram arrives. As 12:3 will declare, it is through him that all the families of the earth will be blessed. Man is not without hope.⁸²

The Patriarchal History (Gen. 11:27–50:26)

The patriarchal history does not technically begin at Genesis 12:1, but at 11:27 with “the generations [*toledot*] of Terah.” Unfortunately, modern chapter divisions introduce an unnatural break in the text. Within the patriarchal history there are five sections marked by *toledot* headings, but since two of these are brief genealogies, the patriarchal history may be helpfully divided into three major parts: the story of Abraham (11:27–25:11); the story of Jacob (25:19–35:29), and the story of Joseph (37:2–50:26). Each of these three major parts begins with a revelation from God that sets the stage for what follows (12:1–3; 25:22–23; 37:5–9).⁸³

The overarching focus of the patriarchal history is on God’s gracious promises of blessing, promises that are given first to Abraham, then to Isaac, and finally to Jacob. The importance of these promises for understanding the remainder of Scripture and biblical eschatology cannot be overstated. They are, as Willem VanGemeren explains, “the very platform of the history of redemption.”⁸⁴ The centrality of the patriarchal promises and history may be observed in the fact that God himself comes to be known in subsequent biblical history as “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” (Ex. 3:6, 15, 16; 4:5; 1 Kings 18:36; 1 Chron. 29:18; 2 Chron. 30:6; Acts 3:13).⁸⁵ The very name of God becomes intimately associated with the patriarchs to whom he makes the promises.

82. Wenham 1987, 253–54.

83. Wenham 1994, 168–69.

84. VanGemeren 1988a, 122.

85. Bartholomew and Goheen 2004, 57–58.

Abraham: Promise and Covenant

Genesis 11:27–32 introduces the sixth section of Genesis, the “generations [*toledot*] of Terah” (11:27–25:11). The main body of the narrative is found in 12:1–22:19. Genesis 22:20–25:11 then serves as an epilogue to the entire section.⁸⁶ The main body of the narrative begins with the call of Abram (12:1–9) and ends with his supreme test, God’s command to sacrifice Isaac (22:1–19). The stories between the call of Abram and his test focus on God’s promise of the land (12:10–15:21) and his promise of offspring (chs. 16–21).⁸⁷

The call of Abram in Genesis 12:1–9 is a pivotal point in redemptive history. According to Gordon Wenham, no section of Genesis is more significant than 11:27–12:9.⁸⁸ It is, as Bruce Waltke observes, “the thematic center of the Pentateuch.”⁸⁹ While the first eleven chapters of Genesis focus primarily on the terrible consequences of sin, God’s promises to Abram in Genesis 12 focus on the hope of redemption, of restored blessing and reconciliation with God. God is going to deal with the problem of sin and evil, and he is going to establish his kingdom on earth. How he is going to do this begins to be revealed in his promises to Abram.⁹⁰ The remaining chapters of Genesis follow the initial stages in the fulfillment of these promises. Thus Genesis 12:1–9 sets the stage for the remainder of Genesis and the remainder of the Bible.⁹¹

The key section of Genesis 12:1–9 is the explicit call of God to Abram found in verses 1–3:

Now Yahweh said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you

86. Ross 1988, 80–81.

87. Ross 1988, 254–55.

88. Wenham 1987, 281.

89. Waltke 2001, 208.

90. Williamson 2007, 77; Dumbrell 1984, 47.

91. Bruce Waltke (2001, 209) elaborates on this important point: “The call of God to Abraham is the sneak preview for the rest of the Bible. It is a story of God bringing salvation to all tribes and nations through this holy nation, administered at first by the Mosaic covenant and then by the Lord Jesus Christ through the new covenant. The elements of Abraham’s call are reaffirmed to Abraham (12:7; 15:5–21; 17:4–8; 18:18–19; 22:17–18), to Isaac (26:24), to Jacob (28:13–15; 35:11–12; 46:3), to Judah (49:8–12), to Moses (Ex. 3:6–8; Deut. 34:4), and to the ten tribes of Israel (Deut. 33). They are reaffirmed by Joseph (Gen. 50:24), by Peter to the Jews (Acts 3:25), and by Paul to the Gentiles (Gal. 3:8).”

a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

The theme of God’s call to Abram is evident in the fivefold repetition of the key terms “bless” or “blessing.” Also important is the repetition of the word “you” and “your.” Man’s sin has resulted in God’s curse (Gen. 3:14, 17; 4:11; 5:29; 9:25), but here God promises to form a people for himself and to restore his original purposes of blessing for mankind (Gen. 1:28).⁹² Abram is somehow going to be the mediator of this restored blessing.

