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# ONE

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## UNDERSTANDING THE BOOK OF “BEGINNINGS”



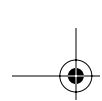
**G**enesis is not an easy book to understand. It takes hard work to come to grips with this ancient, enigmatic book. To really get under the surface of Genesis we can benefit from the work of professionals, those whom God has called to devote their careers to the study of the Scriptures.

As I make this statement, I anticipate resistance on the part of some readers. “No,” they might protest, “God speaks to us clearly in his Word. All we have to do is pick it up and read it. We don’t need to spend a long time thinking about principles of interpretation. The work of scholars obscures rather than clarifies the simple, literal meaning of the Bible.”

I support much of the sentiment expressed in this hypothetical reaction. Even if they are not really aware of it, the protest is based on the important doctrines of the priesthood of all believers and the perspicuity and sufficiency of Scripture.

The priesthood of all believers (based most explicitly on passages like Jer 31:33-35 and 1 Pet 2:9) tells us that we can all have a personal and intimate relationship with God without some kind of human intermediary. The Reformers, people like Luther and Calvin, asserted this truth over against traditional church doctrine that insisted on the necessity of





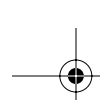
professional clerics. Such a viewpoint also helps explain why for many years the Roman Catholic Church resisted translation of the Bible into people's everyday language and kept it in Latin, which only the priests could read and understand. In the Catholic Church a layperson's relationship with the Bible only changed in the 1960s at Vatican Council II. So it may be in defense of the important idea of the priesthood of all believers that some readers will be skeptical about my urging the help of professional interpreters.

The Reformers argued strongly for the clarity (perspicuity) of Scripture. They rightly held that the Bible was not written in a code. Further, they defended the view that the Bible could be understood on its own terms (sufficiency of Scripture). We do not need the tradition of the church fathers to understand the Bible.

When rightly understood, these doctrines are fundamentally important and crucial to defend. The problem is that the priesthood of all believers as well as the perspicuity and sufficiency of Scripture have been wrongly understood and applied in areas they were never intended to be applied. In short, what the Reformers understood the Bible to teach was that the message of salvation in the Bible is clear and understandable to all without the need of a priestly mediator or scholarly input. That human beings are sinners in need of a Savior and that the Savior is none other than Jesus Christ is patently clear in Scripture.

However, not everything is equally plain. How long is the "day" of Genesis 1? Was the flood universal? Who are the Nephilim? Why do some verses say that the Ishmaelites took Joseph to Egypt and others say it was the Midianites? Who is God referring to beside himself when he says, "Let us make human beings in our own image"? Who was Melchizedek, and what, if anything, does Abraham's tithing to this enigmatic figure have to say to us today about donations to the church? The list could go on and on. A reading of Genesis will raise many questions in our minds that are not quickly and easily resolved. Indeed, a number of questions remain unanswered even after intensive study. One important principle of interpretation is to recognize that not all of our questions can be answered.





Very few people could read Genesis at all without scholarly intervention. Not many people have studied Hebrew; neither have they read the translations sweated and sometimes fought over by scholars who have not only studied Hebrew but also other related languages like Aramaic, Akkadian, Ugaritic, and Arabic, not to speak of the language of the early translations like Greek and Latin.

While some of you may protest, my guess is that most are well aware that there are questions of interpretation and the nature of Genesis is not always on the surface. With this in mind, we turn to a consideration of the principles that offer the most promise of helping us understand the message of the book of Genesis.

#### WHERE IS MEANING FOUND?

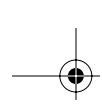
What does it mean to interpret a biblical text like Genesis? What is our goal of interpretation?

Those who study hermeneutics, the technical name for interpretation, know that this question is hotly contested. In this postmodern age some people even deny the very existence of meaning. I will leave the details of this debate for discussion elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> Here I will operate with the confidence that what we are pursuing is the intention of the author who is writing a text to us. The author has a purpose, a message, which he or she is trying to communicate to an audience. We are part of that audience, and through the writing we come into contact with the thought of another.<sup>2</sup>

However, reading the writings of other people is different from carrying on a conversation with them. In both cases an act of communication is taking place, but in a conversation we can ask for clarification or expansion. Quite simply, we can ask, What do you mean? when something is unclear. We don't have that luxury when it comes to another's writings, and the matter only becomes more complicated when the writing under discussion was written centuries, even millennia, ago in a language that is now not spoken by anyone, as is the case with the Hebrew language of the book of Genesis.<sup>3</sup>

