

# 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.

## **Exodus**

### **Reading Exodus**

Thin, cool ribbons of green vegetation border heavenly blue waters. They flow together amid a vast plain of parched yellow sand and dust. From a distance, they appear like a great serpent slithering through the desert, with its tail in Lake Victoria and its head 4160 miles away on the shore of the Great Sea. The coiling track of the Nile is life and civilization.

After 430 years of sipping from the Nile, the children of Israel forgot their homeland in Canaan to the east. Exodus describes how the Lord awakened the memory of Israel, caused them to call out to him, and sent Moses to rescue Israel from the grip of the Nile and the dryness of the desert. As you read Exodus, keep one foot on the Nile's cool green bank and the other foot on the scalding yellow sand. Feel the Israelites' dilemma.

Recognize the immense obstacles and temptation from which the Lord rescued them. And call him your deliverer amid the obstacles and temptations of your life.

### **Author**

Several statements in Exodus record that Moses wrote certain sections of the book. The New Testament also claims Mosaic authorship for various passages in Exodus. Taken together, these references assert that Moses was responsible for writing the book of Exodus.

## **Themes and Theology**

Exodus lays a foundational theology in which God reveals his name, his attributes, his redemption, his law, and how he is to be worshiped. It also reports the appointment and work for the first covenant mediator (Moses), describes the beginnings of the priesthood, defines the role of the prophet, and relates how the ancient covenant relationship between God and his people came under a new administration (the Sinai covenant).

The theology of salvation is likewise one of the strong emphases of the book. The verb “redeem” is used often, and the heart of redemption theology is best seen in the Passover narrative of chapter 12 and the sealing of the covenant in chapter 24. The apostle Paul taught that the Passover lamb was fulfilled in Christ. Indeed, John the Baptist called Jesus the “Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”

The book concludes with an elaborate discussion of the theology of worship. Though costly in time, effort, and monetary value, the tabernacle – in meaning and function – points to God’s gracious condescension to let sinful, forgiven, and restored mankind approach him and enter into communion with him. By means of the tabernacle, the God of the universe came to “dwell” (or “tabernacle”) with his people. God is not only mighty on Israel’s behalf; he is also present in their midst.

## **Blessings for Readers**

Exodus describes the central redemptive event of the Old Testament. Through the blood of the Passover lambs, the Lord delivered his people from slavery. This redemption becomes the most-mentioned event of Israelite history. Through the blood of the covenant, the Lord consecrated Israel as a kingdom of priests. He directed the building of the tabernacle as a place of worship and forgiveness.

Moses and the elders of Israel also enjoyed the splendor of seeing God and learning the meaning of his name, Yahweh. They saw that God is not only holy but also merciful and patient. He remembers his people and his promises to their forefathers for a thousand generations. As you read Exodus, look for these important themes. See that the Lord still leads his people through the prophet like Moses and redeems you by the blood of the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ.

# **Leviticus**

## **Reading Leviticus**

He had pastured and watered the young bull all its days. Now the bull stood calmly before him as he solemnly placed his hands on its head. He nimbly swung a blade through the animal’s throat, severing the main artery. Blood spurted and then drained rapidly into the

bowls brought by the priests, who carried the blood to the altar while the worshiper continued to butcher and skin the animal. God would be honored by the fat, the kidneys, and the liver lobe that the priests would burn. The worshiper's family would feast together on the meat the Lord had provided.

Leviticus opens with earthy, life-and-death detail about the sacrifices Israel was to offer at the tabernacle they had just built in the wilderness. Their cattle, which had traveled with them out of Egypt and southward to Sinai, would not only feed their eager bellies but also touch their hearts as living illustrations of God's gracious provision for them. By these sacrifices, he would provide atonement for sin and food for life and fellowship in the congregation of Israel.

