

Reading Genesis: The Beginning of Wisdom
an introduction to this study and these sermons

The Bible stands alone as God's self-revelation. There is no other written work or word like it.

It is the record of the many ways by which the one God revealed himself to humanity.

It is the record of God speaking to humanity.

It is the means by which we know God acts of self-revelation and by which God speaks to us today.

The authors were inspired ('in-spired' = in-breathed) by God to compose books in which God tells God's own story.

The Bible says this about itself:

'Scripture is able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.' II Timothy 3:16.

Genesis has God's authority.

Jesus quotes Genesis as finally authoritative. When speaking to the Pharisees about divorce:

Have you not read that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female'.

*For this reason a man will leave his father and his mother and be united to his wife,
and the two will become one flesh'?*

So they are no longer two, but one flesh.

Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.

And with that he finished speaking. Enough said.

'... to make us wise...' The Bible can be read well and profitably for its wisdom – the wisdom it offers to humanity.

That is how and why we will be reading, studying, preaching and hearing Genesis:

'... to be wise...'

'... for salvation ...'

'... teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness ...'

'... to be equipped for every good work ...'

Genesis uniquely teaches us about salvation by showing us, in the first 11 chapters, through unforgettable narrative, what preceded salvation –

what God intended for humanity, indeed all of creation, from the beginning,

what humanity did and does to put it all at risk,

what the world looks like when humanity attempts to save itself, and

why therefore salvation from God is needed.

These chapters hint, but unmistakably promise, that God's salvation is coming and is sure.

Genesis shows us, again by narrative, in the long remaining chapters, the beginning of that salvation.

As a book of wisdom, the Bible belongs in conversation with all the great books: great ideas, great texts, great minds.

So we read Genesis with the Psalms and Prophets, with John and Paul, and with Plato and Aristotle, and others.

Genesis is a book about beginnings ('genesis' = 'beginnings'):

The beginning of the heavens and the earth (Chapter 1);

The beginning of human life on earth (Chapters 2-11);

The beginning of a people of God, beginning with Abraham (Chapters 12-50).

Genesis is the beginning of our instruction by The Beginner – The Beginner of all and the One interested in humanity.

Genesis tells us in many ways about "what is first".

It tells us what is first in humanity; what is primordial, elemental, principal, and essential.

It invites reflection on what is first; where humanity first was placed, acted, lived and died.

It educates us as how to live "first" (=best).

Genesis, carefully read, can help us again to experience/know these things for the first time and in a first way.

All that follows in Scripture comes from this account of beginnings.

The laws that come next in Exodus are necessary immediately after we learn about humanity in Genesis.

All of Scripture presumes we know the stories and the wisdom of Genesis.

The Savior who is last in revelation is necessary because of what we learn about humanity in Genesis.

The Gospel of Jesus written by John follows Genesis:

*'In the beginning was the Word ... and the Word was God ...
and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.'*

*'For God so loved the world that he gave us his only begotten Son
that whosoever believeth in him would not perish but have everlasting life.'*

The stories of Genesis are paradigmatic.

They tell us not only what happened but what happens – *always, typically, habitually* happens.

The first story – the story of creation (Genesis 1,2) - is before history began.

The next stories (Genesis 4-11) prepare us for history – the long, still ongoing, history of God with humanity.

These stories are best read as literal (that is how they are told, so that is how they are best heard).

They are before any work or word or recording of the history of humanity; they cannot be dated.

The long stories that follow beginning with Abraham (Genesis 12-50) can be dated beginning about 2,000 BC.

The first chapters/stories we call pre-history, the second primeval history, the third world history.

Individuals in the chapters 1-11 are representative, part of the whole of the humanity, best read as part for the whole.

When Adam eats we all disobey.

When Cain kills Abel we are the violent (Cain) and the victim (Abel) alike.

When Noah is saved all of humanity is saved.

When the tongues are confused at Babel, we all speak languages apart from each other.

This is how the Jesus, thus the New Testament, thus the church, reads Genesis.

Genesis is a coherent narrative that conveys a moral and theological whole,

in which the opening part (1-11) by narrating the consistent and changing ways of God with humanity prepares the reader to take seriously God's new way for humanity – a way that is still offered to all, and in which the latter part (12-50) allows us to learn along with the Bible characters what this knowledge offers, expects, and requires of us, to live life fully human under God now, and teaches us regarding for what (Who!) we yearn and wait in order to live, and live eternally, with God.

Genesis teaches what it means to be human and therefore how to be human.

Genesis teaches us who God is, what God has done, and what God promises to all humanity.

Genesis begins our reading of the whole Bible, teaching us to read it as a whole.

Genesis narrows, and thus sharpens its focus progressively.

At first, in the first verse, it is 'the heavens and the earth', then by the second verse the focus is only the earth.

Then by the end of the first chapter, only humanity is the focus.

By the end of the first section (chapters 1-11), the focus is only one family – Abraham's.

