

STRAIGHT TO  
THE HEART OF

# Genesis



60 BITE-SIZED INSIGHTS

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# Introduction: It All Begins with God

*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.*

(Genesis 1:1)

*“To be ignorant of what happened before you were born is to remain a child always,”*<sup>1</sup> claimed the Roman orator Cicero. Perhaps that’s why Genesis is one of the most loved and hated books ever written. Genesis – the name is simply the Greek word for *“Origins”* – is the God-inspired history of the world from its inception, and right from the outset it was always controversial.

Jesus and the writers of the New Testament refer to Genesis and the other four books which make up the Pentateuch as *“The Book of Moses”*.<sup>2</sup> It contains facts which no human being could ever know, because Moses heard them from God personally during his eighty days and nights at the top of Mount Sinai.<sup>3</sup> They were God’s way of turning a “childish” rabble of Hebrew

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<sup>1</sup> Marcus Tullius Cicero wrote this in his Orator ad M. Brutum in 46 BC.

<sup>2</sup> For example in Mark 12:26, Luke 24:27, 44 and John 1:45; 5:46. This is not to deny that later editors updated Moses’ geographical references (as in 14:14; 36:31; 47:11), or that the account of Moses’ death in the final chapter of Deuteronomy was written by someone else. It is simply to affirm the New Testament’s clear teaching that the *Pentateuch* – Greek for *Five-Volumed Book* – was written by Moses in the desert.

<sup>3</sup> Moses spent forty days and nights on Mount Sinai before discovering the Golden Calf (Exodus 24:18) and then another forty days and nights immediately afterwards (Exodus 34:28).

ex-slaves into a mature and obedient nation he could use. They are still the way he chooses to mature his People today.

Imagine what the book of Genesis must have done for the Hebrews. They had been born into slavery in Egypt under the pompous propaganda of the insecure Pharaohs. They had been brought up on the culture and stories of Egypt, and at times had even been tempted to worship Egypt's gods themselves.<sup>4</sup> They had been taught to address Pharaoh as *"My Lord, my God, my Sun, the Sun in the sky"*,<sup>5</sup> and that the history of the world was really Egypt's history. Then God gave them Genesis, which told a scandalously different story. It claimed that the world did not in fact revolve around Ra and the many other gods of Egypt. The universe began at the command of the only true God, Yahweh, the same God who had just delivered them from slavery. It urged them to distrust the lies they had heard from the mouths of their former slave-masters in Egypt, and to listen to God's story of how they got where they were and why it mattered.

Part One of Genesis consists of eleven chapters which describe the world's earliest millennia. It doesn't try to prove that God exists or even that he is the only true God. It simply begins with the four words *"In the beginning God..."*, and then tells us that the universe all began with him. He spoke and the world came to be. He breathed and the human race came to life. He warned them to remember that it all began with him, and provided them with one tree with which to submit to that fact and one tree through which they could try to resist it. When they chose the wrong tree and fell under sin's judgment, God showed them that salvation all began with him too. Whether judgment at the Flood and at the building-site of Babel, or salvation in the ark and through the blood which he told them to shed at their altars, the message of Part One of Genesis is consistently the same: Everything begins with the true God, Yahweh.

<sup>4</sup> Joshua 24:14 and Ezekiel 20:7-8.

<sup>5</sup> Yapahu of Gezer repeatedly uses this sycophantic formula to address Pharaoh in one of the *Amarna Letters*, written shortly after the Exodus.

Part Two of Genesis gets more controversial still.<sup>6</sup> When God chooses a people to reflect his glory to the rest of the world, he does not choose the superpower nation of Egypt, but an obscure and unimpressive Mesopotamian herdsman. From chapters 12 to 50, Abraham and his descendants sin, deceive and show themselves utterly unworthy of the God who has chosen them, yet this simply serves to reinforce the same message. God did not choose to turn the Hebrew family into his Holy Nation because they were worthy or qualified. He did so to demonstrate his grace and mercy towards weak people who do not deserve it. From the calling of Abraham to the arrival of the seventy Hebrew founding fathers in Egypt, their remarkable blessing began with God alone.