Within God’s call of Abram there are four basic promises: (1) offspring, (2) land, (3) the blessing of Abram himself, and (4) the blessing of the nations through Abram.⁹³ In verse 1, God commands Abram to leave his home and go to the land that he will show Abram. The promise of land is not explicit in this initial command. It is made explicit only when Abram reaches the land of Canaan. At that point, God promises Abram, “To your offspring I will give this land” (12:7). This promise of land becomes a key theme throughout the remainder of the Old Testament.⁹⁴ It is especially prominent in the remainder of the Pentateuch and in the books referred to in the Hebrew canon as the Former Prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings). In terms of God’s kingdom purposes, the land promise indicates that God has not abandoned his plan to establish his kingdom on earth. The land promise would have certainly been important to Israel at the time the Pentateuch was originally composed. As Israel stood on the plains of Moab, they were assured that the land they were about to enter had been promised to Abraham and to his offspring by God himself.

In Genesis 12:2, God promises that he will make of Abram “a great nation.” This promise will be fulfilled initially in the birth of the nation of Israel.⁹⁵ This promise necessarily implies that Abram will have offspring, but like the promise of land, the promise of offspring is made explicit only when Abram reaches Canaan (12:7). The promise of offspring is also related to God’s ultimate kingdom purposes. Just as the land promise provides a realm for God’s kingdom in the midst of his creation, the promise of offspring

92. See McComiskey 1985a, 15–58.

93. As VanGemeren (1988a, 108) observes, Abraham (22:17–18), Isaac (26:3–4), and Jacob (28:13–15) each received God’s fourfold promise.

94. See Johnston and Walker 2000.

95. Dumbrell 1984, 66–67.

anticipates a people for his kingdom. God then promises to bless Abram and make his name great so that he will be a blessing.⁹⁶

The fourth element of God's promise is that in Abram "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (12:3). Abraham will be the head of the "one family by whom all of the other families of the earth will be blessed."⁹⁷ In fact, the blessing of all the families of the earth is the primary purpose behind God's calling of Abram. His calling and the promises he is given are not ends in themselves. Abram is promised offspring, a land, and personal blessing in order that he might be the mediator of God's blessing to all the families of the earth.⁹⁸ As we proceed, the eschatological significance of God's promises to Abram and his determination to bless all the families of the earth will become clearer. As we will see, this blessing will come through the establishment of God's kingdom. From this point forward in Genesis, "the writer's primary concern is to trace the development of God's resolution to bless."⁹⁹

The promise of God is endangered when Abram goes to Egypt during a famine and lies in order to protect himself. As a result of his dishonesty, Sarai is taken into the house of Pharaoh. God, however, will not allow his promises to be thwarted and providentially intervenes (12:10–20). After Abram returns to Canaan, he separates from his nephew Lot (Gen. 13). God then reaffirms the promise of land (13:14–15) and expands the promise of offspring, telling Abram that his offspring will be as numerous as "the dust of the earth" (13:16). In Genesis 14, Abram rescues Lot from warring kings and is then blessed by the mysterious Melchizedek, king of Salem (14:19–20). Melchizedek's name means "king of righteousness," and he is said to be both a king and a priest (14:18). According to Hebrews 7:1–3, he is a type of Jesus the Messiah.¹⁰⁰

96. Williamson (2007, 78–79) argues that because of the imperative form of the verb the words *וְיִבְרַכְתְּ אֶת אֲבְרָהָם* (*weheyeh berakah*) at the end of verse 2 should be translated as a second command, "Be a blessing," rather than as a certain consequence ("so that you will be a blessing"). This is a possible translation, and the ASV does translate the words in this way, but it is not required. In this type of sentence, the imperative verb can express a consequence (See GKC, §110i; Joüon, §116h).

