

Tips for Reading Genesis

by Kurtis Peters

The book of Genesis opens with God creating a good world. But that good world is soon corrupted and humanity quickly spirals into increasing violence and disregard for one another and the world around them. We may be familiar with some of these stories: Adam and Eve with the serpent and fruit (not an apple!); Cain and Abel; the destructive Flood and Noah's Ark; the tower of Babel, etc. It's not a pretty sight. But shortly after the tower of Babel (better to read it as "Babylon") the story turns to a family centred on Abram and Sarai, later renamed Abraham and Sarah. From chapters 12-50 the story follows the next few generations of this family until, at the end of the book, they find themselves prospering in Egypt.

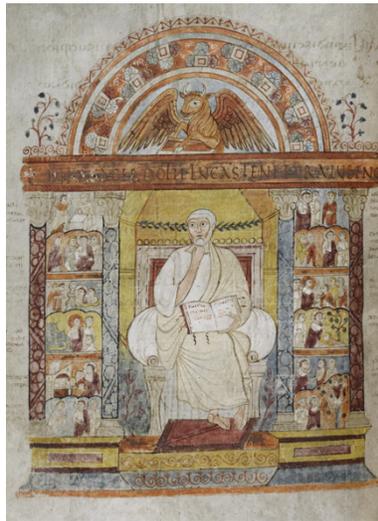
Genesis, however, attracts controversy as much as, if not more than, a Christ Candle attracts Grandviewites. Famous debates around evolution vs. Creation continue to this day, as do those concerning roles of men and women, how humans are to relate to nature, whether or not the flood was historical, etc. In modern scholarship, too, there are debates. Even the first few words of the Bible spark furious debates. Does it mean "In the beginning God

created the Heavens and the Earth" (i.e. creation from nothing) or does it mean "At the beginning of God separating the Heavens from the Earth..." (i.e. not the beginning of all things)?

But for our reading, maybe the most fruitful debate is the one Genesis itself is having. Many of the stories of Genesis 1-11 follow well-known

patterns of stories from the so-called ancient Near East, especially those from the area around Babylon. But the stories in Genesis are no mere retelling of those other stories. Instead, Genesis 1-11 reads like an ironic twist on those other stories, calling them into question. Why would Genesis be interested in doing that? Those other stories represent in many ways the heart of Babylon's religious worldview – Babylon the empire. Many suggest that parts of Genesis were

composed or at least heavily edited around the time of Judah's exile in Babylon (we'll read about that at the end of 2 Kings). The people of Judah were exiles in the heart of an empire that paraded its imperial religion, a religion that justified their own magnificence.



Genesis 1-11 sees things differently. Counter to Babylon's outlook, Genesis sees that one God, and one alone, made all of Creation. That God Yahweh is in control and does not allow the ever-feared chaos to have its way. Yahweh sees that Creation is good and is a gift. Humanity is created not to ease Yahweh's labour, but to share in the joy of the good world. Rather than being the product of violence among the gods, humanity is created in God's own image (a very strong symbol of carrying divine presence), and this, counter to Babylon's stories, applies *both* to males and females! The flood, a very well-known story to the cultures around Israel, was normally thought to be a result of the gods being angry with annoying humans. In Genesis, the story is retold similarly, except that God's judgment is on humanity's wickedness to one another. In the height of Babylon-mockery, chapter 11 has humanity gathering to build a great tower. Everyone reading Genesis would have known that it was talking about Babylon's great tower temples. But despite their arrogance in thinking that they could reach to heaven, Yahweh has to stoop all the way down to see what they're up to.

So the first 11 chapters leave us concerned for the fate of humanity. God has tried to engage them in their entirety, but it has not worked. And so enter Abram and Sarai. Many assume that God has given up on humanity and has now chosen this couple and their offspring to be the sole recipients of his blessing. But that is a very problematic reading! Abram and Sarai and their family are to be the *instrument* of God's blessing for the whole world. Read the covenant(s) closely. Note how absurd it would sound, in the face of the Babylonian empire, to assert that one little family in a backwater region would bear this role.

The rest of Genesis follows this family with apprehension and anxiety. Will the covenant be fulfilled? Will they grow to be a great family? Will they really inherit the land? Will they really bless the nations? These questions guide the reader through the various stories of sex, lies, and violence throughout the rest of the book, and beyond.

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