

# **The Book of Genesis**

*Overview and Purpose*

*David Gooding*

A Myrtlefield House Transcript



**MYRTLEFIELD**

**HOUSE**

[www.myrtlefieldhouse.com](http://www.myrtlefieldhouse.com)

David Gooding has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as Author of this work.

Copyright © The Myrtlefield Trust, 2016

Revision 1 August 2018

All rights reserved. Permission is granted to reproduce this document in its entirety, or in unaltered excerpts, for personal and church use only as long as you do not charge a fee. You must not reproduce it on any Internet site. Permission must be obtained if you wish to reproduce it in any other context, translate it, or publish it in any format.

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. You may not copy or download more than 500 consecutive verses of the ESV Bible or more than one half of any book of the ESV Bible. Quotations marked KJV are from The Authorized (King James) Version. Rights in the Authorized Version in the United Kingdom are vested in the Crown. Reproduced by permission of the Crown's patentee, Cambridge University Press. Dr Gooding occasionally uses his own translations or paraphrases..

This text has been edited from a transcript of a talk given by David Gooding in Apsley Hall, Belfast, N. Ireland on 1 September 2013.

Published by The Myrtlefield Trust

PO Box 2216

Belfast

BT1 9YR

w: [www.myrtlefieldhouse.com](http://www.myrtlefieldhouse.com)

e: [info@myrtlefieldhouse.com](mailto:info@myrtlefieldhouse.com)

Myrtlefield catalogue no: gen.084/pb

# **The Book of Genesis**

## *Overview and Purpose*

Thank you for the opportunity to introduce to you the book of Genesis. Genesis appears to be a sizable book. It has 50 chapters. From another point of view, it is easily comprehensible. It is composed of three creation stories, which I will demonstrate subsequently. Creation is told to us from three distinct points of view. Thereafter, amid other details, it is the story of three great patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. We observe that on each occasion what happened to the son of the patriarch is both interesting and different. The first patriarch was Abraham. What happened to the promised seed is that Abraham's son was sacrificed and laid upon an altar. When Isaac himself became a patriarch, he fathered two sons, Esau and Jacob. The record is given largely to Jacob and what happened to him. He was so devious in his business arrangements that he had to flee from home to escape being murdered by his older brother.

He went and visited his relatives in distant countries, worked for his future father-in-law (because he married two of his daughters), but fell out over his wages with his father-in-law and ran for his life. He eventually got back into the land, though not without fear and trepidation because Esau was still alive. When Jacob, on his return, heard that Esau was coming to meet him, he was filled with fear, if not with panic, because he could not help remembering what he had done to Esau. It was Jacob's sons who were named by their mothers, and the names of those boys, who were born with the prayers of their mothers, shall go on the gates of the eternal city. It is worth remembering this when we read of those women and their sons.

One of the more famous sons was Joseph, and he rose from being rejected by his brothers, sold into Egypt, lied against by the woman who employed him and put in prison. And when brought out from prison he rose to be the saviour, not only of Egypt, but of the surrounding countries that were dependent upon Egypt for their supply of grain. The book of Genesis is a literary whole that begins with Adam who was appointed by God, his creator, to be the administrator of the then world. He was put in the garden to till it and to keep it. God said to Adam, 'See what can be done with this world. Make it your home, but be aware that there's a big world outside and you could make a garden of that too.'

Adam was made to be an administrator of the earth as God made it. The book of Genesis begins with Adam the administrator, and ends with the most famous and biggest administrator of the Old Testament, namely Joseph, who rose to be second in command to the Egyptians and the saviour, not only of Egypt, but the saviour of all the little nations that were dependent upon his organisation of the food supply. The first book tells us the story of

