

GENESIS

INTRODUCTION

Title

On the surface, the English title Genesis is usually taken to mean “origins.” This meaning is similar to the book’s name in Hebrew: *bereshit*, the first word of the book, which means “in the beginning.” However, the name Genesis actually comes from the Greek translation of the Hebrew word *toledot*, which is sometimes translated as “generations.” *Toledot* refers literally to a story or record that is generated rather than specifically to human descendants as we might mistakenly believe. Following an introduction relating the events of the Creation (Genesis 1:1–2:3), Genesis is structured into ten sections of varying length, each of which is introduced using the word *toledot*.¹

Genre

In the simplest analysis, we might say that Genesis presents itself as historical narrative: a primeval history (chapters 1–11) followed by a history of the patriarchs (chapters 12–50). However, even if one accepts the basic stories as genuine and their characters as historical, it must be recognized that the accounts as they have been given have been deliberately shaped to serve specific purposes that go beyond simple storytelling.

The emphasis produced by this shaping allows Genesis to function as a prologue to the history of Israel, analogous to the way the Creation story presented in Latter-day Saint temples serves as a prologue to the ordinance of the endowment. Without an understanding of the Creation, the Fall, the Atonement,

1. Genesis 2:4; 5:1; 6:8; 10:1; 11:10, 27; 25:12, 19; 36:1; 37:2.

and the covenants that empower the posterity of Adam and Eve to return to the Father, none of the story that follows would make sense. The themes of Creation, Fall, and Atonement repeat with rich variation in Genesis from start to finish.² Significantly, the rich illustrations of these three themes in Genesis prepare the reader for their reappearance in the biblical story of Moses. Exodus, of course, recounts Israel's exit from the lush Eden-like setting of Egypt (Creation) to enter the lone and dreary wilderness of the Sinai desert (Fall). In that wilderness, God renews His covenant in the tabernacle, preparing a people to receive their inheritance in the promised land (Atonement).³

Authorship

Latter-day Saint teachings and scripture clearly imply that Moses learned of the Creation and the Fall in vision and was told to write what he saw. However, most modern scholars find evidence that the book of Genesis as we have it today was produced much later than when Moses could have lived. Can these views be reconciled?⁴

Scholars have assembled impressive evidence that the first five books of the Bible were compiled in their current form at a relatively late date from multiple, overlapping sources of varying perspectives—and almost certainly with differing degrees of inspiration. This idea should not trouble believing readers of the Book of Mormon, who know that inspired editors wove separate, overlapping records covering many hundreds of years into a single work of scripture. In addition, the idea that Moses may not have written all that is attributed to him firsthand is not incompatible with the belief that he and other major Old Testament personages were historical figures rather than fictional characters.

Of course, in contrast to the carefully controlled prophetic redaction of the Book of Mormon, we do not know how much of the writing and editing of the Old Testament may have taken place with less inspiration and authority. And although the processes of selection, transmission, and translation of ancient scripture were doubtless guided in at least some respects by the divine hand, these long and complex processes were not wholly accomplished under prophetic supervision.

2. For example, Noah's Flood is seen by many scholars as the destruction and re-creation of the earth, followed by a "fall" and a renewal of God's covenants. See selected examples of this repeated pattern in Genesis, Exodus, Isaiah, pseudepigrapha, and the Gospels in Nicolas Wyatt, "'Water, Water Everywhere . . .': Musings on the Aqueous Myths of the Near East," in *The Mythic Mind: Essays on Cosmology and Religion in Ugaritic and Old Testament Literature*, ed. Nicholas Wyatt (London, England: Equinox, 2005), 224–225.

3. See the parallel drawn between the Creation and the erecting of the tabernacle in Jacob Neusner, *Parashiyot One through Thirty-Three on Genesis 1:1 to 8:14*, vol. 1 of *Genesis Rabbah: The Judaic Commentary to the Book of Genesis, A New American Translation* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1985), 35.

4. Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, "Did Moses Write the Book of Genesis? An Old Testament KnoWhy for Gospel Doctrine Lesson 3: The Creation (Moses 1:27–42; 2–3) (JBOTL03B)," Interpreter Foundation, January 11, 2018, <https://interpreterfoundation.org/knowhy-otl03b-did-moses-write-the-book-of-genesis/>.