97. *NIDOTTE*, 4:665.

98. Alexander 2002, 85–86. Allusions to this promise are found in prophetic texts such as Isaiah 19:24 and Jeremiah 4:2.

99. Ross 1988, 253.

100. In general, a "type" is a person, institution, or event that prefigures a subsequent greater event.

Genesis 15 marks the formal establishment of the Abrahamic covenant. In Genesis 12, God had made certain promises to Abram, including the promise of offspring. In chapter 15, Abram voices concern, saying to God, “Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir” (v. 3). God then tells Abram, “your very own son shall be your heir,” and promises him that his offspring will be as numerous as the stars of heaven (vv. 4–5). Abram has been promised a son. And what is Abram’s response to God’s promise? He “believed Yahweh, and he counted it to him as righteousness” (v. 6). Abram is a man of faith. He trusts God and believes that what God has promised, he will certainly do. And God counts it to him as righteousness.¹⁰¹

In Genesis 15:7, God tells Abram, “I am Yahweh who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess.” This historical prologue to the Abrahamic covenant foreshadows the historical prologue to the Ten Commandments, which reads in part: “I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt” (Ex. 20:2). Abram asks God how he is to know that he will possess the land (Gen. 15:8). God’s response takes the form of a ceremonial rite. God commands Abram to bring him several animals, which Abram then cuts in half and places on the ground (vv. 9–11). Abram falls into a deep sleep, and God tells him that his offspring will be sojourners in a foreign land and that they will be afflicted for four hundred years before he brings them back to the land of Canaan (vv. 12–16).¹⁰²

In the form of a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch, God proceeds to pass between the pieces of the animals and makes a covenant with Abram (vv. 17–18). The meaning of this practice is not immediately transparent today, but its meaning would have been clear to the original readers. In such a ceremony, the one passing between the pieces of the animals indicated that he was taking a self-maledictory oath upon himself.¹⁰³ In other words, God invokes a curse of death upon himself if he fails to fulfill the promises he has made to Abram. This ceremony is a way of saying, in effect, “May I be torn in pieces as these animals have been torn in pieces if I should

101. In this context, the verb *hashab*, which is translated “counted,” means to credit to one’s account (Lev. 7:18; 17:3–4; Num. 18:27, 30; Ps. 32:2; Prov. 27:14). See *NIDOTTE*, 2:305–6.

102. As Waltke observes, God’s promise “reveals his sovereign control over history” (Waltke 2001, 247).

103. Robertson 1980, 130.

break my promise” (see also Jer. 34:18).¹⁰⁴ Abram could receive no greater assurance of God’s commitment to his promises.¹⁰⁵

Having established the covenant in Genesis 15, God confirms or ratifies it in Genesis 17 by changing Abram’s name and by instituting circumcision as the seal of the covenant.¹⁰⁶ Wenham observes, “Whereas inaugurating the covenant was entirely the result of divine initiative, confirming it involves a human response.”¹⁰⁷ Abram is ninety-nine years old when God appears to him and reaffirms his covenant promises. God gives Abram a command, saying, “walk before me, and be blameless . . .,” indicating that God expects continued faithfulness from Abraham (v. 1). God will later declare that the very reason he chose Abraham was that Abraham might “command his children and his household after him to keep the way of Yahweh by doing righteousness and justice, so that Yahweh may bring to Abraham what he has promised him” (18:19; 22:15–18; 26:5).

God tells Abram that he will be “the father of a multitude of nations” (17:4). This promise may be understood in both a biological and a spiritual sense.¹⁰⁸ Abram is, in fact, the biological father, not only of Israel, but of many nations (Gen. 25:1–4; 25:12–18; 36). However, the Hebrew word *’ab*, translated as “father,” does not always refer to a biological father (cf. Gen. 45:8; Judg. 18:19; 1 Sam. 24:11; 2 Kings 6:21; Isa. 22:20–21). Abram is best understood as the “father of a multitude of nations” in the sense that he is for them the mediator of God’s blessing. Support for this understanding of Abram’s fatherhood is found in Genesis 17 in the instruction given to Abram to give the covenant sign of circumcision both to his physical offspring and to those who are not his physical offspring (vv. 12–13).¹⁰⁹

Having promised Abram that he would be the father of a multitude of nations, God changes his name to “Abraham” (17:5). His old name,

104. See Robertson 1980, 130.

105. The Abrahamic covenant is in the form of a unilateral promissory oath. As such it closely resembles ancient royal land grants that were given by kings to loyal subjects (Wenham 1987, 333; Weinfeld 1970).

