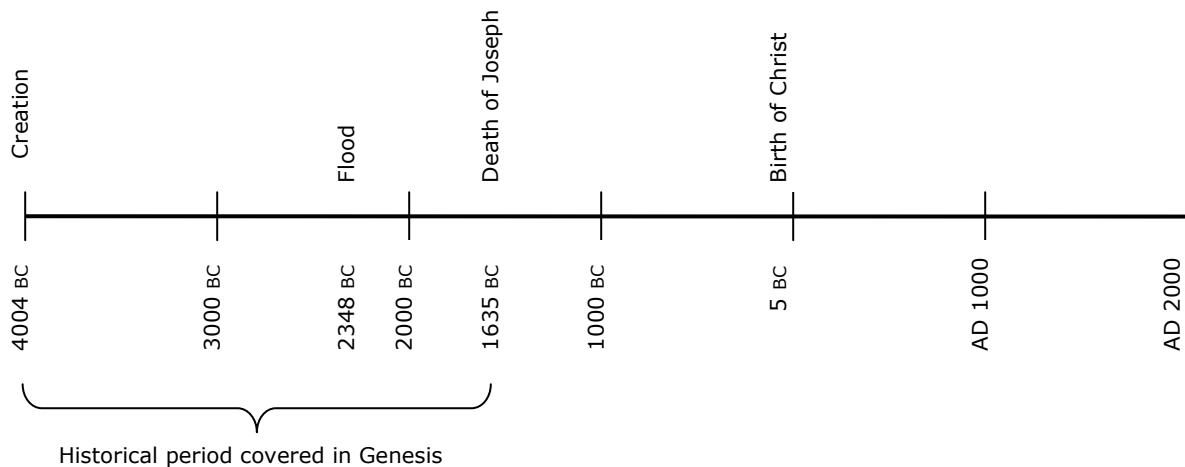

GENESIS
A General Introduction

Genesis covers a period of nearly 2,400 years, from the creation of the world to the death of Joseph (ca. 4004–1635 B.C.). This is roughly forty percent of world history.



The book derives its name from the Septuagint, which is the Greek translation of the Old Testament (ca. 250 B.C.). “Genesis” (Gr. γένεσις) means *birth* or *origin*. In keeping with the general practice of the Septuagint, the book was named according to its subject matter. Its name in Hebrew is *bereshit* (בראשית), the first word of the book, meaning *in the beginning*.

Literary Structure

All verbal communication, whether written or spoken, has a structure of some kind—an internal organization of material, which the author or speaker uses to control how the audience experiences and comes to understand the content of his communication. This is true of speeches, sermons, letters, books, essays, newspaper articles, textbooks, etc. The books of the Bible are no different.

The practice of structuring communication, whether written or oral, is universal among humans, as shown by studies among numerous languages and dialects throughout the world. Humans need and appreciate communication that is arranged and organized.

This was true in ancient Israel. The pages of the Old Testament reflect a keen interest in literary structure. Hebrew authors and editors generally took great pains to arrange their compositions in ways that would help convey their messages...

Analyzing the structures of Old Testament books is difficult for two reasons. First, the Hebrew authors used no visual, graphic structure markers to help readers follow their organization. The original manuscripts of their compositions, like most written works from ancient times, probably contained few if any graphic indicators of their organization. The chapter and verse divisions in the Old Testament were added centuries after the Old Testament books were written. In contrast to modern Bibles, the text of ancient Hebrew manuscripts generally ran on and on without break, filling column after column from top to bottom and from side to side, without set-off titles, subtitles, indentations, or any other visual structure indicators.

Modern readers are unaccustomed to such lack of visual helps. In modern texts an array of graphic techniques make an author's organizational intentions clear. As H. Van Dyke Parunak observes:

Graphical signals bombard the reader of a book in modern western culture. Italics or underlining highlight words and phrases or special importance, while parentheses, footnotes, and appendices remove peripheral material from the direct course of the writer's argument. Chapter headings, section titles, and paragraph indentations divide the text into segments, whose limits coincide with unites of the writer's thought. Tables of contents outline the entire book, and sometimes even chapters or articles within the book.

The absence of such visual structures markers does not mean that ancient authors were unmindful of the structure of their compositions or that their compositions had less rigorous structural patterns than our modern books... The blandness of an ancient text's appearance reflects rather the cultural reality that ancient texts were written primarily to be heard, not seen. Texts were normally intended to be read aloud, whether one was

reading alone or to an audience [see for example, Acts 8:30 and Rev. 1:3; DE]. Accordingly, an ancient writer was compelled to use structural signals that would be perceptible to the listening audience. Signals were geared for the ear, not the eye, since visual markers would be of little value to a listening audience.

