

The Literary Structure of the Book of Genesis

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Overview: Genealogical Structure of Genesis

Introduction: In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth (1:1)

1. This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created (2:4)
2. This is the book of the generations of Adam (5:1)
3. These are the records of the generations of Noah (6:9)
4. Now these are the records of the generations of Shem, Ham, and Japheth (10:1)
5. These are the records of the generations of Shem (11:10)
6. Now these are the records of the generations of Terah (11:27)
7. Now these are the records of the generations of Ishmael, Abraham's son (25:12)
8. Now these are the records of the generations of Isaac, Abraham's son (25:19)
9. Now these are the records of the generations of Esau (that is, Edom) (36:1)
10. These are the records of the generations of Jacob (37:2)

Body: Now these are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Joseph (Ex.1:1)

There is a pattern around the number ten concerning God's activities in the history of Israel. Here is that pattern:

	Genesis 1:1 – 2:3	Genesis 5:1 – 6:8	Genesis 11:10 – 30	Genesis 2:4 – 50:26	Exodus 7 – 11	Exodus 19 – 20	Matthew 8 – 9
Ten acts leading up to a new work of God	Ten declarations of Creation; God forms all life	Ten generations from Adam to Noah, new creation	Ten generations from Shem to Abram, new humanity	Ten genealogies of Israel; God forms the nation Israel	Ten plagues; God un-creates Egypt to free Israel	Ten commands; God makes the Sinai covenant	Ten word miracles; Jesus frees people from disease, demons, death as pictures of new humanity

When God introduces a new work, He does it in ten steps: ten words, ten names/generations, etc. So if we take Genesis 1:1 – 2:3 as an introduction to the body of the story of the created world (Gen.2:4ff.), we see that God created all life with ten words. However, if we take the ten genealogies of Genesis as the ten stages before the nation Israel, we see that God introduced Israel in ten genealogies, then begins the body of the story of the nation Israel (Ex.1:1ff.).

Genesis 1 – 11: High Level Literary Structure

The Pentateuch begins by leveling a critique on human civilization. Scholarship has been done comparing Genesis to the oldest Near Eastern primeval history – the Akkadian version of the Atrahasis epic -- and the Greek mythic tradition exemplified by Homer's *Iliad* and Stasinos' *The Cypria*. Myths from other traditions are very concerned with overpopulation.¹ Atrahasis, for instance, records the Babylonian gods trying to control the spread of mankind with a plague, a famine, another famine, and a resolution to have natural barrenness in some women, a high infant mortality rate, and artificial barrenness by three types of cult priestesses. The Zoroastrian tale of Yima also deals with overpopulation and the gods' response to man's crowding the earth with a flood of snow. In the Greek tradition, war is the agent of the gods to combat overpopulation. *The Cypria* of Stasinos has the note:

There was a time when the countless tribes of men, though wide-dispersed, oppressed the surface of the deep-bosomed earth, and Zeus saw and had pity and in his wise heart resolved to relieve the all-nurturing earth of men by causing the great struggle of the Ilian war, that the load of death might empty the world. And so the heroes were slain in Troy, and the plan of Zeus came to pass.

Interestingly enough, Genesis 1 – 11 seems to follow a five-fold structure that undergirds other ancient literature. I have slightly modified the structure ascribed to Genesis 1 – 11 by Kikawada and Quinn and also Garrett by placing a

¹ Isaac Kikawada and Arthur Quinn, *Before Abraham Was* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1989), p.36 – 53; see also Duane Garrett, *Rethinking Genesis: The Sources and Authorship of the First Book of the Pentateuch* (2nd publishing Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publishing, 2000), p.105 – 109

genealogy at the start of each subsection, which seems to me a more natural way to break up the text. A diagram may help in comparing the various traditions:

Stasinus' Cypria / Homer's Iliad (European)	Atrahasis (Babylonian/Akkadian)	Zoroastrian Avesta (Old Iranian)	Genesis 1 – 11 (Hebrew)
Problem: Overpopulation , wickedness, earth burdened	Creation (1.1-351): the work of the gods and the creation of humans	Creation: Ahura Mazda tells Yima (human) to be king over creation	Creation (1:1 – 2:3): God creates the world and humans and blesses them to multiply
First Threat: Zeus sends the Theban War; many destroyed	First Threat (1.352-415): Humans numerically increase; plague from the gods to limit overcrowding ; Enki's help	First Threat: Overpopulation ; Yima asks the earth goddess Armaiti to expand herself	First Threat (2:4 – 4:25): Humans corrupt themselves; God promises a deliverer to undo it; Cain kills Abel and builds a city 'on' his son for his own security; Seth hopes in God
Second Threat: Zeus plans to destroy all by thunderbolts; Momos dissuades Zeus	Second Threat (II.i.1-II.v.21) Humanity's numerical increase; drought from the gods; Enki's help	Second Threat: Overpopulation; Yima asks the earth goddess Armaiti to expand herself	Second Threat (5:1 – 9:29): Human violence threatens Noah and family, the last family of faith hoping for the deliverer; God protects them through the flood
Third Threat: Momos suggests that Thebis marry a mortal to create Achilles and that Zeus father Helen of Troy; war results between the Greeks and the barbarians	Third Threat (II.v.22-III.vi.4): Humanity's numerical increase, Atrahasis Flood, salvation in boat	Third Threat: Overpopulation; Yima asks the earth goddess Armaiti to expand herself	Third Threat (10:1 – 11:9): Humans build the city and tower of Babel, led by Nimrod the dictator; God disperses humanity
Resolution: Many destroyed by Trojan War, earth lightened of her burdens	Resolution (III.vi.5-viii.18): Numerical increase; compromise between Enlil and Enki; humans cursed with natural barrenness, high infant mortality rate, cult prostitution (to separate sex and procreation)	Resolution: Ahura Mazda sends a deadly winter with heavy snowfall to punish overcrowding; Yima told to build a three storied enclosure to survive; humanity destroyed outside while a boy and girl born in enclosure every 40 years	Resolution (11:10 – 26): Introduction of Abram as the heir of faith (In 11:27ff., God calls Abram and Sarai out of Ur to be a new 'Adam and Eve.')

We can see at a glance that the Hebrew tradition is also concerned with population, but in exactly the opposite sense. The Hebrew God, far from punishing human beings for population growth, orders them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth." Kikawada and Quinn argue, "This command, so long familiar to us, is in its cultural context utterly startling, as unexpected as the monotheism."² Frymer-Kensky says that this command to be fertile is "an explicit and probably conscious rejection of the idea that the cause of the flood was overpopulation and that overpopulation is a serious problem."³ Temple cult prostitutes who used various forms of birth control divorced

² *ibid*, p.38.

³ Tikva Frymer-Kensky. "The Atrahasis Epic and its Significance for Understanding Genesis 1-9," *Biblical Archaeologist* 40 (1977):152. See also B.S. Yegerlehner, *Be Fruitful and Multiply* (Diss., Boston University, 1975) and David Daube's *The Duty of Procreation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1982).

sexuality and childbearing, but the Hebrew God unequivocally united the two. It is significant that such cult practices were coupled with overpopulation myths in ancient *cities*, because cities faced that problem. Kikawada and Quinn conclude: “All other traditions view population control as the solution to urban overcrowding. Genesis offers dispersion, the nomadic way of life. Population growth is from the very beginning of the Genesis primeval history presented as an unqualified blessing. The blessing in Genesis 1:28 finds a fulfillment in the dispersion ‘upon the face of the whole earth,’ which concludes the primeval history. Genesis 1-11 then constitutes a rejection of Babel and Babylon – of civilization itself, if its continuance requires human existence to be treated as a contingent good. For Genesis the existence of a new human was always good.”⁴

Jewish creational monotheism thus begins with a strong ethical critique and condemnation of human civilization, or at least certain forms of it. While it affirms the goodness of creation, and while later Psalmists and New Testament writers would draw on the implications of the creation narrative to say that the natural world and all foods are good, or that the human body, as a part of creation, must therefore be resurrected into the new creation, Jewish creational monotheism carries with it a pessimistic view of the cultural and institutional matrices that are laid on top of the created world by human beings. There is a tension the biblical writers perceived between human conduct as originally intended and circumscribed by God for His covenant people, and the way in which human life was actually conducted everywhere else, and often among the chosen people as well. Its charter document, the Pentateuch, begins with a sophisticated polemic against the institutions and attitudes of Israel’s pagan neighbors. **Human civilization elevates itself at the expense of human life. Genesis 1 – 11 elevates human life at the expense of human civilization.**

Furthermore, Genesis 1 – 11 establishes a linear narrative whereas the others do not. Genesis lays the foundation for God’s renewal of a segment of humanity with Abraham and Sarah, anticipating many more things to come (‘all families of the earth will be blessed through you’). However, the Greek Iliad of Homer, the Babylonian Atrahasis story, and the Old Iranian Avesta establish why circular patterns prevail. Those narratives describe archetypal ways to deal with human overpopulation: prostitution and birth control, and when those methods fail, war.