This made the book of Genesis very good news for those Hebrew refugees at Mount Sinai. They had just crossed the Red Sea and could smell the sweet air of freedom, but they needed to look back if they were ever to move forward. They were in spiritual no-man's-land, saved from the lies of Egypt but unsure of what was true, knowing that God had saved them but not altogether sure why. Genesis explained to them what their God was like and what was on his agenda for their lives and for the world. It was not merely the first of the books of Hebrew Scripture. It was the foundational book which helped turn them into a nation – strong and mature and ready for God's purposes.

This also makes the book of Genesis very good news for you and me today. Don't be put off by descriptions like the one in 13:10 that a patch of land was *"like the land of Egypt as you come to Zoar"*.<sup>7</sup>

Even though you probably do not know where Zoar was, let alone what it looked like, the book of Genesis is still very

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<sup>6</sup> It is possible to split Genesis into ten parts, each beginning with the Hebrew word *tōledōth* or *generations* (2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10, 27; 25:12, 19; 36:1; 37:2), but the simplest division is chapters 1–11 and 12–50.

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 13:10 in the Modern King James Version.

much your story. Paul told a group of Galatian Christians fifteen centuries after Genesis was written that *“those who believe are the children of Abraham.”*<sup>8</sup> The ancient history, the family trees and the Middle Eastern adventures were *“written down... for us, on whom the fulfilment of the ages has come.”*<sup>9</sup> God still saves people from their spiritual “Egypt”, still leads them through the “desert” of discipleship and still brings them into his “Promised Land” through the same book of Genesis. He uses it to teach us that the world began with him, that salvation begins with him, that our mission begins with him, and that our fruitfulness must begin with him too.

I have written this book to help you understand the timeless message of the book of Genesis. I want to unfold for you what Moses heard at Mount Sinai about God, about his purposes, about the universe and about yourself. Most of all, I want to help you to grow up into Christian maturity, because the story which began in Genesis has not yet reached its conclusion. I want to help you make a difference at your own stage in history by stepping out in the faith that it all begins with God.

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<sup>8</sup> Galatians 3:7.

<sup>9</sup> 1 Corinthians 10:11.

# Abraham: God's Nomad (11:27–12:9)

*The Lord had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you."*

(Genesis 12:1)

In 1867, Secretary of State William Seward bought Alaska for the United States. Not everyone could see why he did so. Pilloried widely as *"Seward's icebox"* and *"Seward's folly"*, it was despised as nothing more than an over-hunted frozen wasteland. To William Seward, 600,000 square miles of territory was worth far more than the \$7,200,000 he paid to the Russians, but few people in the nation could follow the direction of his gaze. In the midst of post-Civil War reconstruction, Seward's use of public money seemed nothing short of madness.

Abram, who would later have his name changed to Abraham, was an even stranger choice for God to make than Alaska was for William Seward. He had very little to his credit with which to attract the Lord's particular attention.

For a start, he was an idolater. The Lord told the Hebrews in Joshua 24:2 that *"Long ago your forefathers, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the River and worshipped other gods."* Since Ur of the Chaldees was a city dominated by the moon-god Nanna, Abraham was probably brought up to worship the moon at the temple with his father. He was not looking for God when God came looking for him.

Furthermore, he was a sophisticated urbanite in a city like the one the Lord had just thwarted at Babel. Ur of the Chaldees

was famous for its ziggurat and for its kings who liked to pretend that they were gods. The people of Ur were as wicked as the builders of Babel, and Abraham had grown up as part of that society. Married to his half-sister and raised with an instinct to lie and deceive, he was steeped in the sin of self-sufficient Mesopotamia.<sup>1</sup>

Abraham was not even Terah's firstborn.<sup>2</sup> In our culture, this may not matter – my second-born son and third-born daughter will inherit as much of my estate as my firstborn son – but in the ancient Middle East it was a massive limitation.<sup>3</sup> Abraham would not inherit his father Terah's estate, because under Mesopotamian law those rights belonged entirely to his elder brother, Haran. The Hebrews in the desert had just seen all the firstborn sons of Egypt slaughtered in one night, so they knew that a second-born was worth nothing compared to his beloved older brother.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, to finish off Abraham's profile of natural inadequacy, he and his wife were childless and infertile. Whatever else God might be looking for in a patriarch for his Holy Nation, the ability to have children was an essential prerequisite. The Lord was looking for a couple who could found a mighty chosen race, but Abraham and Sarai were in their sixties and seventies, and even Abraham confessed that this disqualified him.<sup>5</sup> When the *New York Tribune* wrote off Alaska as a "sucked orange" which

<sup>1</sup> Genesis 12:11–20; 20:1–18.