We are "distanced" from the author of Genesis. The book was written ages ago in a language that no one speaks today in a culture that is for-





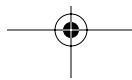
eign to us.<sup>4</sup> The latter point means that there are customs that are strange to us, that are not a part of our experience. It also has repercussions for our coming to grips with the form of the literature itself. Robert Alter, an important figure in the modern exploration of ancient Hebrew literary forms, reminds us: “Every culture, even every era in a particular culture, develops distinctive and sometimes intricate codes for telling its stories.”<sup>5</sup>

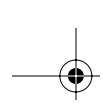
The historical, cultural and literary distance we are at from the time of the author makes Genesis difficult to grasp without study. Indeed, one of the biggest mistakes we can make in interpretation is to read it as if it were written for us today. For instance, later we will criticize those who read Genesis 1—2 as if it was an apologetic against modern scientific understanding of the origins of the world (Darwin), when in actuality it was an apologetic against rival ancient understandings of creation (*Enuma Elish*).

But even though these are issues that we need to recognize, we still haven’t named the most important cause of our sense that Genesis describes a foreign world to us—its theology. The world of Genesis fully embraces supernatural realities. The characters may struggle with God, but they certainly never question his existence. God acts in space and time; indeed he creates space and time. God speaks to people and directs them to act in very specific ways.

For modern Christian readers of Genesis, there is a sense that we are entering a strange world that is difficult to understand. We have a “testament gap.” In Genesis we go back to the beginning of the human relationship with God. We read of animal sacrifices, divine commands to slaughter a human being, God warring on behalf of his people, his wiping out almost all of humanity, and we scratch our heads and ask how does this relate to the gospel of Jesus Christ?

For these reasons it is important for us, if we really want to uncover the meaning of the text, to become conscious of what we are doing as interpreters. In that spirit, I offer the following principles of interpretation that are relevant to the study of Genesis. Here I will do little more than list them, while the following chapters will utilize them in our study of the text itself.





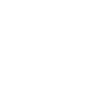
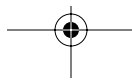
## PRINCIPLE 1. RECOGNIZE THE LITERARY NATURE OF THE BOOK OF GENESIS

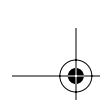
The Bible is a sacred book, but it is a book. God didn't create a new means of communication in order to speak to his people. The Hebrew language was not invented especially for divine use; God spoke in a language the people already knew. The Bible is similar to other books, and so we should study it with many of the same issues in mind that we have for literature in general.

*Question 1: What kind of book is Genesis?* This is one of the most fundamental and important questions to ask about any book, including biblical books. It is the question of genre, and genre triggers our reading strategy. It makes a world of difference whether we identify Genesis as myth, parable, history, legend or a combination of these and other genres. We expect different things from a parable than we do from a history book. Furthermore, if we conclude that Genesis is in some sense a history, that doesn't end the genre question, because there are different types of history writing. The question of the genre of Genesis is not an easy one, and it is highly controversial. However, no reading of the book can proceed without making a genre identification. Most people do it without reflection, a dangerous procedure since an error in this area results in fundamental misunderstanding of the book's message. We will give consideration to the genre of Genesis in chapter three.

*Question 2. How did ancient Hebrews tell stories?* We cannot read Genesis without recognizing that we are sitting at the feet of a master storyteller. For now, we leave open whether these stories are history or fiction, but in either case they are gripping and compelling narratives. As Robert Alter has suggested, though, different cultures tell their stories in different ways. In order to enrich our understanding of the message of Genesis, we need to be conscious of the art of the ancient Hebrew storyteller. Included in this study will be an examination of the structure and style of the book. (We also will turn our attention to this subject in chapter three.)

*Question 3. Was Genesis written at one time by a single person?* This question is always important in the study of a literary composition, but it has been made much more crucial in the light of the history of scholar-





ship of Genesis during the modern era. Even though the question of the literary unity of Genesis is bound up with the nature of the entire Pentateuch, we will keep our focus on Genesis.

The history of interpretation indicates that for centuries the book of Genesis was happily read as a literary and authorial unity. Indeed, it is likely that the vast majority of readers across the world today still read the book in this way.