⁴ Isaac Kikawada and Arthur Quinn, *Before Abraham Was* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1989), p.36-53

The Noah Story

Genesis 5:1 – 9:29

Structure of the Noah Story

The Noah story itself is fine-tuned and fairly elegant. The entire Noah story is in the form of an inverted parallel.⁵ It is a Hebrew literary form found all over the Bible, where the first point matches the last point, the second point matches the second to last point, and so on, until you reach the center. And how do you know the story has cohesion? Look at the literary design of the story. Some of your professors who buy the so-called Documentary Hypothesis think that the Noah story is a contradictory, random patchwork sewn together from multiple sources, but look at the unity of the story. Impressive, isn't it? How do you know the author's intention? What is the point? Look at the center.

- A. The genealogy of Adam to Noah, emphasizing corruption of humanity except Noah (5:1 – 6:8)
- B. Noah is righteous (6:9)
- C. Shem, Ham, and Japheth (6:10)
- D. God will bring an end to all flesh; God tells Noah to build ark for the flood (6:11 – 17)
- E. Covenant with Noah (6:18 – 20)
- F. Food in the ark (6:21 – 22)
- G. Command to enter the ark (7:1 – 3)
- H. 7 days waiting for flood (7:4 – 5)
- I. 7 days waiting for flood (7:6 – 10)
- J. Entry to ark (7:11 – 15)
- K. Yahweh shuts Noah in (7:16)
- L. 40 days flood (7:17a)
- M. Waters increase (7:17b – 18)
- N. Mountains covered (7:19 – 20)
- O. 150 days waters prevail (7:21 – 24)
- P. God remembers Noah (8:1 – 2)
- O'. 150 days waters abate (8:2 – 3)
- N'. Mountains tops visible (8:4 – 5)
- M'. Waters abate (8:5)
- L'. 40 days (end of) (8:6a)
- K'. Noah opens window of ark (8:6b)
- J'. Raven and dove leave ark (8:7 – 9)
- I'. 7 days waiting for waters to subside (8:10 – 11)
- H'. 7 days waiting for waters to subside (8:12 – 13)
- G'. Command to leave the ark, family leaves ark (8:14 – 22)
- F'. Food outside the ark (9:1 – 4)
- E'. Covenant with all flesh (9:5 – 10)
- D'. God will not flood all flesh again; God makes rainbow (9:11 – 17)
- C'. Shem, Ham, and Japheth (9:18)
- B'. Noah repopulates the whole earth (9:19)
- A'. The sons of Noah, emphasizing corruption of Noah and his family (9:20 – 29)

⁵ Modified by Mako Nagasawa from Gordon J. Wenham, "The Coherence of the Flood Narrative," *VT* 28 (1978): 338. See also Bernhard W. Anderson, "From Analysis to Synthesis: The Interpretation of Genesis 1 – 11," *JBL* 97 (1978): 23-29.

The Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar Story

Genesis 11:27 – 22:19

Structure of the Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar Story⁶

- A. A. God calls Abram to trust His word, leave his homeland, gives promise of seed (11:27 – 12:3)
- B. Abram builds an altar, calls on the name of the Lord (12:4 – 9)
- C. Abram and Sarai sojourn in Egypt, Abram lies about Sarai (12:10 – 20)
 - Separation of Lot (13:1 – 13)
 - Blessing: God reiterates promise of seed and many descendants (13:14 – 18)
- D. Abram wars on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah, rescues Lot and them (14:1 – 24)
- E. God again promises Abram seed despite Abram's old age; Abram believes (15:1 – 6)
 - God promises birth of Israel from a hopeless situation: bondage (15:7 – 21)
- F. Sarai relies on herself and fails (16:1 – 6)
 - God hears Hagar (who names God) and promises blessing on Ishmael (16:7 – 16)
- G. God marks Abram with circumcision, symbol of purification back to Eden
 - God says, 'I will multiply you exceedingly' (17:1 – 2)
 - God renames Abram to Abraham, promises land, kings, nations (17:4 – 8)
 - God gives Abraham the sign of circumcision (17:9 – 14)
- F'. God renames Sarai to Sarah, promises Isaac to Sarah, and kings, nations (17:15 – 17)
 - God promises blessing on Ishmael (17:18 – 27)
- E'. God again promises Sarah seed despite Sarah's old age; Sarah laughs, believes (18:1 – 15)
 - God promises birth of son from a hopeless situation: Sarah's womb
- D'. God wars on Sodom and Gomorrah, rescues Lot (18:16 – 19:38)
- C'. Abraham and Sarah sojourn in Gerar, Abraham lies about Sarah (20:1 – 18)
 - Blessing: Isaac is born (21:1 – 7)
 - Separation of Ishmael; promised blessing on Ishmael and many descendants (21:8 – 21)
- B'. Abraham plants a tree and calls on the name of the Lord (21:22 – 34)
- A'. God calls Abraham to trust His word, sacrifice his son, gives blessing on the seed (22:1 – 19)

Structure of Genesis 17:1 – 25

- A. Abram's age (17:1a)
- B. The LORD appears to Abram (17:1b)
 - C. God's first speech, regarding 'I will multiply you' (17:1c – 2)
 - D. Abram falls on his face (17:3)
 - E. God's second speech, regarding Abraham (emphasizing names/land/ kings/nations) (17:4 – 8)
 - F. God's third/most important speech (emphasizing covenant and circumcision) (17:9 – 14)
 - E'. God's fourth speech, regarding Sarah (emphasizing names/land/kings/ nations) (17:15 – 16)
 - D'. Abraham falls on his face (17:17 – 18)
 - C'. God's fifth speech, regarding the choice of Isaac and not Ishmael (17:19 – 21)
- B'. The LORD goes up from Abram (17:22 – 23)
- A'. Abraham's age and household (17:24 – 27)

Genesis 17:19 – 21; God's Fifth Speech⁷

- A. Sarah will bear a son...Isaac (17:19a)
 - B. I shall confirm my covenant with him (17:19b)
 - C. Ishmael (17:20)
- B'. I shall confirm my covenant with him (17:21)
- A'. Sarah will bear next year (17:22)

⁶ Modified by Mako Nagasawa from Duane Garrett, *Rethinking Genesis: The Sources and Authorship of the First Book of the Pentateuch* (2nd publishing Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publishing, 2000), p.114

⁷ Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16 – 50* (Waco, Texas; Word, 1994), p.26

The Jacob, Leah, and Rachel Story

Genesis 25:19 – 35:29

Structure of the Jacob, Leah, and Rachel Story⁸

- A. God makes promise; struggle in childbirth; Jacob and Esau born; Jacob buys birthright (25:19 – 34)
- B. Jacob's mother Rebekah is endangered in a foreign place, Isaac lies about her, makes a pact with foreigners (26:1 – 34)
- C. Jacob tricks Esau, fears him, and flees the Promised Land (27:1 – 28:9)
- D. At night, God speaks to Jacob in a dream (ladder with angels), Jacob names Bethel, makes deal with God (28:10 – 22)
- E. Jacob meets Rachel and Laban (29:1 – 14)
- F. Jacob must acknowledge the rights of the firstborn (Leah) and is vulnerable to Laban, Laban deceives Rachel (29:15 – 30)
- G. Jacob experiences conflict between his two wives (29:31 – 30:13)
- H. Rachel stops trying to thwart God's blessings to Leah; Leah bears children (30:14 – 21)
- H'. God 'remembers' Rachel; Rachel bears Joseph (30:22 – 24)
- G'. Jacob experiences conflict with Laban but accepts a handicap with his flocks, relinquishes his rights (30:25 – 36)
- F'. God prospers Jacob and protects him from Laban; Rachel deceives Laban (30:37 – 31:35)
- E'. Laban departs from Jacob (31:36 – 55)
- D'. At night, God wrestles Jacob, Jacob named Israel, asks God for blessing (32:1 – 32)
- C'. Jacob returns to the Promised Land, fears Esau, but is reconciled to him (33:1 – 17)
- B'. Jacob's daughter Dinah is endangered in foreign place, Jacob's sons lie, make a pact with foreigners, and kill them (33:18 – 34:31)
- A'. God fulfills promise; Jacob named Israel again at Bethel; struggle in childbirth, Rachel dies; Reuben forfeits birthright; Isaac dies, Jacob and Esau bury him (35:1 – 29)