(At the center of the Bible – the Gospels - the focus will be most clear and only on one person – Abraham's Seed, Christ.

Then the Bible will widen its focus again to 'all the families of the earth', indeed to 'whosoever will'.

Then finally, as if to frame all of the Scripture, with these early Genesis chapters,

in the final chapters of the final Book the focus will become again 'the new heavens and the new earth'.)

Genesis, like the whole Bible, has its fulfillment in Christ.

Paul, proclaiming on the grandest level the purposes of God since before creation (*Ephesians 1:3-10*):

God... has blessed us in the heavenly realms... in Christ, for he chose us in Christ before the creation of the world...

with all wisdom... he purposed in Christ to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment –

to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

At the end of time, with the angel sounding his trumpet, the loud voices in heaven will shout (*Revelation 11:15*):

The kingdom of this world have become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever.

Reading Genesis is challenging and rewarding.

The stories can be told to young children.

There is wonder, excitement, drama, comedy and tragedy, heartbreak and joy.

There is a man and a woman, a tree and a serpent, a flood and a tower, a family, lots of travel and tents.

There is God and there we are, with God always near.

The stories can not be exhausted by the wisest of adults.

There is more paradox and irony, trial and error, promise and delay, and still more wonder.

There is marriage and betrayal, philosophy and theology, politics and piety.

The first letter of the first word in the Bible is the Hebrew letter 'beth'  Hebrew reads from right to left.

Ancient Jewish scholars have commented that the letter closes off what is above, below, and before it.

It opens only to what follows, thus we cannot know what is above, below, or before 'in the beginning...' only what follows; but it does open. Thus we must read Genesis with humility - without God speaking we know nothing; and with confidence - God has indeed spoken.

Reading Genesis Bibliography

Augustine.

Augustine wrote three commentaries on the book of Genesis.

On Genesis: A Refutation of the Manichees,
The Unfinished Literal Commentary on Genesis, and
The Literal Meaning of Genesis (his longest work on the subject).

He also wrote 'Questions on Genesis' in his larger "*Questions on the Heptateuch*".

Also on creation and Genesis in the last 3 books of his *Confessions* and Book XI in *The City of God*.

And on creation in *Answer to an Enemy of the Law and Prophets, Faith and Creed,* and *Answer to Julian*.

Nearly a thousand pages of his writings explore creation philosophically and theologically. Though Augustine can be a very pastoral writer – he was a bishop who preached several times a week to his congregation – his writings on Genesis are less commentary than they are essays/books written against the pagans and the heretics, all of whom he thought had wrong ideas about the physical and spiritual worlds and thus about God and humanity, and that therefore Genesis taught the truth against their error. These books are a tough read, unless philosophy comes easy to you. I have all these works in my library.

Brueggmann, Walter. *Genesis. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching.* 400 pages. John Knox Press. 1982.

Brueggmann taught at Columbia Theological Seminary until his retirement. Brueggmann is one of the most well-known Old Testament scholars today. This commentary helped establish that reputation. His works are often profoundly theological and increasingly addressed the matters of justice in our contemporary world. This commentary is perhaps the best at giving a broad and bold theological exposition of Genesis. Though thoroughly scholarly, it is never bogged down in the details, and always spurs great thoughts on these great texts. It is used as a prompt for many preachers and teachers now nearly 40 years later. It is in my library.

Calvin, John. *Commentaries on The First Book of Moses called Genesis.* 1100 pages. Baker. 1998.

Calvin wrote a commentary on the five books of Moses as re-edited from his daily/weekly lectures.

They, with his other commentaries – which are sometimes his re-edited notes, sometimes notes taken by his students, sometimes his sermons – were and are the most read commentaries from the reformation. First written in Latin, they have been translated into all the European languages and most of the larger Asian and African languages. They read well. This is a pastor teaching his congregation daily by way of reading and explaining Scripture in lectures. Calvin is considered the first modern interpreter of Scripture because of his disciplined and careful exegetical judgments, and his pastoral, though sometimes forceful, style of writing/speaking. Most often I read Calvin last, sometimes after the study or sermon is complete. I read him that I too would hear the word and become a doer of it. There is a full set of Calvin's commentaries in the church library given 'in loving memory of C. P. 'Mac' McVay by his wife and children Marie McVay, Pamela McVay Simpson, and Don Riffe'. And there is a full set in my library.

Goldingay, John. *Genesis for Everyone*. 2 volumes. 400 pages. WJK. 2010.

Goldingay is the recently retired Professor of the Old Testament at Fuller Seminary. He wrote the commentary series on all the Old Testament books that is the companion to N. T. Wright's New Testament commentary series. Together they are *The Bible for Everyone*. This series, instead of being a verse-by-verse detailed analysis, interprets and explains the broader sweep of the text and sets it within the contemporary challenges of our times. Written for all Bible readers (hence: 'everyone') this commentary on Genesis can be read almost as one reads a book. I suggest it can be used well as a daily brief devotional/study. The illustrative material makes it engaging and offers help to those who want to teach and perhaps preach. The full OT and NT sets are in the church library. Last year I read his *The First Testament* - his own translation of the whole OT. It is a delightful read and sometimes jarring because of his idiosyncratic phrasing and his vocabulary choices meant to mimic the Hebrew more closely than other translations. Sometimes it felt as if I was reading the OT for the first time. This book/Bible is in my library and can be borrowed.