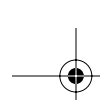
However, if we are honest, a close reading of the book raises questions. We might ask why there are two accounts of the creation (Gen 1:1-2:4a; 2:4b-25), which, when compared, seem to assert a slightly different sequence of events. We might notice that there are stories that are vaguely similar to one another, for instance the three stories where a patriarch lies about the marital status of his wife (see Gen 12:10-20; 20:1-18; 26:1-11), and question whether such a thing actually happened on three separate occasions. Perhaps, some say, they are variants of the same basic story. In addition, the attentive reader might wonder why the group that takes Joseph to Egypt is called the Midianites (Gen 37:28) on occasion rather than Ishmaelites, as they usually are. These are just a token of the kind of questions that make us wonder whether one or more literary forces are at work in the production of the book of Genesis.

Even if our own close reading of the book doesn't demand such inquiry, the present majority view of biblical scholars might. In most college and seminary courses on Genesis today in the Western world, one of the first matters of business will be delineating the sources of the book. Indeed, many readers who have taken such a class will have a notion of what I am referring to when I list the following letters: J, E, D and P (see pp. 49-57).

**Question 4. What can we learn about Genesis from comparable ancient Near Eastern literature?** The stories of Genesis have analogues from the other Near Eastern cultures. Israel was not the only people from this general area and time period to present an account of creation or even a devastating flood.

There are many dimensions to comparing ancient literature, but the main point that becomes obvious as soon as we become aware of litera-





ture written in other Semitic (e.g., Akkadian and Ugaritic) and non-Semitic languages (e.g., Egyptian, Sumerian and Hittite) of the Near East is that God did not create a unique form of literature any more than he created a unique language to communicate his truths.

However, we must tread carefully here. Too often the similarities have lured scholars and others into thinking that the Bible is just a superficial reworking of, say, Mesopotamian literature. They fail to see the significant differences between rival creation accounts—that is, between the biblical account and those from the ancient Near East. As we study ancient Near Eastern literature, we will remain attentive to both the similarities and the differences. We will also inquire into the reasons for both. The important point that comes to the fore through this kind of study is that the Bible is a literature of antiquity and not modernity. This truth will have a great impact on our study. For instance, we will come to realize that the biblical creation accounts were not written in order to counter Darwinism but rather the *Enuma Elish* and other ancient ideas concerning who created creation.

## PRINCIPLE 2. EXPLORE THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE BOOK

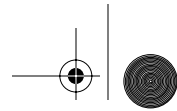
As we will continue to see, the issues that we explore under the first principle concerning the literary nature of the book are intertwined with those connected to the second principle. However, here we will focus on issues related to the space and time events outside of Genesis.

My interest here exposes my belief that literary texts do point to a world outside of itself. In other words, we deny that texts are purely self-referential. In the first place they are the products of the times that produce them. Thus it is important to explore those times as best as can be determined. Furthermore, I believe it is possible for a literary text to accurately, though certainly not exhaustively, inform us about past happenings.

There are three significant questions we can ask of Genesis (and other ancient texts) in regard to its historical background:

**Question 5. *When was Genesis written?*** The answer to this question may be discovered with ease or great difficulty. We might end up with certainty or doubt concerning our conclusions. We may be able to find an





exact date or a general date. However, in all cases it is important to do our best with the evidence that is presented to us.

We can see how this question is related to our conclusions (principle 1, question 3) concerning the unity of the book. It is conceivable that Genesis was not written at one particular moment but rather over a long period of time. It will be important to investigate that question and then try to understand the historical processes behind the different stages of the production of the book. Even if our conclusion ends up being vague (e.g., Genesis is a product of the entire Old Testament time period), it still is valuable as an important reminder: we need to read the book against an ancient Near Eastern background and not unconsciously interpret it in the light of contemporary customs and events.

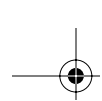
*Question 6. What does Genesis tell us about the past?* A book like Genesis is not just produced in the past, it may also tell us something about the past. The extent to which a book intends to pass down information about its time depends on its genre, again showing a connection between literary and historical concerns in interpretation. If Genesis turns out to be a parable or myth, we shouldn't expect it to inform us about what actually happened.

However, even if a book intends to be historical, this does not assure us that it does so accurately. Not all ancient historical writing has stood up to critical analysis. Indeed, there is a school of thought (minimalism) that suggests that all ancient writings, particularly the Bible, is ideologically biased and should not be trusted to give us a window on actual events.

However, even with those who are less skeptical about the connection between ancient texts and history, there are questions about the historical veracity of a book like Genesis. Why should this book be trusted to tell us what actually happened at the time of the patriarchs or Joseph in Egypt, and how in the world could a human author know anything about creation? These questions raise even further questions about how we learn about the past, the connection between the text and archeological research, and so forth.