our first fathers and how Adam sinned to bring upon us the fatal consequences of his sin. Even the first book of the Bible, by the time it is finished, puts before us an administrator so wonderful and glorious that we are driven necessarily to think of our blessed Lord. Like Christ, Joseph was rejected by his Jewish brethren, and was sold and slandered and put in prison in Egypt as we noted. By God's preservation he was brought out and became the saviour of the then world. Joseph builds a picture in advance of our Lord, even though some call us fanciful for seeing in Adam himself a picture of our blessed Lord. For Adam was the first man. Our Lord Jesus, what was he? And Adam was to be the administrator of the then earth. Our Lord will be not only the counterpart to Joseph, but the administrator of the whole heavens and earth, and if this should seem a fairy story to us, we better pull up our socks and notice that when Christ reigns there will be vacancies in his administration to be filled by those who have been faithful to him in the various tasks he has given them until he returns. Thus the book of Genesis outlines man's first history on this earth. Of course, there is more to it than that. But now I shall need to justify my claim that there are three creation stories in Genesis.

Now, it is commonly said, and many students are, alas, taught it in their theological faculties, that there are two stories of creation in Genesis. That is scarce correct; there are three. The two stories, so they are told, contradict each other. That is not so, however. We shouldn't begin by supposing that they do; if this is God's inspired word, then the fact that there are three creation stories at the beginning of Genesis should prompt us to ask, from what point of view is each creation story told to us? It is commonly said that the story of the flood that we get in the third creation story borrows a lot from the mythologies of the ancient world. Well, let me recommend if you haven't got it, the book *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* by K. A. Kitchen.<sup>1</sup>

This book is by a very learned man. He was a professor of Egyptology in Liverpool University, and not only does he have knowledge of Egyptian, but many other curious languages and is notorious for the ramifications of his studies. In this book particularly, he has aimed to show us the reliability of the Old Testament, and what he does is to start with the kingdom period in Israel when they were ruled by kings, and he includes some very interesting photographs of the seals that were given as seals of office to some of the king's second in command. These photographs show that those people actually existed. He works his way back from the kingdom period, down through the patriarchs in the book of Genesis. This helps dispel the notion that the Bible borrows a lot from ancient myths, and thus I recommend this book to you.

So I have said that there are three creation stories. Let me try to justify that if I can. First of all, Genesis 1 and verse 1 begins the first creation story, 'In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep' (Gen 1:1-2). Thus begins the first creation story. Now look at Chapter 2 and verse 4, 'These are the generations'. The Hebrew word here means 'an account of', 'histories of', and not just 'generations': 'These are the histories of the heavens and the earth when they were created, in the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens.' This is the

---

<sup>1</sup> K. A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003.

second creation story. Now in chapter 5 it begins with, 'This is the book of the generations of Adam. When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God. Male and female he created them, and he blessed them and named them Man when they were created' (vv. 1–2). Three creation stories, therefore. The third one is going to be a long one because it will involve the flood and the consequences of that flood. It is ours, of course, to discover by the Lord's help, what those three creation stories are about. Why hasn't the Holy Spirit combined them into one convenient story? Why are there three? Just as we find in the gospels, there is not one gospel, but four gospels. Each presents our Lord from a different point of view. So also in the three creation stories of Genesis, creation is dealt with from a distinct point of view.

It is thus left to us to discover what that point of view is. Let's take an easy example from the first creation story. It reads,

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. And God said, 'Let there be light', and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day. (Gen 1:1–5)

Now of course we know what the ancients didn't know. The ancients often wondered, particularly the pagan nations, where the sun went to when it went down. Where did it go to? We know better, because we know the earth twizzles around on its axis. We have a while each day with the sunlight beaming on us, and then we are twizzled around so that we look out into the darkness. Day and night. It provokes us to ask, why did God arrange it that way? For the first creation story is marked by organisational details as to how God has organised our world. Why do you think that God has organised us so that, roughly speaking, we get twelve hours more or less facing the sun, and then whether we want it or not, are twizzled out into the darkness?

Some will say, of course, 'It's for your health, old boy. If you don't learn to sleep, you'll go mad.' Well health could be part of the reason, of course. Interestingly modern English has the same idiom as the ancient Hebrew, because Genesis 1, the first creation story, tells us of the 'days' in which God did things. I don't stop to discuss whether they were days of twenty-four hours or not; that, for the moment, is beside the point. It records the various days. On the first day, 'God said, "Let there be light", and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day' (vv. 3–5). Wait a minute, the Hebrew is using the word 'day' in two different senses, isn't it? The evening and the morning were the first day, and yet it says that he called the light 'day', and the darkness he called 'night'. Yes, but Hebrew has what we have in English. Your Aunt Matilda is coming from America, and I say, 'Ah, how is she coming, by aircraft?'

