



HOW TO READ  
GENESIS

TREMPER LONGMAN III



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Dedicated to ministers of the gospel.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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**W**riting a book on biblical interpretation is both a great privilege and a great responsibility. Writing a book on the proper interpretation of a book like Genesis intensifies both.

The responsibility comes with the importance of the subject matter. The Bible is the Word of God and Genesis is the foundation stone of that great literary edifice. In Genesis we learn of God's creation, human rebellion and God's pursuit to redeem us. In Genesis we meet Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, Joseph, and many other compelling persons. Genesis begins with the creation and ends with Israel in Egypt, encompassing an unknown but certainly vast length of time. In Genesis, as I hope to establish in the following pages, we get the first intimations of our Redeemer.

The responsibility also results from the controversies associated with this book. Opinions run hot about the nature of the creation, the historicity of the material, its anticipation of future events, not to speak of its date and authorship. To people of faith and many others, these are important matters.

Of course the privilege is made of the same stuff as the responsibilities. It is a privilege to be able to encourage the reader's thinking about important interpretive issues surrounding this monumental book. And, indeed, though it will be manifestly clear that I have arrived at a number of hermeneutical and exegetical conclusions, my main desire is to stimulate

readers into thinking through these issues for themselves.

I didn't start with a desire to write on Genesis. I had already written books in what has turned into a short series on Psalms and Proverbs,<sup>1</sup> and encouraged by their reception, I approached InterVarsity Press about writing a third book. I made some suggestions as to which book I would tackle, and Dan Reid pushed me toward Genesis because of its popularity.

It did not take much convincing; I welcomed the opportunity to spend more time with that book, but I soon realized just how difficult it would be to write on Genesis. As a monumental and controversial book, I knew I could not cover everything and certainly could never satisfy everyone. My guess is that there is something here that may irritate or even anger everyone who has an opinion already formed on Genesis. My hope is that people will be open to question their previous opinions as they engage the book again. I have tried to do the same as I wrote this book, and I found that I did change my mind on some issues. When it comes to biblical interpretation, the foundational things are crystal clear, but many other matters are debatable.

I would like to acknowledge those who have significantly helped me, while relieving them of responsibility concerning final conclusions. Their reading of my manuscript gave me much to think about, and I often, but not always, accepted their criticism and advice. I would like to thank John Walton and the other (anonymous) reader of my manuscript. They were both intended to be blind referees but John rightly knew that I would know who he was by the nature of his advice since we have been friends and occasional sparring partners on some hermeneutical issues for years. I learned and revised many things because of John's input. I also learned much from the other reviewer. On matters concerning chapter ten, I received conflicting advice (John was hesitant and the other reader wanted me to expand), so there I felt free to keep things as they were!

But the one who deserves the most praise for encouraging and guiding this project is my main editor at InterVarsity Press, Dan Reid. Dan is a first-rate biblical scholar and editor. We have written a book together (*God Is a Warrior* [Zondervan, 1995]), and this is the third book of mine that he has edited. Furthermore, I have worked with him as an editor on

one published book (*Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*), and we are presently working on another. He is meticulous, encouraging, energetic, intelligent and fun to be around. (I am not just saying this because I would like to work with him in the future!)

However, since it is a little dubious to dedicate a book to your editor, I have chosen instead to dedicate this book to ministers who have had a large influence on my thinking and life. I do this as a token of my great respect and love for those in ministry. As a former teacher at a seminary, I know how tough it can be to be a minister. These men and women have made significant sacrifice to be our spiritual guides. The ones I name are not all those I should, and the ones I name are not necessarily ones that I would agree with on Genesis today, but they nurtured me at various important times in my life, and for that I am grateful. My hope is that this book will help them and other ministers continue to enrich their own lives and the lives of their congregations in the Word of God.

*Tremper Longman III*



## PREFACE

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**B**eginnings. We can learn a great deal about people if we know their origins. People often want to know their roots in order to come to a better understanding of themselves. Such interest motivates the study of national history as well as our own personal genealogy.

But there is something even more important, more fundamental, than our family past or our national or ethnic origins. What about the beginning of the human race? Who are we? Were we made with a purpose? Does our existence have meaning beyond our mere lifetimes? These are some of the fundamental questions that nag us as we reflect on life.

But there are even more questions. What is our relationship with the rest of creation? Is it there for our use, or are we simply one of a large variety of animals that prowl the earth, none more privileged than another? Was the world created for us, or are we simply an accident of chemical and biological processes?

Even more basic, is there anything that is beyond the physical? Is what we see all there is, or is there something spiritual that cannot be detected directly by the senses? And most important: what about God? Is there a God, and if so, what is he like and how do we relate to him?