*Question 7. Does our knowledge of the ancient Near East help us understand Genesis?* Earlier we raised the possibility that ancient Near Eastern





materials might provide help in the area of literary analysis. We also gain information about the history of the region from select texts that have been discovered through archaeological exploration. Such information may concern both the time period in which the book was written as well as the time period that the book describes.

We are interested in not just extrabiblical confirmation but also setting the story of Genesis in the light of a broader historical context. To do so we will have to do our best to situate the biblical account in relationship to the history of the area, and we will hope to give a general sense of when these things happened in absolute terms.

A cursory reading of Genesis gives us some hope that such a study will be beneficial. After all, we read about Abraham leaving Ur, a city well known from ancient Near Eastern records. Later we hear that he fights against four kings from the east (Gen 14). Joseph rises to prominence in the Egyptian court. Perhaps connections can be drawn, at least to some extent.

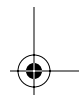
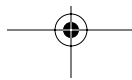
There is yet a third way that ancient Near Eastern materials might help us to better understand the narratives of Genesis, and this is through the use of comparative customs. As we deal with the patriarchs, we will examine the oft-discussed relationship between their customs and those discovered from the ancient texts of Nuzi and Mari (see chap. 6).

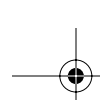
Finally, a study of ancient Near Eastern literature brings us closer to the ancient worldview shared by Israel. It helps us recapture the strangeness of the Old Testament world, reminding us that it was not written yesterday but centuries ago.

### PRINCIPLE 3. REFLECT ON THE THEOLOGICAL TEACHING OF THE BOOK

The Bible claims to be God's self-revelation to his people. Thus it would not be wrong to describe the theological message of the book as its most important feature. In essence, the Bible's primary purpose is to picture God and our relationship with him.

However, we must immediately qualify this statement so it is not abused. It is not uncommon today for scholars to make this assertion in order to minimize or even ignore the historical significance of the text. To





say that theology is the most important aspect of the text is not to say that history is unimportant. Indeed, the Bible's consistent witness is that the God of the Bible acts in history. The book of Genesis is not a history-like story but rather a story-like history.

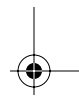
Though I am separating them here in order to facilitate our study, the literary (principle 1), historical (principle 2) and theological (principle 3) aspects of the text are all intertwined. The God of Genesis is one who reveals himself to his people (theology) in space and time (history) and who chooses to inspire writings that serve as a memorial of those events (literary).

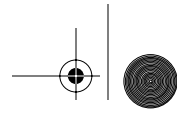
However, since we are especially concerned in this section with theological issues, we will ask how God presents himself in relationship to his people.

**Question 8. How does Genesis describe God?** Theoretically, God could have chosen a number of different ways to reveal himself to us in a written text. He could have inspired the writing of a philosophical or theological essay. The text could have taken the form of a description of God's attributes. Like a traditional systematic theology, it might have reflected on God's omniscience, omnipresence and omnipotence. We might have received a learned and abstract analysis of the nature of God's being. But we did not. What we have in the Bible (and in Genesis) are stories and poems that tell us about God's involvement in the world. Granted that Genesis is for the most part prose and not poetry (though note Gen 49 and a number of smaller poetic pieces), like much of the rest of the Bible it does not describe God in abstract ways but tells us how God acts in the world.

Thus we learn about God not as a force but as a person. God is a person who creates, involves himself with his creation and rescues and judges his human creatures. To find out about God and his relationship with his people, we hear how he acts.

Even so, it appears that the book of Genesis strains at the task of revealing God to us. After all, how can the indescribable be described? The answer suggested in Genesis 1 is that human beings are created in the very image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26-27). An image is not the same as that which it images; thus it is wrong to think that the phrase "image of God"





implies that human beings share in the divine nature. But it does suggest that, just as a statue of a king reflects his image, human beings reflect something of the nature of God. We are not surprised then that the descriptions of God in Genesis and elsewhere in the Bible are often humanlike.

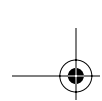
Genesis 3, for instance, describes God as "walking" in the Garden. Does that mean that the author thought that God had legs? I don't think so. Rather, it was a way of conveying the thought that God had an intimate relationship with the first couple. In other words, it is an anthropomorphism, a description of God in human terms, terms that we know.

