

Genesis

Reading Genesis

Bright orange, purple, and red fruit droop from branches like heavy drops of morning dew. The trees bow with the weight, welcoming the glorious face of the sun. Light glimmers through the branches stirring in the breeze, which rouses two figures: Adam and Eve. For our first parents, eating is as easy as reaching up. They simply take and eat the fruit given by the Lord, who sheds his love upon them and pours out his grace each day. The trees of Eden nourish Adam and Eve like sacraments of creation, mediating God's blessing, a never-ending feast for the first family.

However, the feast did end. After the fall into sin, the ground dried up. Thorns raked the brows and pierced the hands and feet of our first parents. Cherubim and a flaming sword blocked the way to the garden, lest they eat of the "tree of life" and live in this way forever. The family suffered lasting heartbreak as families have ever since. As you read Genesis – the book of generations – consider how it focuses on family life, the struggle for daily bread, and the hope of salvation. These are the very things that occupy our hearts and lives today.

Author and Date

Historically, Jews and Christians alike have held that Moses was the author/compiler of the first five books of the Old Testament. These books, also known as the Pentateuch, were referred to in Jewish tradition as the five fifths of the law. The Bible itself suggests Mosaic authorship of Genesis, since Acts 15:1 refers to circumcision as "the custom taught by Moses," an allusion to Genesis 17. However, a certain amount of later editorial updating does appear to be indicated.

Theme and Message

Genesis speaks of beginnings: of the heavens and the earth, of light and darkness, of seas and skies, of land and vegetation, of sun and moon and stars, of sea and air and land animals, of human beings, of sin and redemption, of blessing and cursing, of society and civilization, of marriage and family, of art and craft and industry. A key word in Genesis is "account," which also serves to divide the book into its ten major parts.

The book of Genesis is foundational to the understanding of the rest of the Bible. Its message is rich and complex, and listing its main elements gives a succinct outline of the biblical message as a whole. It is supremely a book of relationships, highlighting those between God and nature, God and man, and man and man. It introduces us to the way in which God initiates and makes covenants with his chosen people, pledging his love and faithfulness to them and calling them to promise theirs to him. It establishes sacrifice as

the substitution of life for life. It gives us the first hint of God's provision for redemption from the forces of evil and contains the oldest and most profound definition of faith. More than half of Hebrews 11 – the New Testament roll call of the faithful – refers to characters in Genesis.

It is no coincidence that many of the subjects and themes of the first three chapters of Genesis are reflected in the last three chapters of Revelation. We can only marvel at the superintending influence of the Lord himself, who assures us that "all Scripture is God-breathed" (2 Timothy 3:16).

Blessings for Readers

Genesis lays the foundations for all the events and doctrines of Holy Scripture. Studying its characters and events will prepare you for a much broader understanding of God's ways with humankind. Throughout Genesis, Moses emphasizes that these records apply not simply to Israel but to all nations and families of the earth. See in the patriarchs' weaknesses, struggles, and joys a mirror of families today. The Lord, through promises and faith, makes all the difference for the patriarchs, and he will likewise bless and lead you.

Psalms

Reading Psalms

The shepherd's weathered hand gently worked the strings of the harp. He created a sequence of harmonious tones that ascended and descended the rolling Judean hills. Poetry flowed from his lips like a meadow spring, recounting the day's experiences and offering heavenward thanks.

The shepherd boy David learned to play and sing in just such a setting, while watching his father's flocks of sheep or goats. The Lord made David a warrior-poet and a prophet who united the tribes of Israel as a harmonious kingdom. His collection of songs accompanied by the harp is the basis of the Psalter, one of the most beloved books of the Bible.

Collection, Arrangement, and Date

The Psalter is a collection of collections and represents the final stage in a process that spanned centuries. It was put into its final form by the postexilic temple personnel, who completed it probably in the third century BC. As such, it served as the prayer book for the second temple and for use in the synagogues.

In its final edition, the Psalter contained 150 psalms. It was divided into five Books, and each was provided with an appropriate concluding doxology. The first two of these Books were probably preexilic. The division of the remaining psalms into three Books was possibly

in imitation of the five books of Moses. In spite of this five-book division, the Psalter was clearly thought of as a whole, with an introduction (Psalms 1-2) and a conclusion (Psalms 146-150).