106. Nehemiah 9:7–8 seems to view the events of Genesis 15 and 17 as two elements of a single Abrahamic covenant (Waltke 2001, 263). Nehemiah speaks of the giving of the new name Abraham (Gen. 17) and the promise of land and offspring (Gen. 15) as aspects of the one covenant with Abraham. For the argument that Genesis 15 and 17 present two distinct but related covenants, see Williamson 2007, 89–91.

107. Wenham 1994, 20.

108. Waltke 2001, 260.

109. Alexander 2002, 86–87; Waltke 2001, 260.

“Abram,” means “exalted father.” His new name is a wordplay on the Hebrew words for “father” (*’ab*) and “crowd” (*hamon*).¹¹⁰ One can only imagine the reaction of those who knew this elderly and childless man when he informed them of his new name (“father of a multitude”). Yet every time he was addressed as “Abraham,” he would be immediately reminded of God’s promise to him.¹¹¹ God would give him descendants, and they would be as numerous as the stars in the heavens. This he firmly believed.

God’s promises to Abraham have been incredible thus far: land, offspring, personal blessing, a source of blessing to the nations (Gen. 12:1–7), descendants as numerous as the dust of the earth or the stars of heaven (13:16; 15:5), a son of his own (15:4). And now, when Abraham is ninety-nine years old, God makes yet another amazing promise. He declares to Abraham, “kings shall come from you” (17:6), indicating again God’s purpose to establish his kingdom. The Abrahamic covenant here anticipates the Davidic covenant (2 Sam. 7:5–16; 1 Chron. 17:4–14). Ultimately, kings descended from Abraham will be involved in the fulfillment of the promise of blessing to the nations.¹¹² Here we begin to see the close interrelationship between covenant and kingdom. The covenants not only serve to administer each successive form of God’s kingdom on earth but have as their ultimate goal the full restoration of God’s universal kingdom.¹¹³

The covenant has been made with Abraham, promising him offspring among many other blessings, but in Genesis 17:7, for the first time, God declares that he is not only going to give Abraham offspring, but that he is also going to establish his covenant with Abraham’s offspring. By declaring that he will establish his covenant with Abraham’s offspring, God gives the covenant a future orientation. As he did in his covenant with Noah, God describes this covenant as “everlasting” (cf. 9:16). The use of this word indicates “that a permanent relationship is envisaged, as durable as life itself.”¹¹⁴ The heart of this covenant is found in verse 8, in God’s promise, “I will be their God.”

110. Waltke 2001, 259–60.

111. Ross 1988, 332.

112. See also Psalm 72 (esp. vv. 9–11, 17), which clearly associates the blessing of the nations with the rule of an eschatological Davidic king.

113. See Kline 2000, 4; Dumbrell 1984, 42.

114. Wenham 1994, 29.

God gives Abraham the sign of the covenant in Genesis 17:9–14. He commands Abraham to keep his covenant (v. 9), and tells him that the covenant he is to keep is the circumcision of every male (v. 10). Circumcision is to be a “sign of the covenant” between God and Abraham (v. 11).¹¹⁵ Every male in his household, whether his natural offspring or not, is to be circumcised (vv. 12–13). Those who are not circumcised will be cut off from the people of God because they have broken God’s covenant (v. 14). The sign of circumcision, the removal of the foreskin from the male sexual organ, was appropriate to a covenant that ratified the promise of offspring.¹¹⁶ This outward sign both signified and necessitated a corresponding cleansing of the heart (Lev. 26:41; Deut. 10:16; Jer. 4:4; 9:25–26).¹¹⁷ Circumcision, then, “symbolized the inner purification necessary for a life of obedience and love to God.”¹¹⁸ It is also important to observe that from the time of its institution, circumcision was not a racial sign but a covenantal sign. It was required to be given to foreigners within Abraham’s household. It was, therefore, open to Gentiles (Ex. 12:43–49), and those Gentiles who submitted to the covenant sign became a part of the visible covenant people of God.