<sup>2</sup> Terah became a father at the age of seventy (11:26), but Abraham is only mentioned as his first son because God favoured him in the same way that he had earlier favoured the second-born Shem. Terah was 130 when he had Abraham because he died at 205 when Abraham was 75 (11:32; 12:4). This also explains why Haran died long before Abraham, and why Abraham treated his nephew, Lot, more like his brother (13:8).

<sup>3</sup> Contrast the "firstborn" Isaac's inheritance in 25:5 with the paltry inheritance of his half-brothers in 25:6.

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 11:1–12:30. Note that God did this because Israel, his pride and joy, was his own *firstborn son* (4:22).

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 15:2.

had already seen its best days, it might as well have been talking about Abraham. The New Testament tells us twice that this idolatrous urbanite, who stood to inherit little and had no one to bequeath it to, was “*as good as dead*”.<sup>6</sup> There can scarcely have been anyone in the ancient Middle East who looked less qualified to become God’s patriarch than him. Except for two important details, that is.

First, Abraham was *descended from the line of God’s promise*. He was the descendant of Shem, Noah’s second-born son whom the Lord had turned into his spiritual firstborn by grace. That made him part of the backslidden remnant of the Family of God.

Second, Abraham was *a man of faith*, who took God at his word and was prepared to do as he commanded. He may have been steeped in false religion and compromise in the city of Ur, but it only took one encounter with the Lord to convert him thoroughly. In the words of Hebrews 11, “*By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.*” He traded in the civilized comfort of Ur to become a tent-dwelling foreigner in a land he had never visited, because his eyes were fixed on the God who had appeared to him and the heavenly promises he had heard from his mouth.<sup>7</sup> He knew better than anyone that he was a spent and childless has-been, but he had faith in the power of the God who had called him to obey. Paul explains to the Galatians that the Lord “*announced the Gospel in advance to Abraham*”, when he told him that he would bless all nations through his offspring.<sup>8</sup> That was what

<sup>6</sup> Romans 4:19; Hebrews 11:12.

<sup>7</sup> Hebrews 11:10. Note that Acts 7:2–3 tells us that the Lord made the promises of Genesis 12:1–3 to Abraham while he was still living in Ur of the Chaldees, not once he arrived in Haran.

<sup>8</sup> Galatians 3:8.

Abraham had stacked in his favour. He *“believed the Lord, and it was credited to him as righteousness”*.<sup>9</sup>

This should encourage you when you look at your own life. If you feel about as useful to God as Seward’s hunk of frozen wasteland, it should give you hope that our usefulness begins with God. The Lord did not choose Abraham to be the founder of the Hebrew nation because he was devout or virtuous, well-connected or fertile. He chose him because he was a weak man who had faith that God would be strong on his behalf. He chose him because he was a man who knew he could not chart his own way towards a glorious future, but who was painfully aware that it had to begin with God. He chose him because he was a man who would obey his words with childlike faith. The builders of Babel had longed to build a name for themselves through their own effort, but here was a man who would let God build a name for him through his undeserved favour. God is still on the lookout for modern-day Abrahams.

William Seward’s purchase of Alaska was actually an act of financial and strategic genius. Underneath its frozen surface lay reserves of oil and minerals, and its geography offered a priceless advantage when the Cold War began with the Russians who sold it. The Lord’s choice of Abraham, as we will see in the rest of Genesis, was also vindicated time and time again. God has chosen us as well, and told us plainly the Gospel that Abraham merely heard as a distant echo from the future. It is time for you and me to respond to the Lord with the same faith as he did.

God is not looking for heroes who possess great natural promise. He is far too great to need the help of those he chooses. He is simply looking for nobodies who will believe his Gospel promises. Abraham heard God’s voice and believed what he said – and that was credit enough to find a place in God’s great story.

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<sup>9</sup> Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:3–22; Galatians 3:6; James 2:23.