

Genesis Summary

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Overview

Genesis covers some 1533 verses and 2374 years. The author's intent is reflected in how he allocates verses to time, which is not at all even. Compare use of slow-motion in a movie.

The book is marked by the repeated phrase "these are the generations of x." The phrase occurs ten times, beginning at 2:4, and so divides the book into eleven sections. (Actually, it occurs 11 times, but we consider the two uses with respect to Esau, 36:1,9, as a single entity.) The summary sheet shows for each of these sections

- its length relative to the other sections (law of proportion),
- its beginning and length in verses,
- the key character, and
- a brief summary of its structure and theme.

We will quickly review each of these sections, and attempt to end by formulating, in a single sentence, a summary of Genesis.

Prologue, 1:1-2:3

Read 1:11-13, 20-23.

The dominant feature of this introduction is an extended alternation describing how God created everything, and declared it good. In addition, he declares a blessing on the fish, fowl, and man. These three points are the foundation of the book, and indeed of the entire Bible:

1. God is the creator of everything.
2. As it came from his hand, it was good.
3. His purpose toward it was one of blessing.

The importance of this section is reflected in its verses-per-year: 850, by far the highest in the entire book. This is extreme slow motion, compared with what follows.

Heaven and Earth, 2:4-4:26

God created man as his image, the king's statue in the midst of the city. This section relates two stories about this masterpiece of creation. Both emphasize that man sinned against God. Both are structured as chiasms.

The first story describes how Adam and Eve sinned against God's command not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and were cast out of the garden. The center of the chiasm is 3:6-7.

The second story shows that this tendency to rebellion was passed on to their children, Cain in particular, who slew his brother Abel, and was driven out from the face of the earth. Again, the center of the chiasm is the description of the sin, 4:8.

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So the major themes here are sin, its persistence in the race, and its effect of breaking fellowship between man and God.

Adam, 5:1-6:8

Half of the *toledot* sections are mostly genealogies. At first glance these seem boring, but each of them contributes an important part to the argument of the book. This first one shows that the consequences of sin extended beyond the first generation. Each generation here is closed with a constant refrain, lacking in the other genealogies and thus emphasized here: “and he died.”

Noah, 6:9-9:29

Read 6:5-12. Major themes here:

1. The earth continues in sin. Sin, not obedience, is the dominant condition of the race.
2. v.8, God graciously chooses a man to deliver from this sin. It is important to remember that “find grace” is an expression of grace, not merit. The point is not that Noah was better than others, but that God actively chose and delivered him from sin.
3. The section as a whole is a chiasm, whose center at 8:1 reminds us that God is faithful to those whom he has chosen for himself.

Sons of Noah, 10:1-11:9

This section includes both an extended genealogy and a story, the Tower of Babel. The two are closely related.

Like the first genealogy, this one has distinctive features not present in the other: the repeated emphasis on “families, tongues, nations, lands” (e.g., 5, 20, 31). To understand the blessing that God will bring on his chosen people, we must understand that people live in different places and different social groups. The genealogy records the *fact* of this distribution.

The story, in ch. 11, records the *reason* for this distribution: a further act of judgment by God to restrain the arrogance of men, who sought to be like God.

Shem, 11:10-26

This genealogy has no embellishments: no reference to death, no focus on a particular land or territory. Its purpose appears to be simply to document the continuity from Noah to Terah.

Terah, 11:27-25:11

Read 12:1-4.

The focus of this section is the life of Abraham, which is structured around the promises in 12:1-4; see chart on back of handout.

Each of the three long stories appears to focus on a different aspect of the promise. Abraham’s promises focus on the land, and his discussions with Lot and purchase of a burial ground reinforce this.

An important theme is his spiritual progression, from lying about Sarah to honoring her.

Ishmael, 25:12-18

The main theme here is *where* Ishmael's descendants live, in Sinai and Arabia. God has given Canaan to Isaac, so we must now understand where the other descendants live.

Isaac, 25:19-35:29

The main focus of this story is Jacob's life, and the twelve sons from whom the blessing of the seed will be realized. This is reinforced chiastically by building the section around birth of the children.

Again, note the progression in his personal life, from stealing the blessing to giving it back to Esau.

Esau, 36:1-43

Like the genealogy of Ishmael, this serves mainly to identify where they lived (the western slopes of the Arabah, south of the dead sea) and so preserve Canaan for Isaac's descendants.

Jacob, 37:1-50:26

50:20.

See summary chart on back. Focus of this section is on the blessing that is to come through Abraham's seed.

Overall Summary

The main themes are creation, sin and its consequences, election and how God deals with his chosen ones. Suggested summary: "After man, the pinnacle of God's good creation, sinned against God and was separated from him, God chose a remnant, delivered them from judgment, defended them from evil, developed them in godliness, and determined to bless them."