These questions about origins are foundational questions, and the book of Genesis, though not answering all our foundational questions, addresses many of them.

Early tradition recognized this when it gave Genesis its name. In Hebrew tradition the book was known by its first phrase, *bereshit*, “in the beginning.” The English title “Genesis” comes from the Greek word that means “origins,” since it was recognized that this book provided a description of the origins of the universe, the earth, animate life in general as well as human beings. Furthermore, the book narrates the origins of Israel, the people through whom God chose to bring his blessing to the world.

The book of Genesis, concerned with origins, is very much a foundational book. It is the foundation of the Torah (also known as the Pentateuch), the Old Testament and ultimately the entire Christian Bible. We will fully explore the foundational quality of Genesis throughout this study, but here I will provide a few words of introductory comment.

We often think of Genesis as an isolated book within the canon, the first of the Hebrew Bible. It describes the period from the beginning of time, through the patriarchal period, to the severe famine that drove the family of God to Egypt. The next book, Exodus, begins several centuries after the close of Genesis. Exodus is tightly connected to the rest of the Torah, since the books of the Torah are all concerned with Israel’s journey through the wilderness.

The book of Genesis is not properly understood unless it is seen as the first chapter of a five-chapter work we refer to as the Torah, or the Pentateuch. While it may have been written using earlier sources, it was not written at the time of the events it describes, but rather, at the earliest, in the period after the exodus, and it was written very much as a prehistory providing the base of the story of exodus and wilderness wandering that follows.

Second, and this will be harder to see until we deal with the life of Abraham, the book of Genesis is the foundation for the rest of the Old Testament as well as the whole Bible, including the New Testament. When we read through the book of Genesis, we see that its ending anticipates that more is to come. The last major character, Joseph, dies, but he gives instructions that he is to be buried not in the land of Egypt but in the land that God has promised to give to the descendants of Abraham. When the Torah ends, the descendants of Abraham are poised on the bor-

der of the Promised Land, about to go in. We cannot understand the history of redemption of the people of Israel from beginning to end without the book of Genesis. The same is true of the good news concerning Jesus Christ (of which a full explanation will come later). Already in the book of Genesis, Christ's redemptive work is anticipated, and without this foundational book we cannot understand the significance of Jesus' death and resurrection.

Last, we should see a special connection between the very beginning of the Bible and its end. Genesis 1—2 narrates the creation of the cosmos and humanity. God places Adam and Eve in the Garden that contains the tree of life. Genesis 3 narrates the fracture of that relationship, and from that point through Revelation 20 we hear the story of redemption, how God pursued humans to restore his blessing on them. It is of great significance that the last two chapters of Revelation (Rev 21—22) use language reminiscent of the Garden of Eden to describe the time of final reunion with God. The end brings us back to the beginning.

The Bible is made up of many different books, but it is also a single book, of which the book of Genesis is the first chapter. As such it initiates the plot of the whole. In chapter seven and following I will argue that the theme of Genesis centers around the idea of God's blessing on his human creatures. Genesis 1—2 describes a situation in which Adam and Eve are given abundant life. In particular, we should note Genesis 1:28: "Then God blessed them and said, 'Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and govern it.'" Here we see God's blessing connected both to descendants and land, an association that will reverberate in the rest of the book and beyond.<sup>2</sup> However, the plot is complicated by the fact that Adam and Eve rebel against God in Genesis 3. The rest of the book shows God's relentless pursuit to restore the relationship. Indeed, again, this is the theme of the rest of the Bible that only comes to conclusion in its final two chapters and the description of the New Jerusalem, a metaphor for heaven, where human beings will again, as in the Garden, live in the very presence of God.

Why read the book of Genesis? To understand our origins. To understand who we are, our meaning in life. To comprehend our place in the

world, our relationship with other creatures, with other humans and with God himself. To recognize the significance of the rest of redemptive history culminating in the ministry of Jesus Christ.

In other words, it is difficult to overstate the importance of Genesis to our lives today. However, as numerous controversies concerning its interpretation well illustrate, Genesis is not always easy to understand. The purpose of *How to Read Genesis* is to explore the interpretation of the book of Genesis. In the process I will present an overarching understanding of the book itself, but in addition, I want to reflect on the principles of interpretation that are most important to arriving at a proper understanding of the book. It is to these principles that we turn in the next chapter.

P A R T

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READING GENESIS  
WITH A STRATEGY



**T**his book is not a commentary, though it will provide an overarching interpretation of Genesis, especially in chapters 7-9. Like its predecessors in this series, which examine Psalms and Proverbs,<sup>1</sup> *How to Read Genesis* is an exploration of the proper interpretive approach to the book of Genesis. Since many of us have grown up hearing the stories of Genesis (creation, fall, flood), they sound so familiar. However, we need to be reminded that they were written in an ancient context. Perhaps the interpretations we grew up with are correct, but on further study they may need to be adjusted.