You say, 'By aircraft of course.'

'When is she coming?'

'She's coming on Thursday.'

'But is she coming on daylight Thursday, or overnight Thursday?'

We're using the word 'day' in two different senses, aren't we? So here, the first day, twenty-four hours presumably, was divided between light and darkness.

The word 'day' is saying the obvious, which everybody has known since youth. Why do you think God has organised it that way? If you were going to organise earth's light, would you have organised it that way? It can be very inconvenient when you're digging the garden, if ever you dig the garden and the daylight fades on you and you have to pack up before it's finished. Why has God organised it thus? The medics will tell us it's because you need to put yourself on a shelf while it's dark and recover from the day's activities, and be refreshed in mind and body until the next day. That's a very good explanation, but why didn't God make us so that we didn't need rest? What is this alternation between day and night? If you're doing your garden or something, the night overtakes you and you can't work. The sun has set, as we say. We have no control over it. Our lighting system, which is so vital and fundamental to our existence and to our work, is not in our earth nor near our earth. It's outside our world; it is 90 million miles outside our world. Genesis 1 is pointing out to us at its very beginning that the light that is necessary for life is not in our world. Of course there's the moon and so on. Perhaps you begin to see what I mean by saying that the first creation story has to do with the organising of our world, how it is organised and why, therefore, it is organised.

What the second creation story is about is somewhat different. Genesis 2 and verse 4 begins the second story: 'These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created, in the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens. When no bush of the field was yet in the land and no small plant of the field had yet sprung up—for the LORD God had not caused it to rain on the land' (vv. 4-5). So now God makes a man, puts him in a garden and the man breaks the condition, and is turned out of the garden to till the soil from which he was taken. Adam and Eve then had two sons. Cain, who was a tiller of the ground, rose up and in a quarrel, murdered his brother, Abel. God said to Cain, 'Cain, you can go. Here are your cards, Cain. You can go.'

You say, 'That sounds to me a great option, you know, free now to go with his wife on a Mediterranean cruise or something.'

No he wasn't. He was now, according to Genesis and the second creation story, bereft of the very reason for which he was made. I can't imagine a more grievous thing than to lose the very purpose of your existence. Why exist? It will be one of the horrors of hell.

The third creation story begins in chapter 5.

This is the book of the generations of Adam. When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God. Male and female he created them, and he blessed them and named them Man when they were created. When Adam had lived for 130 years, he fathered a son in his own likeness, after his image, and named him Seth. The days of Adam after he fathered Seth were 800 years; and he had other sons and daughters. Thus all the days that Adam lived were 930 years, and he died. (Gen 5:1-5)

Look at the end of verse 8: 'and he died.' Look at the end of verse 11: 'and he died.' Verse 14: 'and he died.' That was a new thing for Adam. Dying. What did it mean? What did it imply? Of course it is an issue to be faced, even today, isn't it? What will my death mean to me? (It'll be a relief to others of my friends, of course, that goes without saying.) But what will it mean to me? What does death mean? So the three creation stories deal with different aspects of creation. The three major patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, tell us another story. The New Testament is not slow to profit from it. Abraham and his experience, and the birth of Ishmael and the birth of Isaac when he and Sarah were sizably elderly—the New Testament comments on it, doesn't it? God made a promise to Abraham: 'in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed' (Gen 22:18). For a long while his wife could not bear a child. They were reduced to using their slave girl, and she produced Ishmael. 'No,' said God, 'that wasn't what I had in mind.' Oh what a trial of faith it was.