'Three Mirrors for Jacob', noted by Paul Borgman

1. The rights of the firstborn: Jacob took Esau's firstborn rights at Esau's expense; Laban upholds Leah's firstborn rights at Jacob's expense
2. Quarrels between siblings: The brothers Jacob and Esau quarreled; the sisters Rachel and Leah quarreled
3. The duel of the schemers: Jacob vs. Laban

⁸ By Mako Nagasawa using insights from J.P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2004), Paul Borgman, *Genesis: The Story We Haven't Heard* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), and Gary A. Rendsburg, *The Redaction of Genesis* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1986), p.53 – 54.

The Joseph and Judah Story

Genesis 37:1 – 50:26

Structure of the Joseph and Judah Story⁹

- A. Prologue: The genealogy of Jacob (37:1 – 2)
- B. Jacob favors Joseph, brothers hostile to Joseph (37:3 – 11)
- C. Joseph with Jacob for 17 years in Canaan, brothers sell him into slavery, Jacob mourns (37:12 – 35)
- D. Judah: moral failure and repentance with Tamar (38:1 – 26)
- E. Reversal of the firstborn: Perez before Zerah (38:27 – 30)
- F. Potiphar favors Joseph; Joseph accused unjustly by Potiphar's wife (39:1 – 23)
- G. Jailer favors Joseph; Joseph demonstrates wisdom; interprets dreams (40:1 – 42:57)
 - a. Joseph interprets dreams of cupbearer and baker (40:1 – 23)
 - b. (End of second year of that Pharaoh's reign?): Joseph leaves jail and interprets dreams of Pharaoh (41:1 – 57)
- H. Joseph tests his brothers and father (42:1 – 46:7)
 - a. Jacob sends brothers to Egypt; Joseph imprisons them, takes Simeon to test their brotherhood, demands to see Benjamin, gives silver (42:1 – 38);
 - b. Jacob finally releases Benjamin; Joseph frames Benjamin; Judah offers himself instead of Benjamin (43:1 – 34);
 - c. Joseph reveals himself (44:1 – 45:28);
 - d. Jacob sets out for Egypt (46:1 – 7)
- I. Provision for Jacob's family, all 70 persons (46:8 – 27)
- H'. Joseph reunited with his brothers and father (46:28 – 47:12)
 - a. Jacob arrives in Egypt, but sends Judah ahead (46:28 – 30);
 - b. Joseph reveals his family as shepherds (46:31 – 47:6);
 - c. Joseph welcomes Jacob, introduces him to Pharaoh; Jacob blesses Pharaoh (47:7 – 10);
 - d. Jacob moves to Rameses in Egypt (47:11 – 12)
- G'. Joseph demonstrates wisdom, cares for Egypt, honors Pharaoh (47:13 – 26)
 - a. Year of severe famine: Joseph gives grain for money and livestock (47:13 – 17)
 - b. Second year of severe famine: Joseph gives grain for land and people (47:18 – 26)
- F'. Joseph elevated and blessed by Jacob (48:1 – 12)
- E'. Reversal of the firstborn: Ephraim before Manasseh (48:13 – 22)
- D'. Judah: Jacob blesses Judah as the firstborn among his brothers (esp. 49:8 – 12)
- C'. Joseph with Jacob for 17 years in Egypt¹⁰, death of Jacob, Joseph buries him (49:29 – 50:14)
- B'. Brothers afraid of Joseph; Joseph reassures his brothers (50:15 – 21)
- A'. Epilogue: Death of Joseph (50:22 – 26)

⁹ Modified by Mako Nagasawa from Duane Garrett, *Rethinking Genesis: The Sources and Authorship of the First Book of the Pentateuch* (Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publishing, 2nd publishing 2000), p.115

¹⁰ See Gen.47:28, 'Jacob lived in the land of Egypt seventeen years; so the length of Jacob's life was one hundred and forty-seven years.'