

The Beginning

Few books in the Old Testament generate as much interest for Roman Catholics as the Book of Genesis. In Genesis many of our most cherished teachings find their roots such as the doctrine of Original Sin, the institution of marriage, stewardship over creation and the all-important idea of covenant. In addition, the Book of Genesis also reveals the beginnings of the relationship between God and his people. However, it is not solely a history of that relationship but a reflection upon that relationship and how it changed over time.

When the Holy Spirit inspired the first authors of Genesis to write down their stories, they recounted all they could remember about their origins. As these Jewish writers put ink to papyrus some 2500 to 3000 years ago, their writing reflected where they were at that time as well as from where they had come. Their views on this relationship were colored and influenced by their past experiences.

If I may draw from an analogy in my own life, I might be able to explain this a little better. I began dating my wife nearly thirty years ago. If you had stopped me by Buckingham Fountain in Chicago after one of our first lunch dates and asked about our relationship, my answer would have reflected a viewpoint colored by my impressions at the time. Flash forward a few years to our wedding in 1998. Undoubtedly my impression of the relationship would have grown and been colored by the intervening seven years. At the present time, after two children, two dogs, and countless career changes (for me, not her) my views on the relationship are different still. Each stage of reflection is wonderful; however, you need to consider all phases of the relationship to get the whole picture.

The Old Testament (and the Book of Genesis, which is its launching point) is the sum total of centuries of reflections by the sacred authors about their relationships with God. As you would expect, from any collection of reflections taken over a long period of time, the views of that relationship differ. The only member of the relationship who doesn't change is the Lord. Genesis includes only the very beginning of the many pictures of this relationship we find in Scripture.

We must therefore look at the different people in the stories and the cultures of their times in order to explain the many portrayals of the relationship we are given. This is where our wonderful Jewish authors and an understanding of who they were helps us understand the picture of God they put forth.

The general consensus among biblical scholars is that most of what we know as the Old Testament came to its final form during one of the periods of greatest distress for the Jews in the ancient world - the Babylonian Captivity. After the Temple in Jerusalem (the center of the Jewish faith) was destroyed by the Babylonian army in 587 B.C., a great number of Jews were taken in bondage to Babylon where they would live as a subject people for the next fifty years. During that time the authors of the Old Testament reflected on their people's history from the beginning of the world as they saw it to their present dire circumstances. In their reflections they sought to find a reason for the situation in which they found themselves. They were trying to find an answer to the question that all of us ask at one time or another, "God, how did I get here?"

To answer this question they searched all of the sacred texts that had been collected over the millennia and came up with an answer familiar to all of us - sin. They saw that both as a people and as individuals, their history was filled with folks who never seemed to do what the Lord commanded. From Eden to Babylon they saw themselves as a people who, although were in a covenantal relationship with God, never lived up to their end of the bargain. Yet, the relationship stayed strong. Although at times it was strained because of the people's actions, it was an everlasting, relationship.

The Sources

God is the author of all Sacred Scripture. However, the Almighty had to bring to light His revelations through the work of human hands. Or as the Second Vatican Council stated, God speaks in Sacred Scripture through men in human fashion (*Dei Verbum*, Ch. III, par. 12). We must, therefore, keep in mind that human reasoning and the limits of human language play a part in the composition of the sacred texts. We must know something about the original human authors and endeavor to understand what they originally intended. Even this will not give us the complete meaning of a passage. One can only attempt to ascertain this by reading scripture in its entirety and studying the teachings of the Church. However, we have to begin somewhere. The starting point for most biblical theologians in deciphering the text is to consider the human hands that shaped the sacred writing. This is undoubtedly true of the Book of Genesis. In this first book of the Bible we are made aware quite early that numerous human authors had a hand in the final work.

Most theologians agree that there were four primary authors - or perhaps communities of authors - who contributed to the final work of Genesis.

Like most great ancient works of literature (such as the Iliad, the Odyssey, the Bhagavad Gita or the Norse Sagas) the final form evolved only after the passing of much time. The stories contained in the Book of Genesis were composed first in oral form and passed down by word of mouth from generation to generation. At some time they were written down on clay, stone, papyrus or whatever other materials were used at the time. Probably authors began writing The Book of Genesis (written as opposed to oral recitation) sometime around 1300-1200 B.C. The final form, the form in which we have it today, in all probability was finished around the time of the Babylonian Captivity of the Jews (587-532 B.C). As you can see, the Book of Genesis was a long time in the making.

The first of the four groups of writers who composed the Book of Genesis were called the Yahwists. Writing during the beginning of the period mentioned above, the Yahwists depicted a very hands-on Creator who fashioned beings out of clay, walked with His people in the garden and spoke frequently with them. The Yahwists, as the name implies, frequently used the name Yahweh to refer to the Lord. The second group of writers (and to this day there is debate as to whether it was a single individual or a group) were known as the Elohist. This group preferred to use Elohim as the divine name until the revelation of the Ten Commandments on Mt. Horeb. They tended to include very dramatic stories in their writings such as Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac and Jacob wrestling with God. They also tended to be extremely fond of angels. The third group (known as the Deuteronomists) that had a hand in writing the text is the most difficult of the four proposed authors to pinpoint in the Book of Genesis. The Deuteronomists were probably the first group to bring the earlier stories of the Yahwists and the Elohist together into a single work. In their writings they always emphasized the importance of Jerusalem.

The final and arguably the most important authors were the Priestly authors. The Priestly authors, who wrote during and maybe a bit after the Babylonian Captivity, gave the work its final form. Their God (as contrasted to the God of the Yahwists) is a supreme, majestic and powerful God who does not have to create with His hands using clay but creates through His word alone (Genesis 1). Whatever view you take of the "Documentary Hypothesis" (as the fourfold discussion of proposed authors has grown to be called), in the final analysis we are left solely with the canonical Genesis (one complete work, compositional in nature) which has been revered by believing Jews and Christians for a very, very long time. Much like the four Gospels give us a fuller picture of Jesus, the composite parts of Genesis give us a fuller understanding of God and the relationship He wishes to have with His people.

The Book of Genesis describes the beginning of man's relationship with God in which He first creates human beings and then guides them on a path that takes them from Eden to Egypt. At each major juncture in the story we will notice that our characters are characters on the move. The Book of Genesis is one in which our favorite characters rarely stay in one place for long. It is a book that has, even by Biblical standards, a tremendous amount of action.

Before I begin teaching any of my undergraduate or graduate courses on Sacred Scripture, I always warn my students to read carefully. Heaven is in the details of the sacred texts and if you skim or fail to pay attention, you will miss something. The biggest mistake you can make when opening a book of the Bible (and this is doubly true of the Book of Genesis) is failing to appreciate the complexity of what is before you. Reading and interpreting Sacred Scripture takes work. If you quickly read over a page of the text and announce, “I’ve got it!” nine times out of ten you missed something important.