Anthropomorphisms belong to a broader category that is relevant to our study of how Genesis (and the Bible generally) depicts God: *metaphor* (a term under which I subsume simile). A metaphor is a comparison between two things that are essentially dissimilar, though the comparison is made to highlight an area that is similar. To call a person's teeth pearls is not to say they are round or of a certain size, it is to compliment their whiteness. To say that God is an intoxicated soldier (Ps 78:65) is not to say that he drinks wine or can get drunk; in the context it suggests that like an intoxicated soldier aroused from an alcohol-induced sleep, he will be irritated and dangerous.

Studying the theology of Genesis includes being on the lookout for metaphors of God. What are the implications of his being described as king, warrior, shepherd, guest or sojourner? To draw out those implications, we must unpack the metaphors. While this book is not the place to do so exhaustively, we will be attentive to many of the major ones, including that of a king who enters into a covenant with his people, which leads us to our next question.

**Question 9. How does Genesis describe God's relationship to his people?** So God is personal, and his nature and actions are often described by metaphors. Of the major metaphors used in the Bible to describe God, many of them are relational. A warrior implies an army, a shepherd implies a flock of sheep, a guest implies a host, and a king implies subjects. The task of theology is not just to ask questions about the nature and actions of God but also about the quality of God's relationship with his people. Thus we will explore the human side of the relationship as well.





In this regard, one particular metaphor deserves special mention: the covenant. *Covenant* is a particularly important and pervasive theme in Genesis. It first becomes explicit in Genesis 9 in reference to the relationship established between God and Noah, and then later is used in regard to the association between God and Abraham (Gen 15 and 17). The concept may also be implied elsewhere, but simply based on its use with Noah and Abraham it is clear that covenant is an important idea. When it is realized that covenant is also used extensively throughout the Old Testament, not to speak of the New Testament, we understand its importance even more profoundly.

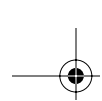
When we properly understand the concept of covenant in the light of its ancient setting, we recognize that it has the form of a political treaty. The covenant in essence is like an ancient treaty between a king and his people. It not only makes clear the power structure of the relationship, but it also is the vehicle through which the king issues his will (law) to his people. We will pay attention to the development of this theological idea as well as others in the book of Genesis.

*Question 10. How does Genesis fit into the whole of Scripture?* As presently received by the Christian church, the book of Genesis is not an isolated entity. Indeed, it never was, considering that it is really the first chapter of a five part literary work known as the Torah or Pentateuch. However, my present point entails more than the fact that it is a part of the Torah.

*Canon* refers to the status of certain books that have been recognized as authoritative by the church through the ages. These books are considered to be the standard of faith and practice for the believing community. The belief is grounded in the fact that these books attest to their own ultimate divine authorship.<sup>6</sup> This assertion does not deny that there are a variety of human authors, styles and messages, but the final authority is grounded in an origin with God himself. Thus we legitimately have an expectation that the message of the whole coheres in an organic unity. An exciting aspect of biblical study is to recognize the rich diversity as well as the staggering coherence of its message.

The reality, nature and consequences of that coherence are much de-



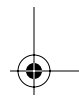
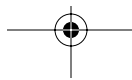


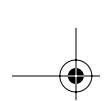
bated in contemporary scholarship these days.<sup>7</sup> However, this book is not the place to enter into that complex discussion. Accordingly, I will simply present the perspective that I think is most persuasive and fruitful, and allow you to judge its merits on its own.

The coherence of the Bible is grounded in the ultimate divine authorship of the whole. Thus in spite of a variety of styles, genres, themes and motifs, it's important to ask how the part (in this case the book of Genesis) fits into the whole (the Old and New Testaments). We begin with the recognition that Genesis provides the foundation. The rest of the Bible is built on that foundation. In other words, Genesis lays the foundation for the history of God's redemption of the world. It's not only the first chapter of the Pentateuch, but it is the first chapter of all the books that narrate God's ways in the world. We recognize this in the fact that Joshua picks up where the Pentateuch ends. Indeed, the Pentateuch ends with no strong sense of closure. The story must continue, and it continues in Joshua and is carried even further in Judges, Ruth, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther. In other words, Genesis initiates an Old Testament history of redemption that begins at creation and ends with the return from the exile and a description of the early diaspora.

But the Old Testament itself ends without a strong sense of closure and with an openness to the future. The testimony of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther, as well as prophetic nonhistorical books like Daniel, Zechariah and Malachi, describe the people of God living in oppression. But it also describes those who are oppressed as living in the light of the sure hope of a future redemption. The New Testament describes the advent of that hoped for redemption.

