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BACKGROUNDS

Most of us are vitally interested in answers to the big questions of life. Where did we come from? Why are we here? What makes us tick, or what is the nature of man? How did we get into the mess we are in? What is our future? Or what is the future of the world? We consider any literature that deals with those questions relevant and timely.

Preeminent among all literature about the big questions of life is the book of Genesis. Its name comes from a Greek word, *geneseos*, which was the title given it in the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament). That title was derived from the heading of the various sections of the book, each of which begins with “the book of the *geneseos*” (meaning *generation, origin, source*; see 2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10, 27; 25:12, 19; 36:1, 9; 37:2). In these sections Genesis depicts the beginning of the world by creation; the beginning of mankind and human languages; the beginning of sin in the race; the beginning of salvation; the beginning of God’s chosen people, Israel; the beginning of the Arabs (descended from Ishmael, 25:12) and the other nations of the earth; the beginning of the Arab-Israelite conflict; and the beginning of the covenant with Abraham and

his descendants. The latter in its fuller statement and with its supplements spells out conditions at the end time—Jews in control of the Promised Land and their Messiah ruling on the throne of David in Jerusalem.

As a book of beginnings, Genesis is of course a seed plot and springboard for the concepts and history of the rest of the Old Testament. But it is almost nearer in many ways to the New Testament than the rest of the Old Testament. As Derek Kidner has observed, the institution of marriage, the Fall of man, judgment by Flood, Esau's despising his birthright, and many of its other themes are hardly dealt with again until the New Testament. Moreover, whereas near the beginning of Genesis Satan is victorious and man is expelled from Eden, in a beautiful symmetry the New Testament ends with the serpent coming to his downfall and the redeemed walking again in Paradise.¹

Probably over no other part of Scripture have so many battles been fought as over the book of Genesis. Theologians, scientists, historians, and students of literature have subjected it to minute examination and criticism. But with all their attention, they have been able neither to exhaust its contents nor destroy its message. The measure of its greatness is seen in its continuing ability to command the attention of scholars and laymen alike throughout the world.

AUTHORSHIP

One of the battles fought over Genesis has concerned its authorship. But of course the authorship of Genesis is closely tied to that of the rest of the Pentateuch (first five books of the Old Testament). Eighteenth-century rationalism launched attacks against the Pentateuch along with the rest of the Bible. Denying any supernatural origin of Scripture, it completely humanized the Bible and viewed it as a record of human experience with God rather than a revelation of God to humanity. And as the teachings of evolution made an increasing impact during the nineteenth century, the concept of slow development was applied to Scripture. Thus it was taught that the Pentateuch developed gradually: Documents and sources were collected and

edited until it finally came to its present form during the fifth century B.C. Mosaic authorship was denied.

Theories of literary development not employed in dealing with other literature were forced on the Scripture in a day when Near Eastern studies had not yet provided a basis for evaluating theories of biblical interpretation. In fact, construction of liberal theories did not even make commonsense allowance for variations in style and vocabulary with differences in subject matter and mood of the author, and highly subjective conclusions were reached.

Discussion of that highly technical subject is beyond the scope of this study. It is enough for present purposes to show that there is abundant support for the traditional view of Mosaic authorship. The Pentateuch itself claims that important parts were written by Moses (e.g., Exod. 24:4, 7; Deut. 31:9, 24–26). Internal evidence shows that the Pentateuch was written by an eyewitness. Those parts that involve Egypt contain many references that show the author's familiarity with Egypt and have information virtually impossible to obtain in Canaan several centuries after Moses' day, when liberals hold it was written. Egyptian names, Egyptian words borrowed by the writer, Egyptian customs and geography all indicate the author knew Egypt well.

Pentateuchal claims for Mosaic authorship are supported in the rest of the Old Testament, intertestamental literature, and the statements of Christ. As early as Joshua's day the Law of Moses was in written form (Josh. 1:7–8; 8:32, 34; 22:5). And the rest of the Old Testament follows Joshua's example (e.g., 1 Kings 2:3; 2 Chron. 23:18; 34:14; Ezra 3:2; 6:18; Neh. 8:1–8; Dan. 9:11).

The testimony continues during the intertestamental period, notably in Ecclesiasticus 45:6 (written about 180 B.C.) and in Philo (*Life of Moses* 3:39), dating about the time of Christ's birth. Those are supported by the eminent Josephus (*Antiquities* IV.8.48), who wrote about A.D. 90. All three declare Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch.

Christ on numerous occasions spoke of the Law of Moses, sometimes of the "book of Moses" (Mark 12:26), and twice of

“Moses and the prophets” (Luke 16:29, 31) or Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms (Luke 24:44), obviously making Moses author of the first part of the Old Testament on a par with the other major sections. The early church, the church of later centuries, and the Jews almost unanimously accepted that view until the rise of destructive higher criticism at the end of the nineteenth century. The position is too strongly supported to be dismissed easily by a group of rationalists.

Of course the claim that Moses wrote the Pentateuch in general or Genesis in particular does not assume that Moses wrote without the use of sources. Inspiration argues only for accuracy of the written record; it does not stipulate that the writer had a mind that functioned as a blank tablet to be written on by the Holy Spirit. Abraham came from a very sophisticated background in which all sorts of records were meticulously kept. Joseph rose to a place of leadership in a very literate society; if he himself did not write, he had plenty of scribes who did. Both of these men could have contributed to the written sources available to Moses; and of course many could have contributed oral sources.

Interesting confirmation of the traditional view of single authorship of Genesis has been provided by a five-year linguistic analysis of the book, just completed in Israel. The study was conducted at Technion, Israel’s institute of technology in Haifa, under the direction of Professor Yehuda Radday. It reached the conclusion that there was an *82 percent* probability that Genesis was written by one author.²

DATE OF COMPOSITION

When Moses wrote Genesis will never be known, but the latest possible date is the time of his death, just before the Hebrews crossed the Jordan and attacked Jericho. The time of that event depends on the date one assigns to the Exodus. I subscribe to the early date of the Exodus (about 1440) and thus concludes that Genesis must have been written by about 1400 B.C., for Moses died at the end of the subsequent forty years of wilderness wandering.

CONTENTS AND OUTLINE

The book of Genesis divides rather easily into two parts: the early history of mankind (chaps. 1–11), and the patriarchs (chaps. 12–50). The first part narrates the creation of the universe and mankind and quickly moves on through the story of the entrance of sin into the world, the extension of godless civilization, judgment on humanity by means of the Flood, and further judgment by means of proliferation of languages and scattering across the earth. Then in part two God makes a fresh beginning by calling out a new people as a witness to His name in the earth. That people, the Hebrews, are led by patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob) during a 215-year period in Canaan; at the end of the book they go down into Egypt to escape a famine and are cared for there through the instrumentality of Joseph.

OUTLINE

Part 1: THE EARLY HISTORY OF MANKIND (1:1–11:32)

The Creation (1:1–2:3)

The Fall of Man and Extension of Civilization (2:4–5:32)

The Flood (6:1–9:29)

Historical Developments After the Flood (10:1–11:32)

Part 2: THE PATRIARCHS (12:1–50:26)

Abraham (12:1–25:18)

Isaac (25:19–26:35)

Jacob (27:1–36:43)

Joseph (37:1–50:26)