Genesis 18–19 recounts the story of the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah, a judgment that becomes a paradigm for future divine judgments. In Deuteronomy, for example, Moses will use the imagery of Sodom and Gomorrah to describe the curses of the covenant (Deut. 29:23; 32:32). The prophets use this imagery to describe the kind of judgment that will befall Israel’s enemies (e.g., Jer. 49:17–18; Zeph. 2:9). The prophets also use this imagery to describe the judgment that will fall upon Israel herself when she forsakes God and embraces wickedness (e.g., Isa. 3:9; Jer. 23:14;

115. It is worth noting that in this text, circumcision is identified by God both as “my covenant” and as “a sign of the covenant.” There is a close relationship here between the sign and the thing signified.

116. Ross 1988, 333.

117. The outward sign did not, however, automatically effect the internal change. Otherwise God would not call those who had been circumcised in the flesh to be circumcised in their heart as well. Faith was required. Abraham, for example, experienced circumcision of the heart before he was given the outward sign of that reality. For him it was a seal of his existing faith (Rom. 4:10–12). Isaac, on the other hand, received the outward sign of inward purification when he was only eight days old (Gen. 21:4). The reception of this sign did not automatically confer upon him the inner purification that it signified. Instead, it required Isaac to be circumcised in his heart, to exercise the faith of his father Abraham and to love God.

118. Robertson 1980, 153.

Amos 4:11). Finally, our Lord Jesus Christ uses the imagery of Sodom and Gomorrah to describe his coming judgment (Luke 17:28–30).

When Abraham is one hundred years old, God fulfills his promise to give Abraham and Sarah a son (Gen. 21:1–7). Sarah gives birth to a boy, and Abraham names the child Isaac, which means “he laughs.” As Wenham explains, “This is the most visible fulfillment of any of the promises so far and also the most central, for without a son Abraham could never have a multitude of descendants, inherit the land, or be a blessing to all the nations.”¹¹⁹ In Genesis 22, however, a dramatic turn occurs as Abraham’s faith in God’s promises is put to the ultimate test. Verse 1 of this chapter immediately states that “God tested Abraham.” With these words, the reader is given insight into what follows, but this is insight that Abraham himself did not have at that time.

God commands Abraham to take Isaac to Moriah and sacrifice him there (22:2). Abraham faces a conflict here between faith in the promises of God and obedience to a command of God that would seem to require the nullification of those promises. On a more existential level, Abraham faced a conflict between his love for his only son (22:2) and his love for God.¹²⁰ Abraham makes the necessary preparations and after a three-day journey, he reaches Moriah. In obedience to God’s command, Abraham prepares to sacrifice Isaac, but at the last possible moment God intervenes and stays Abraham’s hand. We are not told in Genesis how Abraham reconciled the conflict he faced, but Hebrews 11:17–19 indicates that Abraham believed that if Isaac died, God would raise him from the dead. Abraham has passed the test, and as he lifts his eyes he sees a ram caught in a thicket, which he then offers as a sacrifice to God (22:13). In verses 16–18, God emphatically reaffirms his promises to bless Abraham, to multiply his offspring, and to bless all the nations of the earth.

Genesis 22:20–25:11 serves as an epilogue to the story of Abraham. Here we read of the death of Sarah (23:2) and Abraham’s purchase of a burial plot for her in the field of Machpelah in the land of Canaan (23:19). This small piece of land is the first part of Canaan to be owned by Abraham. His purchase is the first step toward the fulfillment of God’s promise to give all of the land to Abraham and his offspring. The story of the marriage of Isaac to Rebekah is then told in Genesis 24. And in Genesis 25, we read

119. Wenham 1994, 86–87.

120. Wenham 1994, 113. See also Kierkegaard 1983.

of the death of Abraham. When he was 175 years old, “Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people” (25:8).¹²¹ He did not live to see the fulfillment of all of God’s promises, but he died in faith, and those promises remained the framework of God’s eschatological plan of redemption.