With that background, we now turn to the words of Jesus Christ himself. He pointedly instructs his disciples in Old Testament interpretation. Perhaps we should not be surprised that Jesus instructs his disciples concerning this important aspect of hermeneutics. What is startling is that so few followers of Jesus today embrace their Lord's perspective on interpreting the Old Testament—and consequently Genesis. After his resurrection Jesus walks unrecognized with two disciples on the road to Emmaus. They are dumbfounded concerning the events that have just happened in





Jerusalem. They are in disbelief that Jesus has died on the cross. Then Jesus says to them:

*“How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. (Lk 24:25-27 NIV)*

And then a little later, he spoke in a similar vein to a broader group of disciples:

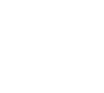
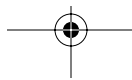
*“This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.”*

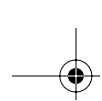
*Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, “This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.” (Lk 24:44-49 NIV)*

Jesus’ point is clear. The Old Testament anticipates his coming suffering and glorification. In both passages Jesus instructs his disciples that the entire Old Testament proclaims his coming. In the first passage he cites “Moses and all the Prophets” and in the second passage he refers to “the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.” Both these phrases were used to refer to what we call the Old Testament (which was not used as a title until the New Testament came into existence).

Our concern in this book is with Genesis, the first book of the law of Moses. Jesus thus invites us to consider the possibility that the message of Genesis somehow anticipates his future ministry.

This passage in Luke 24 raises the debated question of the role of the New Testament in the interpretation of the Old. Many scholars defend the idea that Christian interpretation of the Old Testament must never appeal to the New Testament. They honestly feel that such a move distorts the meaning of the more ancient text. On the contrary, and on the basis of Jesus’ instruction in Luke 24, I submit that it is wrong for a Christian to ignore the good news of Christ in the act of interpreting the Old Testa-





ment and, for our purposes, the book of Genesis.

To be sure, when we begin our interpretation, it's important to ask how the original audience would have understood the Old Testament passage under study, and it's not my contention that the full significance of the text's relationship to Christ would have been recognized by an ancient reader (or the author for that matter).<sup>8</sup> Though it is true that there was a messianic expectation at the time of Christ, the actual shape of his advent was a surprise to most, even the most ardent reader of the Hebrew Bible. However, once Christ had fulfilled the Old Testament, a Christian cannot and should not resist seeing *how* he fulfilled it. The Christ event enriches our understanding of the message of the Old Testament.

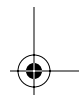
An analogy may help. When we read a good mystery (or see one at the movie theater) for the first time, we may find that opening events and dialogue have a meaning that is not clear until we reach the conclusion. We cannot read a good mystery the same way a second time. There will always be a sense of "Oh yes, now I see the significance of that event." Or for the Old Testament, "Yes, indeed, this does point to the coming of Christ."

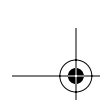
Right now, our discussion is all very general and vague. However, as we engage the text of Genesis I will demonstrate how Genesis, when read in the context of the finished canon, may be seen to point to Christ. It certainly lays the foundation of the redemptive history that is fulfilled with his coming (see, for instance, chap. 10).

*Question 11. What in Genesis is theologically normative for today?* Many Bible readers start with this question. This is understandable. After all, it's the proper goal of our efforts. We want to know how the Word of God affects our life. How does a passage address my beliefs, and how does it shape my actions today?

This admirable enthusiasm for knowing God and his will today, however, can lead to a serious misconstrual of God's message. Without the hard work entailed in the preceding questions and principles, we are much more likely to mishear the Word of God.

This is particularly the case with the Old Testament. The Old Testament is much more difficult for modern Christian readers to understand than the New. We are further distanced chronologically, culturally and in





terms of redemptive history from the events of the Old Testament. Indeed, even with careful study and an awareness of the interpretive principles, our study of Genesis will not escape difficulty. We should be prepared to recognize when our interpretations are certain, merely probable or even tenuous. The more certain we are that Genesis teaches something that remains normative for our belief and behavior today, the more firmly we should embrace it. On the other hand, if our understanding is tenuous, we shouldn't consider the point essential. We will later see that some of the most vociferous debates about Genesis (for instance, the length of the creation days) are based on fairly tenuous interpretations. It's a good principle to operate with the belief that what God considers essential for our relationship with him is taught clearly and in many places; in other words we can't miss it if we tried. On the other hand, while it is still valuable to try to discover all that we can of what the Bible teaches, we must learn to "not sweat the small stuff" in biblical interpretation as well as in life.



