

# **GENESIS**

## **A THEOLOGICAL COMMENTARY**

***THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, ISAAC AND JACOB***

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## WHY IS THIS SO COMPLEX?

I'm sure you are wondering why I've turned simple stories into a complex theological treatise. On the surface, it seems that we simply have an account of the creation of the world, man's rebellion and death, and the choosing of Abraham and his family for life with God. What I've ended up with, on the other hand, are deep connections between the stories and characters of Genesis with the teachings of the rest of the Bible – spread out all through the Prophets and the Apostles. In fact, on the surface it looks as if I've taken the theology of the Bible and read it *back* into the Genesis stories, “filling them out” and making them bigger than they appear to be on the surface. Is there justification for this method?

I have three reasons for taking this approach.

**First**, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob *really are* referenced throughout the rest of the Bible.<sup>1</sup> The Prophets and Apostles rely heavily on what God did with the Patriarchs. That should make us stop and ask, “Why did they do so?” It's a fatal error in our modern scholars that they basically ignore such questions and assume that the Patriarchs had no real input for our modern situation; Christianity, for them, exists very well on its New Testament foundation without having to reach back to Genesis for anything. But it's not right to take that approach, nor is it intellectually honest. In fact we can set up a contrast between the two approaches:

### PROPHETS AND APOSTLES

*Patriarchs important*

### MODERN SCHOLARS

*Patriarchs unimportant*

Now – which one are you going to follow? If we follow the modern scholars, then we've rejected the testimony of the only authority that Jesus recognizes in the Church, the Holy Scriptures. (2 Timothy 3:15-17) And if we follow the Prophets and Apostles, then we have to slow down and ask some critical questions like “What did they say about the Patriarchs that is so crucial for our faith?” And we have to get some hard data here; we can't just make a generalized reference to our obligation to the Fathers without making clear what it is that we rely on them for. But when you ask such questions, you'd better be ready to work it out and “connect the dots” because, as the Apostles told us, it's a complicated business and not something that novices are going to get right away. (Hebrews 5:11-14)

**Second**, Paul says plainly that we are heirs of the Patriarchs.

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<sup>1</sup> Do the statistics. The “God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” is mentioned 18 times in the entire Bible, and 6 times in the New Testament. “Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” are mentioned together 46 times, 12 in the NT. Abraham is mentioned 246 times in the Bible, and 70 times in the NT. Jacob: 388 in the Bible, 24 in the NT. And in keeping with how important the Old Testament characters are, David is mentioned 1150 times in the Bible and 53 times in the New Testament. So if these names are so crucial to the story of the entire Bible, why don't we hear them in sermons nowadays?

If you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise. (Galatians 3:29)

The Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel. (Ephesians 3:6)

Words have meanings. If the Patriarchs didn't have anything concrete to pass on to us, then we are not their heirs. So if we presently have a saving faith in Christ, and access to God, and sins forgiven and a holy nature (things that are truly important) then these foundation stones evidently came from the Patriarchs and should be easy to see in their stories. Otherwise we didn't inherit our faith from them.

**Third**, the purpose of Genesis is not to explain our entire faith to us. Rather it shows us God laying down critical foundation stones for the House and Family of God. The Bible is a big book. God explains the fullness of our faith across all 1700 pages (in my Bible!) of Scripture; whereas in Genesis we are watching the Builder lay down the cornerstone, and the foundation stones, for the structure that will be built upon it over the next 4000 years. We may not understand the ultimate function, or implications, for the builder laying down a particular stone, but that doesn't mean the Builder didn't have all that in mind at the beginning. Or (to use another metaphor) the wiring in a house that's being built may look like a hopeless jumble to the uninitiated, but it's all according to the blueprints; later on, when we switch the lights on in a particular room, it all makes sense to us.

Therefore there's only one right way to read Genesis. We can't take the bare story in isolation and form an entire theology around just that; we'll end up with nothing more than moralisms and theologically useless anecdotes about ancient people and cultures that have little relevance to us today.<sup>2</sup> Instead, we have to take the theology of the Bible back to Genesis and read it in that light, primarily because the Apostles give us the necessary hermeneutic (which the Patriarchs already had). The God and Father of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ created the world, addressed completely the problem of sin, and chose for himself heirs to inherit eternal life in the Son. *That* God is at work in Genesis. Can you see him there? If so, you have the faith necessary to understand Genesis. Is this "faith" an unwarranted perspective on what was going on there? No – the Patriarchs had the *same* faith, and saw the *same* things with that faith, that we modern Christians have and see.

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the people of old received their commendation. (Hebrews 11:1-2)

And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect. (Hebrews 11:39-40)

The Bible *is* a big book; the entire book is a complete description of our Christian faith. So we have to use Genesis for the purpose for which it was written, not more and not less. It doesn't matter when the books were written, or what little information the

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<sup>2</sup> Which is, in fact, what constitutes most modern commentaries on Genesis.

characters had available to them at the time versus the “fullness” that we have now; it only matters whether we can see *our faith* forming in the beginning. Early saints didn’t have all the books of the Bible as we do, that’s true; but whatever they were lacking, God gave them through faith to make up for missing books of the Bible. The Apostles were plain about that. So we must assume that the Patriarchs really did see critical elements of our spiritual faith in their day, which means we have to read the story in light of that truth. “Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the Word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” (Hebrews 13:7-8)

And the complexity of the story shouldn’t surprise us – not if we know our God. Creation itself is so infinitely complicated that scientists, in spite of all that they’ve learned about it, feel as if they’re still standing on the shore of a vast ocean of things to discover. God’s works are beyond our understanding. In addition to that, just as parents know that it takes twenty years to raise a child to adulthood so that he/she is ready for the complexity of living in a big world (if then!), God’s plans and works to raise spiritual children to live with him forever in Heaven are also beyond our understanding, very time consuming, and extremely complicated. Especially in light of our true calling in eternity: we must be ready and trained to be “a kingdom and priests” in the House of God. This is not a simple project.

Therefore we can’t read the Creation account without having some awareness of the kind of world that God made, and our place in it. It’s a complex business. And since it took 2000 years and staggering spiritual dynamics to solve our problems of sin and death, we should expect at least *some* depth and complexity to the foundation work to create the solutions that would serve all mankind, all through history. This is not a kindergartener’s comic book story.

It’s typical of modern “students” to want the lessons on an extremely simplistic level, served up pre-digested and requiring no thought or effort. I cannot cater to that mindset. It doesn’t match what God has done, and it certainly doesn’t help anybody aspiring to sit “at the right hand of the throne of God” in Heaven. It requires rigorous discipline and training, and deep meditation, to see the situation as it is and attain “mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” (Ephesians 4:13) What the Patriarchs saw and experienced was passed down to us to *instruct* us in our faith; and our God and Savior was their hope as well.

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