To study structure in the Hebrew Bible, then, requires paying serious attention to verbal structure indicators—as we do, for example, when we listen to a sermon and try to grasp its general outline and main points. The Hebrew Bible is full of such verbal structure cues. (Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament*, pp. 15-16)

The first step in analyzing the structure of a biblical book is to identify its literary units, which is often complicated by its chapter and verse divisions, which are not a part of the originally inspired material and only very rarely follow the natural divisions of the text.

Discovering literary units is easier for some books than for others. The Psalter, for instance, contains 150 individual psalms already clearly marked (in many cases) with titles and superscriptions. The book of Proverbs provides us with a number of verbal markers regarding its natural divisions, not only with respect to individual proverbs, but also in relation to larger blocks of material. Reading carefully, we discover seven clearly marked literary units:

- I. Proverbs of Solomon I (1:1-9:18)
- II. Proverbs of Solomon II (10:1-22:16)
- III. Thirty sayings of the wise (22:17-24:22)
- IV. Further sayings of the wise (24:23-34)
- V. Proverbs of Solomon III (25:1-29:27)
- VI. The words of Agur son of Jakeh (30:1-33)
- VII. The words of King Lemuel (31:1-31)

Other books of the Old Testament contain similar verbal cues.¹

¹ See, for instance, Amos' repetition of: "For three transgressions of _____, and for four, I will not revoke its punishment" (Amos. 1:3; 6, 9, 13; 2:1, 4, 6)

When we read the book of Genesis with an eye toward such verbal cues, we discover that after an introduction in 1:1-2:3, there are ten literary units, each delineated by an introductory statement (or some variation of it): “These are the generations of...”

- I. Introduction: overview of creation (1:1-2:3)
- II. The generations of the heavens and the earth (2:4-4:26)
- III. The generations of Adam (5:1-6:8)
- IV. The generations of Noah (6:9-9:29)
- V. The generations of the sons of Noah (10:1-11:9)
- VI. The generations of Shem (11:10-26)
- VII. The generations of Terah (11:27-25:11)
- VIII. The generations of Ishmael (25:12-18)
- IX. The generations of Isaac (25:19-35:29)
- X. The generations of Esau (36:1-37:1)
- XI. The generations of Jacob (37:2-50:26)

It will be noticed that these literary units are of greatly varying lengths. The generations of Terah are covered in fifteen chapters; the generations of Ishmael in only seven *verses*. This is an indication of the relative importance each literary unit has with respect to the story Moses is telling us.

There is another division in the text that we should notice, a division that roughly corresponds to chapters 1-11 and chapters 12-50. These units are as unequal in length, from a literary point of view, as they are in the time periods they cover. The first eleven chapters cover a period of 2,008 years (ca. 4004–1996 B.C.). The remaining thirty-nine chapters cover a period of just 361 years (ca. 1996–1635 B.C.).

Genesis 1-11
4004-1996 B.C.
(2008 years)

Genesis 12-50
1996-1635 B.C.
(361 years)

Adam
Seth
Enosh
Kenan
Mahalalel
Jared
Enoch
Methuselah
Lamech
Noah
Shem
Arphaxad
Shelah
Eber
Peleg
Reu
Serug
Nahor
Terah
Abram
Isaac
Jacob
Twelve sons

To give some perspective to the difference in the time span between these two portions of Genesis, consider that the first eleven chapters gives us an overview of nineteen generations, while the remaining thirty-nine chapters give us an account of only four.

Consider, too, that the span of time in Genesis 1-11 is equal to the span of time from the birth of Christ to the present day, while the span of time in Genesis 12-50 is slightly shorter than the period from the founding of Plymouth Colony to the present.

Relation of Chapters 1-11 to Chapters 12-50

Chapters 1-11 set the stage for the *main story*, which is told in chapters 12-50. The main story is the origin of the chosen people with the calling of Abram, and the growth and development of his family over the course of several generations. This story was given to Israel in the wilderness in order that they might know whence they came and whither they were going. The story explains how it came to be that they were the chosen people of God, how they came to live in Egypt, and what reason they had to expect to inherit the Promised Land. In this story they learned that the God with whom they were in covenant is the one and only true God, the maker of heaven and earth. They learned that he had chosen their ancestor Abram and had promised him a land and a numerous seed. They learned their place in the world as the chosen people.

Chapters 1-11 set the stage for all of this by taking the story all the way back to the origin of all things. It answers the questions which would naturally arise if the story simply began with Abram. The people would inevitably ask, "Where did *he* come from?" If it were answered, "From his father Terah," the next question would be, "And what about *him*?"

Israel would also naturally inquire about the God who claimed them as his own people. "Who is *he*, and how is he related to the other gods we have heard about?"

Genesis 1-11 answers all these questions by taking us back to creation itself (to *God* himself) and in so doing, it answers not only the question of the origin of the chosen people, but the origin of all things. It provides us with the only satisfying answers to the question of origins, the identity of God, the proper criteria for moral behavior, the existence of evil, etc.