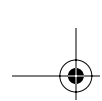
**PRINCIPLE 4. REFLECT ON YOUR SITUATION,  
YOUR SOCIETY'S SITUATION AND THE  
GLOBAL SITUATION**



To know how to apply the Bible to our lives and our world, we must be aware of ourselves and our surroundings. It is certainly possible to overdo this, but most of us are not as reflective as we should be. Sure, we know where we experience joy and pain in our lives, but most of us need to go deeper in our self-awareness. What are my relationships like, and can I discern patterns in my relationships with others? What do I admire in other people, and what do I detest or feel indifferent toward? Why? What about the past? Have there been events that have shaped me for good or bad?

The list can go on, but the simple and often neglected truth is that the best interpreters of the Bible are those who not only can read the Bible but can read themselves, others and the world at large. Without this knowledge it is impossible to bridge the ancient world of the text to the modern world we live in. Without that bridging we have not completed the hermeneutical, or interpretive, task. What is vitally important is, What does Genesis mean to us today? However, we must first figure out what it





meant to Moses before we can proceed to that final step.

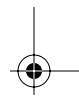
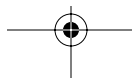
**Question 12.** *What is my redemptive-historical relationship to the events of Genesis?* The book of Genesis records events that happened in the far distant past. Its purview stretches from creation down through the time of the patriarchs. While the Bible does not give us the information we need to date the creation, we may safely situate the patriarchs roughly in the first half of the second millennium B.C.

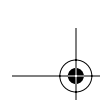
Genesis was written long ago, and a lot of water has passed under the bridge. God's strategy of redemption has flowed from these events through the exodus and conquest, the period of the judges and kings, and the exile and postexilic period. The New Testament gives testimony to the climactic event of Christ's death and resurrection and the founding and early history of the church. We live on the far side of all these events. As part of our task of appropriating the message of Genesis, we must ask how the book's stories relate to us today. How are we related to the Noahic and Abrahamic covenant? What do we do with the picture of God's warring activity in Genesis 14? The questions are endless.

The attentive reader can see that this question is intimately connected with my comments on theology where I asked how the book fits into the canon as a whole. I revisit it here to remind us that an important aspect of bringing the text to bear in the twenty-first century has to do with an awareness of our redemptive-historical relationship with the events recorded therein.

**Question 13.** *What can I learn from Genesis about how to think and act in a way pleasing to God?* The Bible not only helps us situate ourselves in redemptive history, but it also guides our moral and intellectual life. While it is true that the book of Genesis does not do so in as direct a way as, say, the law in Exodus 19—24 or Proverbs (though even here there are issues of continuity and discontinuity), its stories intend to form the believer's worldview and provide illustrations of proper behavior.

As the first book of the canon Genesis begins to lay down a worldview for its readers. That is, it provides foundational teaching that provides a lens through which we interpret our experience of the world. By way of illustration, I might point to the first chapter of the book. Here we are in-



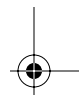
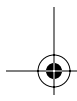


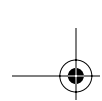
roduced to a God who is not a part of his creation (he is transcendent) but is involved with it (immanent). Everything is dependent on God, who created it, and he created it good. Human beings are not the most important thing in the cosmos (God is), but we have a special relationship with him, and that confers dignity on us (image of God). These truths are not something we would come to apart from the revelation of Genesis, and they are important for how we think about the world and act toward it.

But Genesis does more than form a worldview; it also teaches us how to behave. It is appropriate to read the stories of Adam and Eve, Cain, Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, and the other characters as illustrative of moral principles. Later we will develop the plot of the Abraham narrative as a journey of faith, and his journey throws light on the ups and downs in our own relationship with God. Joseph's response to the seductions of Potiphar's wife is a model of obedience that intends to guide other men (and women) when faced with the same temptation. In other words, there is a sense in which we can read the text and say to ourselves or to others "Go, and do likewise." On the other hand, there are also counterillustrations—the rebellion of Adam and Eve, the fratricide of Cain, the deceptions of Jacob, the murderous intent of Joseph's brothers—that should elicit a "Go, and don't do likewise."

Although most sermons on the Old Testament today take this approach, many people resist it, saying that the purpose of these narratives are theological and not moral. Of course, such a reaction insists on a false dichotomy. God intends us to read Genesis both theologically and morally.