Jacob: Conflict and Blessing

The story of Abraham is followed by a brief genealogy, “the generations [*toledot*] of Ishmael,” in the seventh section of Genesis (25:12–18). The eighth section of Genesis (25:19–35:29) is the second major part of the patriarchal history: the story of Jacob. This story begins with God’s revelation to Rebekah, the bride of Isaac, concerning the two children struggling in her womb (25:21–22). God declares to Rebekah, “Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the older shall serve the younger” (v. 23). Eventually Rebekah gives birth to twin boys. Esau is born first, and his brother Jacob is born second, holding on to Esau’s heel (vv. 25–26). Esau grows up to be a skillful hunter, while Jacob is said to be “a quiet man, dwelling in tents” (v. 27). Isaac loves Esau, but Rebekah loves Jacob (v. 28).

Esau displays a rash and foolish attitude early in the narrative when he is persuaded by Jacob to sell him his birthright in exchange for bread and a bowl of stew (25:29–34). Already God’s revelation to Rebekah is beginning to be fulfilled. In Genesis 26, God reaffirms to Isaac the promises made to Abraham, promises of a multitude of offspring, of land, of personal blessing, and the promise that in his offspring all the nations of the earth will be blessed (vv. 2–5). In his old age, Isaac prepares to bless Esau, but Rebekah makes plans to ensure that Jacob receives the blessing instead (Gen. 27:1–17). The entire story presupposes the belief of Isaac and Jacob in the efficacy of the patriarchal blessing. As Wenham explains, “Clearly, Genesis sees the deathbed blessing as more than a prayer for the future; it is a prophecy whose fulfillment is certain.”¹²² After deceiving Isaac in order to receive the blessing (27:18–29), Jacob is forced to flee to his uncle Laban because his brother Esau now intends to kill him (27:41–28:5).

121. The words, “gathered to his people” indicates a belief in the soul’s continued life after the death of the body.

122. Wenham 1994, 216.

During his journey from Beersheba toward Haran, Jacob has a dream in which God reveals himself and reaffirms the covenant promises. Jacob renames the place Bethel, which means “the house of God” (28:10–22). Upon reaching the home of his uncle Laban, Jacob encounters Laban’s daughter Rachel and agrees to work for seven years in order to marry her. At the end of the seven years, however, Jacob is tricked into marrying Rachel’s older sister Leah instead. Although extremely unhappy about the situation, he agrees to work another seven years for Rachel (29:1–30). Genesis 29:31–30:24 narrates the birth of Jacob’s first eleven sons and one daughter. The birth of Joseph to Rachel who, like Sarah and Rebekah, has been barren (29:31; cf. 11:30; 25:21), is the turning point of the narrative.¹²³

Despite Laban’s every effort, Jacob prospers (30:25–43) and is finally commanded by God to leave Laban and return to his home (31:1–3). During his return journey, Jacob has a strange encounter. A man wrestles with him, but Jacob realizes that the man is more than he appears to be for he declares that he will not release the man unless he receives a blessing from him (32:22–26). The man then tells Jacob that his name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel instead, “for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed” (v. 28). Jacob’s new name Israel means “He strives with God,” and it was to become the name of the nation descended from Jacob’s sons.

After a surprising reunion with his brother Esau, a reunion that demonstrates to Jacob something of the divine nature of forgiveness (33:1–11), Jacob continues on his journey until he reaches the city of Shechem (v. 18). He is told by God to go to Bethel (35:1), and after arriving there, God reaffirms the covenant promises and confirms that Jacob’s name is now Israel (vv. 9–12). Jacob’s beloved wife Rachel dies giving birth to Benjamin during their journey from Bethel to Ephrath (vv. 16–20). The story of Jacob then ends with the death of his father Isaac (vv. 28–29). God has reaffirmed his promises to Jacob, but at this point in history they remain largely unfulfilled, forcing us to look toward the future, to Jacob’s sons.

Joseph: From Canaan to Egypt

Jacob’s story is followed by “the generations [*toledot*] of Esau,” the ninth section of Genesis (36:1–37:1). It provides a genealogy of Isaac’s older son.