In Abraham we find lessons that are absolutely basic to our present relationship with God and to salvation. Abraham believed God and it was counted to him for righteousness (see 15:6), and the New Testament takes up the story, pointing out that we're saved by faith and we're meant to go on to live by faith, rather than to introduce the slavish notion of being saved by works. There's more to it than that, of course. But Abraham had a son called Isaac. In those days, fathers were particularly concerned about who their sons married and organised the whole arrangement. The story is told at great length, of how Abraham provided a wife for his son. Beloved Isaac—God had once asked Abraham to offer him on the altar, and Abraham rose to the occasion. Just as he lifted the knife, the angel of the Lord intervened and said, 'Now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me' (22:12). So Abraham was justified by faith, Genesis 15 tells us so. Chapter 22 tells us he was justified by his works. So Genesis keeps the balance in our doctrinal system: Abraham justified by faith, Abraham justified by works.

What is Jacob about therefore? Well, he's not so much another repeat lesson in how we are to be justified. In Jacob, we meet the businessman. In those days, suppose you were a businessman and you were very wealthy. You're sitting in your great office, not on a throne necessarily, but you might as well be, and in comes a poor man. He's failed in business. He's asking you to come and buy a painting that he has because this is his hope of getting some money. You go and look at the painting. You see at once, it's a Renoir. Worth a million. The poor man who's about to be bankrupt says, 'What will you give me for it?' What would you say? 'Well, I'll give you £10,000 for it.' Knowing it to be worth a million? You say, 'Well that's how business works.' I see. Is it a matter of Christian faith? What about our business life? In Jacob we learn the lesson about whether God minds how we conduct our business life.

Jacob had robbed Esau of the birthright, and escaped, and he'd made good; he had got two wives and their handmaids as well. Whether that's good fortune or bad, I wouldn't know but he had, and he could no longer stay with Laban, his father-in-law, because all the shops in that part of the world were entitled 'Jacob's shops'. He'd managed to transfer most of his father-in-law's balance to his own bank account. In the end his brothers-in-law couldn't stick it anymore, and he had to run for his life. So there he was, running for his life to escape Laban, and he hears the news that Esau is coming. Oh dear. What now? This was

the occasion when he wrestled with the angel. You see, God blessed Jacob, but if Jacob thought that the way to blessing was by stealing and perverse business deals, he had yet to be taught.

So when he heard that Esau was coming, being the brave man he was, Jacob sent his wives across first. Oh no, he thought, here comes the end of sheep and stock and so on, and as he thought about what would happen, there wrestled with him a man, until the daylight. It was God incarnate of course, breaking Jacob, touching his thigh so he could no longer wrestle and had to learn to depend. And he was given the new name Israel. He came back to Canaan lame, and there his sons committed unspeakable atrocities. (The return of Israel in modern times has likewise not been without its complications, has it not? I reference the way Israelis have treated the local population.) Jacob, therefore, is not just a repeat of justification by faith, but now true faith in God, applied to our business life and our marriages, and so forth. Like Jacob, we too may have to face what we've done in the past, regrettable though that might be.

Joseph comes at the end, what a story it is, as poor old Jacob comes down to Canaan to get the food necessary to save his life. He's introduced by his glorious son Joseph to the pharaoh, and Jacob blesses pharaoh. The blessed is blessed by the greater, you know, so says Scripture (see Heb 7:7). Pharaoh was blessed by Jacob because of Jacob's son Joseph. The solution of our world's problems will be found in Jacob's son, our blessed Lord, our Joseph yet to rule.

So these scattered remarks. There might be an odd thought among them that would encourage you in your excavations in the book of Genesis. How grateful we are to our Father for his word, for those men and women, through whose mistakes he warns us, and whose successes we are to follow. May he grant his blessing on his word and help us to live according to it, according to his desire, so that we might please him and be of benefit to others.



## About the Author

**DAVID W. GOODING** is Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University, Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. He has taught the Bible internationally and lectured on both its authenticity and its relevance to philosophy, world religions and daily life. He has published scholarly articles on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John, Acts, Hebrews, the New Testament's Use of the Old Testament, and several books addressing arguments against the Bible and the Christian faith. His analysis of the Bible and our world continues to shape the thinking of scholars, teachers and students alike.