However, it is not as simple as reading the text and simply applying it to our lives. In Genesis Abraham is told that he and his descendants, the godly, must circumcise their sons on the eighth day. "Go, and do likewise?" Not in this case. Why? Because the New Testament tells us that circumcision is a ritual connected to the old covenant. Of course we may choose to circumcise our sons, but for other than religious reasons. Abraham went to war against the kings of the east who kidnapped Lot, and Abraham was victorious because God fought with him. Does this mean that God fights along with his people today? Not necessarily. It's important to ask questions about issues of continuity and discontinuity. It's also



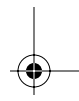
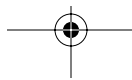


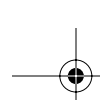
important, and sometimes difficult to take into account ancient customs that are not meant to be normative but were part of the culture of the day. Courting rituals (Gen 24) may be a case in point. It is not at all clear that God intends his people today to follow tribal courting practices of the early second millennium B.C. These issues involve reflection rather than immediate application.

Though I can't be exhaustive here, in the chapters that follow I will model the proper way to appropriate the text of Genesis to our lives today.

**Question 14: How can I keep from imposing my own views on Genesis?**  
Once we realize that we have to work at the interpretive process, we might fear that the text is open to a number of different interpretations. If this is true, why should we trust the one we have come to? We might be fooling ourselves.

In the first place, it is important to adopt humility in our interpretation. We must acknowledge that it is possible that we are wrong, so we must be open to other interpretations. We should test our understanding of Genesis by "reading in community." Protestants sometimes lose sight of the importance of this because our movement was founded by breaking away from the tyranny of official church interpretation and insisting on the priesthood of all believers. But there is a middle ground between "It's between God and me" and simply submitting to the authoritative interpretation of others. We need to wrestle with the text on our own and then expose ourselves to the thinking of others. Indeed, we should seek out opinions of people who may have opinions different from our own. As a middle-aged, white, relatively well-off male, I want to hear women speak about the text. I want to read commentaries by Asian, African (American), Latino scholars and pastors. I want to be exposed to the thoughts of other Ph.D.s as well as people with no education. Why? Not because the text is flexible but because different people will attend to different things in the text. "Reading in community" is done by joining Bible study groups and Sunday School classes, listening to sermons, reading commentaries, and so forth. The comments that I make on Genesis have been enriched by many years of listening to others talk about their understanding of the book.





## CONCLUSION: HOW IN THE WORLD CAN I DO ALL OF THIS?

I hope that after you have read this chapter, I have convinced you that deep reflection on the literary, theological and historical nature of Genesis is important to understanding the ancient message and applying it to today. However, for many the task will appear daunting. So I would like to make a few final comments of encouragement.

First, no one fathoms the entire depth or breadth of meaning of the biblical text. The message is too rich. Rather than being discouraging, I think this ought to encourage all of us. It means that even our first understandings of the text are worthwhile. The most important aspects of the book are taught so clearly and repeatedly that they are hard to miss. And there are always new dimensions of the book to discover. Realizing this energizes continued reading.

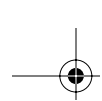
Second, none of us can or have to do all the work. We can gain help from others who have devoted their lives to the study of the Bible and its background. Very few people can become experts in ancient Near Eastern backgrounds, for instance, but those who do have written books alerting us to the material that is available. Commentaries should never be used as a means of avoiding our own personal reflection, but they should not be ignored either.<sup>9</sup>

It is my hope that this book will not only articulate principles helpful for interpreting Genesis but also model their application. To that task we now turn.

## SUMMARY OF THE INTERPRETIVE QUESTIONS

1. What kind of book is Genesis?
2. How did ancient Hebrews tell stories?
3. Was Genesis written at one time by a single person?
4. What can we learn about Genesis from comparable ancient Near Eastern literature?
5. When was Genesis written?





6. What does Genesis tell us about the past?
7. Does our knowledge of the ancient Near East help us understand Genesis?
8. How does Genesis describe God?
9. How does Genesis describe God's relationship to his people?
10. How does Genesis fit into the whole of Scripture?
11. What in Genesis is theologically normative for today?
12. What is my redemptive-historical relationship to the events of Genesis?
13. What can I learn from Genesis about how to think and act in a way pleasing to God?
14. How can I keep from imposing my own views on Genesis?

#### FOR FURTHER READING

- Fee, Gordon D., and Douglas Stuart. *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*. 3rd ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003.
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- Wenham, Gordon J. *Story as Torah: Reading the Old Testament Narrative Ethically*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004.