Many of the Bible's sources may go back to authentic oral or written traditions that are associated with figures such as Moses as *authorities*, even if they were not the direct *authors*.⁵ As a witness of the existence of these prophets, we have accounts of Joseph Smith's having visited with many of them personally. Moreover, Joseph Smith's Bible translation, the Book of Mormon, the Book of Abraham, and several revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants portray these people as historical figures. Latter-day Saints know that these reports of events experienced by ancient prophets not only are authentic but also were directly translated in our day by a prophet.

In considering how authority and authorship may have come together in writing prophetic teachings and revelations that likely originated in oral sources, we have modern-day analogues.⁶ Consider, for example, the fact that Joseph Smith's Nauvoo sermons were neither written out in advance nor taken down by listeners verbatim as Joseph delivered them. Rather, they were copied (sometimes retrospectively) as notes and reconstructions of his prose by a small number of individuals, generally including an official scribe. These notes were in turn shared and copied by others. Later, as part of serialized versions of history that appeared in Church publications, many of the notes from such sermons were expanded, amalgamated, and harmonized. Their prose was also smoothed out, and punctuation and grammar were standardized. Sometimes the wording of related journal entries from scribes and others was changed to the first person and incorporated into the *Documentary History of the Church* in order to fill in gaps—an accepted practice at the time.

The important point in all this is that while the published accounts of the Prophet's Nauvoo sermons have been widely used to convey Joseph Smith's teachings to Church members on his authority, few or perhaps none of these accounts were written or reviewed by the Prophet personally. Moreover, less than two hundred years after these sermons were delivered, multiple variations in content and wording—none of which completely reflect the actual words spoken—are in common circulation. In some cases, imperfect transcriptions of Joseph Smith's words led early Church leaders to misunderstand doctrine and, consequently, have been explicitly corrected by later Church leaders.⁷

What this example shows is how easily divergence in written records can happen, even when like-minded scribes, recording events as they occur, do the best they can to preserve the words of a prophet. This phenomenon also helps explain the great lengths that Joseph Smith went to in order to preserve an accurate written record.

5. See John H. Walton and D. Brent Sandy, *The Lost World of Scripture: Ancient Literary Culture and Biblical Authority* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 68–69, 305.

6. See Bradshaw, “Did Moses Write the Book of Genesis?”

7. See, for example, David A. Bednar, “Faithful Parents and Wayward Children: Sustaining Hope while Overcoming Misunderstanding,” *Ensign*, March 2014, 28–33.

So, though we do not find it necessary to believe that Moses personally wrote every word ascribed to him in the Bible as we now have it, Latter-day Saints accept him as the authority behind important biblical works and as a divinely appointed prophet and historical figure who plays a prominent role in modern scripture and in the restoration of priesthood keys in the latter days.

Date and Setting

The date and setting of Genesis in its present form has been the subject of much controversy. Because there is so little relevant historical and archaeological data available for dating Genesis, Bible scholar Ronald Hendel stressed the need for a broad approach that considers every kind of data available.⁸ In particular, he cautioned against the extreme views of both “maximalists” (who accept virtually everything in Genesis as historically accurate) and “minimalists” (who accept virtually nothing as historically accurate). From his careful study, he placed various material within the ninth to eighth centuries BC and the sixth century BC. But in addition, he saw strong cases for the persistence of historical memories prior to the Israelite period that pertain to traditions about the patriarchal homeland near Haran and the worship of the most high God, the father of Jehovah. In addition, he found ancient threads of historical context in the Genesis stories that relate to older Mesopotamian traditions. Research on Aramaic texts from the Dead Sea Scrolls, including on those with Enoch traditions, also evidences ties to earlier Mesopotamian traditions.⁹

Structure and Key Themes

Genesis has four major parts: the primeval history (1:1–11:26), the Abraham story (11:27–25:18), the Jacob story (25:19–36:43), and the Joseph story (37:1–50:26). The story of Isaac is brief; most of what we know about him comes from the part he plays in stories about Abraham and Jacob.

Filling out the primeval history of Genesis with significant new material and in line with the temple endowment, the eight chapters of the Book of Moses introduce each of the major covenants first given to Adam and Eve while also providing illustrations of the making and breaking of each covenant.¹⁰ Ronald Hendel made the case that a prominent theme of the first eleven chapters of Genesis is “transgressions

8. Ronald S. Hendel, “Historical Context,” in *The Book of Genesis: Composition, Reception, and Interpretation*, ed. Craig A. Evans, Joel N. Lohr, and David L. Petersen (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2012), 51–81.