123. Wenham 1994, 170.

The third major part of the patriarchal history, however, begins at 37:2 with the tenth and final section of Genesis: the story of Joseph. This lengthy narrative provides a transitional link between the history of the patriarchs and the exodus of Israel from Egypt. It relates how the tribes of Israel came to be in Egypt and demonstrates God's providential outworking of his plans. The story shows the beginning of the fulfillment of God's promise to make Abraham's offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven, and it shows the beginning of the fulfillment of God's promise to bless all the families of the earth through Abraham's offspring.

Like the first two major parts of the patriarchal history, the story of Joseph begins with a revelation from God, two dreams in which Joseph sees a symbolic representation of his brothers bowing down to him (37:5–11). His brothers, provoked to jealousy by his dreams and by the favoritism shown to Joseph by their father, sell Joseph to Midianite traders who then sell him to the Egyptians (vv. 12–36). Upon arriving in Egypt, Joseph becomes a slave in the house of Potiphar and is so successful that he is put in charge of the entire household (39:1–6). Because of false accusations by Potiphar's wife, however, Joseph is unjustly imprisoned (vv. 7–20), but God remains with him and even in prison he is given responsibility (vv. 21–23).

In prison, Joseph interprets the dreams of two fellow prisoners, Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker, and his interpretations are ultimately proven to be accurate (40:1–23). Two years later, Pharaoh himself begins to have disturbing dreams that no one is able to interpret. His cupbearer, who had since been released from prison, remembers Joseph, who is then brought before Pharaoh in order to see if he will be able to interpret these dreams (41:1–24). Joseph does interpret the dreams, telling Pharaoh that after seven years of great abundance there will be seven years of severe famine. He advises Pharaoh to put someone in charge of gathering and saving food during the seven years of abundance to prepare for the seven years of famine (vv. 25–36). Pharaoh names Joseph to this position of responsibility, and when the famine comes, the people of Egypt and many other nations are saved from starvation because of Joseph's efforts (vv. 37–57). Already God is using Abraham's offspring to bless the families of the earth.

After a number of years, Joseph is reconciled with his brothers and reunited with his father, and the entire family moves to Egypt because of the severity of the famine (42:1–46:34). By the time the family of Jacob

enters Egypt they number seventy.¹²⁴ Once in Egypt, the family of Jacob settles in the fertile land of Goshen, and they begin to prosper and multiply (47:1–28). As Jacob nears death, he has Joseph swear to him that he will not bury Jacob in Egypt but will return him to the land of promise for burial (vv. 29–31). Jacob understands that Egypt is not his true home (cf. 50:25).

As Jacob draws close to death, he gathers his sons together to pronounce his last words concerning them (Gen. 49). As John Sailhamer notes, this is the first of three places in the Pentateuch where the author inserts a lengthy poetic section at the close of a long narrative (cf. Num. 24; Deut. 32–33). All three poetic sections have certain features in common. Sailhamer explains, “In each of the three segments, the central narrative figure (Jacob, Balaam, Moses) calls an audience together (imperative: Ge 49:1; Nu 24:14; Dt 31:28) and proclaims (cohortative: Ge 49:1; Nu 24:14; Dt 31:28) what will happen (Ge 49:1; Nu 24:14; Dt 31:29) in ‘the end of days’ (Ge 49:1; Nu 24:14; Dt 31:29).”¹²⁵

Jacob says to his sons at this time, “Gather yourselves together, that I may tell you what shall happen to you in days to come” (Gen. 49:1).¹²⁶ The meaning of the phrase “days to come” or “the latter days” (cf. Num. 24:14) must be determined by its context. In general, as Allen Ross explains, it “should be interpreted to mean an undetermined time in the future, early or late (cf. Dan. 2:28–29, 45; Ezek. 38:16; Jer. 23:20).”¹²⁷ Jacob speaks to all of his sons, but it is his words to Judah that are most significant for our understanding of biblical eschatology (Gen. 49:8–12). Jacob’s words to Judah anticipate the rise of the Davidic king and more.