The truth of the matter is that the proper interpretation of any piece of literature, and in particular a text as ancient and as important as the Bible, deserves our careful reflection. Chapter one will provide the interpretive

tools to improve our understanding of Genesis. As we do so, we will observe that Genesis is a different type of book than Psalms or Proverbs, and thus we will have to fine-tune our interpretive strategy.

The strategy will focus on discovering the intention of the human author. Otherwise, we run the risk of importing all kinds of foreign ideas into the ancient text. However, we must never forget that Genesis is part of the canon and thus claims ultimate divine authority. God used human authors to produce the Bible, but he is the ultimate author. While we ground our interpretation in what we propose is the meaning of the human author, we also believe that the divine intention can transcend that of the human author. However, we can only recognize this if a later author brings this meaning out. This will be the subject of chapter ten.

You might get the impression from what follows that interpretation is simply a matter of the intellect, involving research and analytical thinking. While there is too much unreflective Bible reading among Christians, interpretation is not a mere intellectual exercise. It is a spiritual discipline. After all, for those who believe that God is the ultimate author of the Bible, the message of 1 Corinthians 2:14 is relevant: “only those who are spiritual can understand what the Spirit means.” We read the Bible to hear the words of God. In order to keep this from becoming a one-way conversation, Bible study should be accompanied by prayer, asking God to open our eyes to its truth. After all, truth involves more than intellectual statements; it includes acting on what we believe, making the Bible’s teaching a part of our lives. Many Christians need to hear this message.

Chapter one presents the important principles of interpretation by means of questions to ask the text. (A summary of these questions may be found at the end of the chapter.)

## UNDERSTANDING THE BOOK OF “BEGINNINGS”

**G**enesis is not an easy book to understand. It takes hard work to come to grips with this ancient, enigmatic book. To really get under the surface of Genesis we can benefit from the work of professionals, those whom God has called to devote their careers to the study of the Scriptures.

As I make this statement, I anticipate resistance on the part of some readers. “No,” they might protest, “God speaks to us clearly in his Word. All we have to do is pick it up and read it. We don’t need to spend a long time thinking about principles of interpretation. The work of scholars obscures rather than clarifies the simple, literal meaning of the Bible.”

I support much of the sentiment expressed in this hypothetical reaction. Even if they are not really aware of it, the protest is based on the important doctrines of the priesthood of all believers and the perspicuity and sufficiency of Scripture.

The priesthood of all believers (based most explicitly on passages like Jer 31:33-35 and 1 Pet 2:9) tells us that we can all have a personal and intimate relationship with God without some kind of human intermediary. The Reformers, people like Luther and Calvin, asserted this truth over against traditional church doctrine that insisted on the necessity of

professional clerics. Such a viewpoint also helps explain why for many years the Roman Catholic Church resisted translation of the Bible into people's everyday language and kept it in Latin, which only the priests could read and understand. In the Catholic Church a layperson's relationship with the Bible only changed in the 1960s at Vatican Council II. So it may be in defense of the important idea of the priesthood of all believers that some readers will be skeptical about my urging the help of professional interpreters.

The Reformers argued strongly for the clarity (perspicuity) of Scripture. They rightly held that the Bible was not written in a code. Further, they defended the view that the Bible could be understood on its own terms (sufficiency of Scripture). We do not need the tradition of the church fathers to understand the Bible.

When rightly understood, these doctrines are fundamentally important and crucial to defend. The problem is that the priesthood of all believers as well as the perspicuity and sufficiency of Scripture have been wrongly understood and applied in areas they were never intended to be applied. In short, what the Reformers understood the Bible to teach was that the message of salvation in the Bible is clear and understandable to all without the need of a priestly mediator or scholarly input. That human beings are sinners in need of a Savior and that the Savior is none other than Jesus Christ is patently clear in Scripture.

However, not everything is equally plain. How long is the "day" of Genesis 1? Was the flood universal? Who are the Nephilim? Why do some verses say that the Ishmaelites took Joseph to Egypt and others say it was the Midianites? Who is God referring to beside himself when he says, "Let us make human beings in our own image"? Who was Melchizedek, and what, if anything, does Abraham's tithing to this enigmatic figure have to say to us today about donations to the church? The list could go on and on. A reading of Genesis will raise many questions in our minds that are not quickly and easily resolved. Indeed, a number of questions remain unanswered even after intensive study. One important principle of interpretation is to recognize that not all of our questions can be answered.