### **Themes**

The key theme of Leviticus is holiness: the holiness of God and man. In Leviticus, spiritual holiness is symbolized by physical perfection. Therefore, the book demands perfect animals for its many sacrifices and requires priests without deformity. The person with visible skin disease must be banished from the camp, the place of God's special presence, just as Adam and Eve were banished from the Garden of Eden. Such a person can return to the camp (and therefore to God's presence) when he is pronounced whole again by the examining priests. Before he can reenter the camp, however, he has to offer the prescribed, perfect sacrifices (symbolizing the perfect, whole sacrifice of Christ).

After the covenant at Sinai, Israel was constituted as God's kingdom, and, as her King, the Lord established his administration over all of Israel's life. Her religious, communal, and personal life was so regulated as to establish her as God's holy people and to instruct her in holiness. Special attention was given to Israel's religious ritual. The sacrifices were to be offered at an approved sanctuary, which would symbolize both God's holiness and his compassion. They were to be controlled by the priests, who by care and instruction would preserve them in purity and carefully teach their meaning to the people. Each particular sacrifice was to have meaning for the people of Israel but would also have spiritual and symbolic importance.

Some suppose that these Old Testament sacrifices were remains of old agricultural offerings – a human desire to offer part of one's possessions as a love gift to the deity. But the Old Testament sacrifices were specifically prescribed by God and received their meaning from the Lord's covenant relationship with Israel – whatever their superficial resemblance to pagan sacrifices. They indeed include the idea of a gift, but this is accompanied by such other values as dedication, communion, propitiation (appeasing God's judicial wrath against sin), and restitution. The various offerings have different functions, the primary ones being atonement and worship.

### **Blessings for Readers**

As you study the book of Leviticus, reflect on the detail and deep care with which God teaches the people about faithful, orderly worship. Though worship is chiefly a matter of faith and sincere repentance, God's people must not regard the outward expressions of

worship as mere formalism; our outward actions reveal our hearts. Genuine confession of faith manifests itself in thought, word, and deed.

Note especially the four greatest themes of Leviticus: cleansing, atonement, rest, and redemption. These themes foreshadow Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, his peace, and the freedom he grants us in the gospel. Seeing these broad themes allows one to understand that Leviticus is truly about the chief article of the Christian faith: justification through Christ's blood.

## **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.

## **Proverbs**

### **Reading Proverbs**

Clinking bits of silver, shouting merchants, and bleating herds distract a young man as he passes through the streets of Jerusalem. He pauses to wonder at the piles of goods on display, bartered wildly by shoppers and shopkeepers. At the corner, he catches a whiff of myrrh and cinnamon from where a sultry woman caresses the doorframe of her house. She winks and smiles. From the city gate, the young man hears the voice of one calling, “The Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding” (Proverbs 2:6).

Above the clamor of Jerusalem’s streets, King Solomon could see and reflect on the temptations of his subjects – temptations to which he himself succumbed. He saw clearly the need for instruction, for wisdom that parents could pass on to their children and teachers could share with their students. The book of Proverbs is the result of Solomon’s God-given wisdom, experience, and concern.

### **Authors**

Although the book begins with a title ascribing the proverbs to Solomon, it is clear from later chapters that he was not the only author of the book. Most of the book, however, is closely linked with Solomon. A group of wise men or scribes compiled most of the proverbs as editors and added chapters 25-29 to the earlier collections. The book also contains a short prologue and a longer epilogue which may have been added to the other materials. The emphasis on the “fear of the Lord” throughout the book ties the various segments together.

### **Wisdom Literature**

The Jews sometimes speak of the Old Testament as the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. Included within the third division are Psalms and wisdom materials such as Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. These wisdom books are associated with a class of people called “wise men” or “sages” who are listed with priests and prophets as an important force in Israelite society. Some of their writings, like Proverbs, were optimistic, as they showed the young how to behave in order to live prosperous and happy lives. Other materials, such as Job and Ecclesiastes, were more pessimistic as they wrestled with difficult philosophical and theological questions such as the problem of evil and the prosperity of the wicked. Both viewpoints – the optimistic and the pessimistic – are also found in the literature of other nations in the ancient Near East.