9. The Aramaic *Book of Giants* is one such text with an Enoch tradition. See Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, “Moses 6–7 and the *Book of Giants*: Remarkable Witnesses of Enoch’s Ministry,” in *Tracing Ancient Threads in the Book of Moses: Inspired Origins, Temple Contexts, and Literary Qualities*, ed. Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, David R. Seely, John W. Welch, and Scott Gordon (Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation; Springville, UT: Book of Mormon Central; Reading, CA: FAIR; Salt Lake City, UT: Eborn Books, 2021), 1041–1256.

10. Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, “The Book of Moses as a Temple Text,” in *Tracing Ancient Threads*, 421–468. See also Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, “Jeffrey M. Bradshaw on ‘The LDS Book of Enoch as the Culminating Story of a Temple Text,’” Academy for Temple Studies, March 15, 2013, YouTube video, 26:14, <https://youtu.be/DjUToZa-e8U>.

of boundaries” set up in the beginning to separate mankind from the dwelling place of God.¹¹ Several examples of this theme are easily cited:

- the transgressions of Adam and Eve, of Cain, of Lamech, and of the “sons of God” who married the “daughters of men”
- the intrusion of Ham into the tent of Noah
- the efforts of those who built the Tower of Babel to reach heaven

In these stories we cannot fail to observe the common threads of Creation and Fall and of a God who places strict boundaries between the human and the divine.

Surprisingly, however, a significant and opposite theme largely neglected by scholars is found within some of these same chapters: God’s seeking to *erase* the divine-human boundary for a righteous few, drawing them into His very presence. The prime examples of this motif are, of course, Adam and Eve (Moses 6:66–68), Enoch (Moses 6:39; 7:69), and Noah (Moses 8:27), who all “walked with God.” This theme continues into the later patriarchal history, where the Lord commands Abraham to “walk before me” (Genesis 17:1) and Isaac speaks of “the Lord, before whom I walk” (24:40).

After the scattering of the nations in chapter 10 and the disastrous end of the great Tower in chapter 11, the focus of Genesis narrows to the family of Abraham. God’s covenant with Abraham and its associated promises are first introduced in 12:1–3. The themes of Atonement through faith, sacrifice, and the binding power of covenants are frequently replayed in the lives of Abraham and his posterity—nowhere more pointedly and poignantly than in the story of the near sacrifice of Isaac.

The personal nature of these stories creates an intimate setting where perceptive readers vicariously experience the joys and heartaches of the family circle, which are mercifully overshadowed by the constant, transcendent presence of the Almighty God, whose purpose is to lead the souls of both the faithful and the fractious in each generation inexorably forward to the promised land.

The overriding theme of Genesis is that the promises made to Adam, Eve, and the patriarchs extend to all of God’s people. Its stories provide the background for God’s invitation to the Israelites in Moses’s time to become “a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation” (Exodus 19:6). In like manner, the story of Joseph, who brought salvation to his brethren, enjoins Latter-day Saints to be faithful in carrying forth the message of the Restoration so that scattered Israel may be gathered for the last time.¹²

11. Ronald S. Hendel, “Of Demigods and the Deluge: Toward an Interpretation of Genesis 6:1–4,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 106 (1987): 23.

12. Ezra Taft Benson, “A Message to Judah from Joseph,” *Ensign*, December 1976, 67–72.

Additional Resources

- Abraham's Hebron: Then and Now*. Five-part video series lecture by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw. The Interpreter Foundation. February 2018. <https://youtube.com/watch?v=t5GJ8F5K2Jo&list=PLRMn4gyXMWLuivVS5TidEuY5R96C6A2my>.
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- . *The First Days and the Last Days: A Verse-By-Verse Commentary on the Book of Moses and JS—Matthew in Light of the Temple*. Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City, UT: Eborn Books, 2021.
- . *In God's Image and Likeness 1: Creation, Fall, and the Story of Adam and Eve*. Updated and revised. 2 vols. Salt Lake City, UT: Eborn Books, 2014.
- Bradshaw, Jeffrey M., and Book of Mormon Central Staff. "Book of Moses Essays." Interpreter Foundation. May–November 2020. <https://interpreterfoundation.org/book-of-moses-essays/>.
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