In Genesis 49:10, Jacob says, “The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.” This verse is considered by some to be the first clearly messianic prophecy in the Old Testament.¹²⁸ The precise translation of the words “until tribute comes to him” is disputed because of the ambiguity of the Hebrew, but as Wenham notes, “all at least agree that this line is predicting the rise of the Davidic monarchy

124. This is the same number of nations found in the table of nations in Genesis 10.

125. Sailhamer 1992, 36.

126. “In days to come” is a translation of the Hebrew בְּאַחֲרֵי הַיָּמִים (*be’aharit hayyamim*).

127. Ross 1988, 700; see also Wenham 1994, 471.

128. E.g., Dumbrell 1994, 37.

and the establishment of the Israelite empire, if not the coming of a greater David.”¹²⁹ The main point of Jacob’s words to Judah is that the scepter, a symbol of kingship, would belong to the tribe of Judah until the coming of the one to whom such royal status truly belongs. In the Old Testament, this prophecy is initially fulfilled by David. In the New Testament, it is fully and finally fulfilled by Jesus Christ, the Son of David and the Lion of the tribe of Judah (Matt. 1:1; Rev. 5:5).

Summary

Genesis is the book of first things, but it is nevertheless essential for an understanding of the last things. Later eschatological texts presuppose a grasp of the many themes and concepts introduced in Genesis. It is in Genesis that we are introduced to the major eschatological themes of kingdom and covenant, blessing and cursing, promise and fulfillment. It is in Genesis that we find the first hints of a coming Messiah who will crush the head of the serpent and redeem his people.

In Genesis, we learn that the entire universe and all that is in it was created *ex nihilo* by God. He is the Great King, the Creator who is sovereign over all, and everything exists for his glory. Genesis also teaches that the original creation was declared by God to be good, and thus the Bible consistently rejects any assumption that the physical material world is inherently evil or corrupt. Its present corruption is a result of the fall.

The first chapters of Genesis teach us that human beings were created in the image of God for union and communion with God. God gave man dominion indicating his creational plan to establish his kingdom on earth. God’s desire for man at creation was to bless him and commune with him, and the garden was the place of God’s special presence with man. Another theme important to biblical eschatology that is introduced in the creation narratives is that of God’s rest. His creative work moved toward the goal of blessed rest.

In the early chapters of Genesis, God also reveals how the good creation came to be in the state we find it in today. Man’s disobedience and fall into sin resulted in God’s judgment upon man. The introduction of sin into human history led to God’s curse and the introduction of death, and man was removed from Eden. Sin and its results are revealed in Genesis to be

129. Wenham 1994, 478. See Ezekiel 21:27 for a similar text.

the problem in man and in the world. In the narrative of the fall, Genesis also introduces the serpent who is a tool of Satan, the archenemy of God. Satan becomes the “ruler” of the world, usurping the dominion God gave to man. But God promises that there will be perpetual conflict between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman, and that Satan will ultimately be destroyed. He will not thwart God’s purposes. He will be overthrown, and God’s kingdom will be established.

The remaining chapters of Genesis explain how sin and death spread and how God’s judgment and grace were initially revealed. With the call of Abraham, the book of Genesis introduces God’s plan for the restoration of blessing to man. God makes a number of promises to Abraham, promises of land, and offspring, and personal blessing. And all of these promises are given in order to fulfill another promise, namely, that through Abraham and his offspring, God will bless all the families of the earth.

The promise of land is particularly significant in the Pentateuch and in the Former Prophets. The land promise indicates that God has not abandoned his plan to establish his kingdom on earth. The Abrahamic covenant, then, is a statement of God’s purposes, that which he will certainly accomplish—the redemption and blessing of man and the establishment of God’s kingdom. The remainder of the book of Genesis traces the partial fulfillment of God’s promises through the families of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. By the end of Genesis, however, Abraham’s offspring are found living in Egypt far from the land of promise.

Readers will understand a book's final chapter only if they have understood all that came before it. Likewise, "in order to understand biblical eschatology," writes Keith Mathison, "we must understand the entire Bible."

From Age to Age looks not only at the fulfillment of God's purposes at the end of history, but also at the stages along the way. The millennium and second coming of Christ are eschatologically important—but Christ's *first* coming was the beginning of the end. Deftly working through each book of the Bible, Mathison traces God's preparations throughout redemptive history, which have laid everything in place for the last day.

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