Because of the nature of Proverbs, we must not interpret it as prophecy or its statements about certain effects and results as promises. For instance, Proverbs 10:27 says that the years of the wicked are cut short, while the righteous live long and prosperous lives. The righteous have abundant food, but the wicked will go hungry. While such verses are generally true, there are enough exceptions to indicate that sometimes the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper. Normally the righteous and the wicked receive their due on earth, but at other times reward and punishment lie beyond the grave.

Although Proverbs is more practical than theological, God’s work as Creator is especially highlighted. Twice God is called the Maker of the poor. He also directs the steps of man, and his eyes observe all his actions. God is sovereign over the kings of the earth, and all history moves forward under his control.

### **Blessings for Readers**

As you read Proverbs, bear in mind the central theme of the book: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 1:7). Proverbs promises that you will not face life alone or without good counsel. When you face the practical dilemmas of life, the Lord is with you to establish your steps. Call on his name, and wisdom will answer. “You are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (1 Corinthians 1:30).

## **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.

## **Mark**

### **Reading Mark**

The old farmer knew this corner of the field well. His plow had turned up rocks here for years. He and his brothers picked up the rocks and worked them into a retaining wall not far away. He could see there a row of sick and lame people sitting on the stones, waiting for their turn to see the Teacher. Families with small children also sat nearby, awaiting their turn. The farmer sat and scratched the soil. It felt warm and loose to the touch. Then he struck a rock. "Another rock," he said. "Still too stony – unfit for seed."

Mark describes how the disciples and the crowds immediately responded to the authority of Jesus' teaching. They flocked to receive his healing touch and blessings for their children. But beneath the surface of this excitement, their hearts remained hardened and crippled by unbelief. As you read Mark's account of Jesus' ministry and passion, consider Jesus' patience. He plows and replows matters of repentance, faith, and the promises of God, picking out hard hearts and calling people to believe and to bear fruit.

### **Author and Date**

Although there is no direct internal evidence of authorship, it was the unanimous testimony of the early church that this Gospel was written by John Mark. It is generally agreed that the Mark who is associated with Peter in the early non-Biblical tradition is also the John Mark of the New Testament. Mark accompanied Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey, but he deserted them at Perga, in Pamphylia, to return to Jerusalem. Mark reappears in Colossians and was apparently beginning to win his way back into Paul's confidence. By the end of Paul's life, Mark had fully regained Paul's favor.

Some, who hold that Matthew and Luke used Mark as a major source, have suggested that Mark may have been composed in the 50s or early 60s. Others have felt that the book was written shortly before the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.

### **Recipients and Purpose**

The evidence points to the church at Rome or at least to Gentile readers. Mark explains Jewish customs, translates Aramaic words, and seems to have a special interest in persecution and martyrdom – subjects of special concern to Roman believers. Mark may have been writing to prepare his readers for suffering and martyrdom by placing before them the life of our Lord. There are many references, both explicitly and veiled, to suffering and discipleship throughout his Gospel.

### **Special Characteristics**

Mark's Gospel is a simple, succinct, unadorned, yet vivid account of Jesus' ministry, emphasizing more what Jesus did than what he said. Mark moves quickly from one episode in Jesus' life and ministry to another, often using the adverb "immediately." The book as a whole is characterized as "The beginning of the gospel" (Mark 1:1). The life, death, and resurrection of Christ comprise the "beginning," of which the apostolic preaching in Acts is the continuation.

### **Blessings for Readers**

As you read Mark's account of Jesus' ministry and passion, take special note of the emphasis on discipleship and faith. Jesus tells his followers that he will suffer and will ransom them. They, too, will face suffering on account of him and the gospel. Yet, through repentance and faith, they will inherit eternal life.

When you face difficulty, cry out, "I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24). The Son of God, who ransomed you from the bondage of sin and death, will hear you in compassion and have mercy.

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