Kass, Leon R. *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis*. 700 pages. Free Press. 2003.

Kass teaches at the University of Chicago. Of all these authors he is not a Biblical scholar, but a public philosopher. And he is the only writer not identified as a Christian but as a Jew. And this is, in all my reading, the single best commentary of any author on any book of the Bible. I knew Leon and his wife Amy when I was a graduate student and we each taught sections of the History of Western Civilization at the U of C. This book is not for believers only – Jew or Christian – but for anyone asking the big questions about God, humanity, the world, and how they were intended to be together and how they still might be. It's about gaining wisdom. He writes that Genesis is a text to rival any philosophical work by any author – Plato, Aristotle, and any modern public thinker. I will offer notes each week based more on this commentary than the others. I have this book in my library.

Keil, C. F. and Delitzsch, F. *Genesis*. Commentary on the Old Testament. 500 pages. Eerdmans. 1976.

Keil and Delitzsch were among the leading Hebrew scholars of the 19th century and together wrote a commentary on the whole Old Testament beginning in 1861. First written in German, this commentary is still the gold standard for those who study the Hebrew when studying the OT. I have spent hours (weeks? months?) in this set and do not trust my exegesis until I submit it to theirs. Usually dry and far from pastoral concerns, it is a rigor to read, but, in my experience, a necessary discipline when attempting to be the faithful interpreter of the word as God has called me to be and do. This set is prominent in my library and was given to me by Lois when we were just married.

Kidner, Derek. *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*. Tyndale Old Testament Commentary Series. 200 pages. Inter Varsity Press. 1967

Kidner was Warden of Tyndale House in Cambridge when he wrote this brief and focused commentary. When I first became a user of commentaries in order to preach and teach, this was one of my favorites. It explains the hard texts and yet keeps sight of the great themes and teachings of Genesis. A well worn copy is in my library.

Leupold, H. C. *Exposition of Genesis*. 2 volumes. 1200 pages. Baker, 1942.

Leupold was Professor of Old Testament Exegesis at Capital University Seminary in Ohio. An older commentary it reads somewhat older and sometimes considers questions no longer asked, yet it is excellent in its teaching. His commentary never lets go of the purpose of Scripture 'to make us wise unto salvation'. This was my first commentary on Genesis studied while I was a college student. These two volumes are in my library.

Walton, John H. *Genesis. The NIV Application Commentary*. 750 pages. Zondervan. 2001.

Walton taught Old Testament at Wheaton College. The purpose of the series and this single commentary is to help us hear the word well and then be 'doers of the word'. The application of the word to contemporary life covers much, from personal piety to public politics. Not a technical effort, yet a careful interpretation, it offers 'original meaning', then 'bridging contexts', finally 'contemporary significance'. The 44 volume set is in the church library given 'in loving memory of C. P. 'Mac' McVay by his wife and children Marie McVay, Pamela McVay Simpson, and Don Riffe'.

Wenham, Gordon J. *Genesis*. Word Biblical Commentary. 2 volumes. 850 pages. Nelson. 1987.

Wenham taught at the College of St Paul and St Mary in Cheltenham, England when he wrote this commentary. The commentary can be deeply detailed in its grammatical analysis of the Hebrew. Each extended passage has several sections – 'Bibliography' which references technical journal articles, 'Translation' which is always original, 'Notes' which can go for pages on the textual variants and grammatical analysis, 'Form/Structure/Setting' which gives literary and historical context, 'Comment' the longest section which goes verse by verse, and 'Explanation' which always strikes me as too short. The Word Biblical Commentary is 60+ volumes and is in the church library given 'in loving memory of C. P. 'Mac' McVay by his wife and children Marie McVay, Pamela McVay Simpson, and Don Riffe'. The two volumes on Genesis are also in my library.

Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. Genesis I-II. Inter Varsity Press. 200 pages. 2001.

Reformation Commentary on Scripture. Genesis I-II. Inter Varsity Press. 400 pages. 2012.

These sets, each of which cover the whole Bible and of which the second is still in production, are collections of the most important comments of many authors on all the passages of Scripture. That is: look up Genesis 1:1 in the *Ancient Commentary* and read what Augustine, Origen, Chrysostom, Basil, Nemesius of Emesa, and others have to say on that verse. Look it up in the *Reformation Commentary* and read what Melancthon, Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, Peter Martyr Vermigli, Wolfgang Capito and others have to say. The quotes are short pieces and thus are good for quoting and comparing and sampling, but because short, not so good for in depth studying. I have the sets in my library. They look really good on my shelves.

-- Jerry Andrews
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