Psalm Types

Analysis of content has given rise to a classification that has proven useful for study of the Psalms. The main types that can be identified are: (1) prayers of the individual; (2) praise from the individual for God's saving help; (3) prayers of the community; (4) praise from the community for God's saving help; (5) confessions of confidence in the Lord; (6) hymns in praise of God's majesty and virtues; (7) hymns celebrating God's universal reign; (8) songs of Zion, the city of God; (9) royal psalms – by, for, or concerning the king, the Lord's anointed; (10) pilgrimage songs; (11) liturgical songs; and (12) didactic (instructional) songs.

Of all these psalm types, the prayers (both of the individual and of the community) are the most complex. On the whole, these psalms represent the conventions of the court, the psalmist(s) presenting their case before the heavenly King/Judge. When beset by wicked adversaries, the petitioner describes his situation, pleads his innocence, lodges accusation against his adversaries, and appeals for deliverance and judicial redress. When suffering at the hands of God (that is, when God is his adversary), he confesses his guilt and pleads for mercy.

Blessings for Readers

The Israelites used two different names for the Psalms as a collection of holy writings: *tepillot* ("prayers") and *tehillim* ("praises"). These are the chief uses of the Psalms in all ages. The Psalms have a way of connecting with the daily concerns of our lives and guiding us in heartfelt prayer and worship. For these reasons, they remain the most devotional portion of Scripture and the inspiration for hymnals and prayer books.

A third important use for the Psalms is instruction. They teach so much about the blessings and challenges of walking in the Lord's ways. They constantly point forward to the appearance of Jesus for our salvation. New Testament interpreters saw the life and words of David as foretastes and prophecies of the Son of David, the Messiah.

Matthew

Reading Matthew

A brilliant halo of white light envelops the walls of Herod's temple. The white limestone blocks gleam at the edges as the light slips around them. Travelers camping on the Mount

of Olives wonder at the temple's beauty. As the sun descends, the color of the heavens paints the temple yellow, then red, then purple, until finally heaven and earth meld in darkness. The great, glorious building that seemed so permanent has disappeared.

When Jesus taught in Galilee, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4:17), and at the temple, "There will not be left here one stone upon another" (Matthew 24:2), it must have seemed like a dream to his disciples. The ways of the world and their glory must have seemed permanent. And yet, as Jesus preached, the sun was setting on the old ways because God had promised he would come to reign. In the Gospel according to Matthew, Jesus reveals the glorious appearing of the kingdom of heaven.

Author and Date

The early church fathers were unanimous in holding that Matthew, one of the 12 apostles, was the author of this Gospel. However, the results of modern critical studies – in particular, those that stress Matthew's alleged dependence on Mark for a substantial part of his Gospel – have caused some Biblical scholars to abandon Matthean authorship. Why, they ask, would Matthew, an eyewitness to the events of our Lord's life, depend so heavily on Mark's account? The best answer seems to be that he agreed with it and wanted to show that the apostolic testimony to Christ was not divided. Depending on the date of the Gospel according to Mark, Matthew's Gospel was likely written between AD 50 and AD 70.

Matthew, whose name means "gift of the Lord," was a tax collector who left his work to follow Jesus. In Mark and Luke he is called by his other name, Levi.

Recipients and Purpose

Since his Gospel was written in Greek, Matthew's readers were Greek-speaking. They also seem to have been Jews. Matthew's main purpose is to prove to his Jewish readers that Jesus is their Messiah. He does this primarily by showing how Jesus in his life and ministry fulfilled the Old Testament Scriptures. Matthew includes more proof texts from the Old Testament than the other Gospel writers to drive home his basic theme: Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament predictions of the Messiah. This does not mean, however, that Matthew restricts his Gospel to Jews. He records the coming of the Magi (non-Jews) to worship the infant Jesus and gives a full statement of the Great Commission. These passages show that, although Matthew's Gospel is Jewish, it has a universal outlook.

Structure

The way the material is arranged reveals an artistic touch. The whole Gospel is woven around five great discourses: chapters 5-7, chapter 10, chapter 13, chapter 18, and chapters 24-25. That this is deliberate is clear from the refrain that concludes each

discourse: “When Jesus had finished saying these things,” or similar words. This fivefold division may suggest that Matthew has modeled his book on the structure of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament). He may also be presenting the gospel as a new Torah (Old Testament law) and Jesus as a new and greater Moses.

Blessings for Readers

As you read the Gospel according to Matthew, rejoice especially in the very full accounting he gives of Jesus’ teachings. His five discourses record more of Jesus’ parables and sayings than are recorded by Mark and Luke. Also take special note of the promise that Christ is coming again to reign eternally. As you face struggles, dwell on this sure and certain hope in your Savior.

Material taken from the Concordia Self-Study Bible, the Lutheran Study Bible, and The People’s Bible series.