

INTRO TO GENESIS

John 5:39–47 • Pastor Luke Herche

Please turn with me to John 5:39-47. This is God's word and these specifically are the words of Jesus.

You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life. And it is they that bear witness about me. Yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life. I do not receive glory from people. But I know that you do not have the love of God within you. I have come in my father's name and you do not receive me. If another comes in his own name, you will receive him. How can you believe when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God? Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father. There is one who accuses you, Moses, on whom you have set your hope. For if you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote of me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?

Well, this is one of those moments in which I am supposed to use words like embark - words that aren't used every day and that rise a little above the mundane.

So, we embark on a journey through the book of Genesis and Genesis is without question, one of the greatest books ever written.

It deals with the biggest themes in human life.

It tells the story of the origin of the universe and the origin of humanity and the origin of sin. It describes the origin of Israel and God's gracious plan to save a people for himself.

Genesis situates us in the world. It sets the stage for everything that is to come in the Bible. Everything that is to come in existence - everything that is to come. Period.

Genesis is a literary masterpiece. The stories are artfully told. The themes are thoughtfully interwoven with conflict, tension, anticipation and hope.

And, Genesis is also one of the most debated books of the body. People argue over everything from the author and the date, its view of creation, its teaching on sin and brokenness, its historicity, and its theology.

Before we get into some of those arguments this morning, I want to ask a question - why? Why this book?

As I was preparing this sermon, a mob stormed the United States Capitol, in protest of the certification of electoral college results. Regardless of your view of those events, you might think, "why spend time studying a 3500 year old book? Aren't there more important things going on? Shouldn't we be talking about politics? Or, shouldn't we be talking about what's going on in our country? Shouldn't we be talking about the future of democracy?"

But as I was reading recently, we cannot deal with the social ills of the world that we can see until we deal with the realities of the world that we cannot see.

We cannot deal properly with social realities until we understand properly spiritual realities. The book of Genesis and the gospel of Jesus that flows from it is exactly what we need to live in a way that pleases God. In the midst of what one of the disciples of Jesus called this crooked generation, we need to get grounded in spiritual realities. Only that grounding will enable us to approach social ills.

Not that spiritual things are merely a means to an end. They are not. But, they are fundamental; they are primary. They are that in light of which everything else makes sense.

And so, we begin to turn to the book of Genesis. Now, my intention was to look at just three things that aren't the kind of thing that we usually talk about except maybe once per book. But, they will be helpful as we approach the book of Genesis. This morning will be more teaching than preaching. But hopefully, like the book of Genesis itself, this sermon will set the stage for the rest of our studies to come.

What kind of book is Genesis?

If you pick up and read a newspaper and a medicine bottle and a children's story, they read differently. They read differently because they are different genres of writing with different intentions, different vocabularies, different structures.

For example, Genesis is not a haiku. A Japanese haiku is a poetic genre. They are short poems with a set number of syllables and lines. Genesis in haiku form would be something like this:

God created all.

Adam broke what God made.

Of course, my haiku might need to communicate that God is not done yet. There is more to the story.

Genre is important because it clues you in on how to read something and what to expect.

When Bible scholars debate the genre of Genesis, there are at least four genres that they typically mention. The first option that many modern scholars suggest is myth.

We don't like that word when it comes to Genesis, because myth implies something that is neither true nor historical. A myth might be used to explain someone's experience, ideology, and origins. In fact, one writer says a myth addresses those metaphysical concerns that cannot be explained by scientific discovery. I would expect for most of us who are listening to the sermon this morning "myth" means something fanciful and fictitious.

Genesis records historical realities. It presents itself that way. Jesus does as well. The New Testament authors spoke of it that way. And so, if we believe in Jesus and the inspiration of Scripture, we cannot read Genesis as a fanciful myth.

The second option is particularly talked about when it comes to the first two chapters of Genesis. Option two is that Genesis is scientific writing. Is Genesis scientific? I'm not asking if Genesis records what is true, but whether Genesis falls under the genre of scientific writing. Hopefully, you can see those are two different questions.

One writer gives four differences between Genesis and scientific writing. First, Genesis and scientific writing discuss essentially different matters. God and His relation to his people is the subject matter of Genesis. The natural world is the subject matter of science.

Second, they use different languages. I don't mean Hebrew versus English, but every discipline has its own vocabulary. For something to count as scientific writing, a writer must use a specialized vocabulary like "thermodynamics", and "homeostasis", and "psychokinesis" - words that I don't understand and cannot define.

Scripture uses no such specialized vocabulary. In fact, it uses the language of everyday experience. If you want a technical phrase, Scripture uses phenomenological language- language that describes phenomena as we experience them. In other words, it uses normal, everyday speech.

We use this kind of speech when we say things like, "let's go outside and watch the sunset." There's nothing untrue about talking about sunset. But scientifically, we would talk about the Earth's rotation around the sun. "Sunset" is no less true and factual, just less scientific.

The purposes of Genesis and science also differ. Genesis is prescriptive, answering the questions of who and why and what ought to be. Whereas the purpose of science is to be descriptive, answering the questions of what and how. Genesis may provide answers to the questions of what and how and what it gives us is true, but *it*

is not the main intent. Genesis and science are written to different communities. Science speaks to the academic community and requires empirical testing for validation. Genesis is addressed to the covenant community of God and requires the validation of the witness of the Spirit to the heart.

We could add a fourth difference between science and Genesis; each have a different means of production. Science comes about by empirical observation. Genesis came about through revelation.

It's really important to see that Genesis and the whole Bible is not scientific writing. Otherwise, we end up like the detractors of Galileo who argued that the earth cannot be moved physically because of Psalm 104:5 which says, *He set the earth on its foundations so that it should never be moved.*

When we treat Scripture like scientific language, we end up misinterpreting it and arguing for the wrong things. Scripture is not a science text. That doesn't mean it isn't true. We must be wise in the way we understand, present and defend that truth. Otherwise, we end up getting snookered by modernity into trying to defend what ought not be defended.

If Genesis is not myth and not science, maybe it is history. Now, this at least is getting closer to what Genesis is. It records historical realities. The writer of Genesis presents himself as a historian, recording people and events of the past. The church confesses that what is recorded in Genesis actually happened in time and space.

So it is historical, though that's not quite the same thing as determining that it is written in the genre of history. If we think of Genesis as similar to modern history writing, that writing is typically someone making an argument about what happened based on primary source material. Historians gather old letters, receipts, and fragments of things and place them together to make a conjecture about what actually happened. They want to put everything in chronological order and minimize metaphor and poetry in favor of strict, straightforward, flat vocabulary. Historical writing, in this sense, is more like science. It investigates primary source data, and formulates a thesis about what happened. Its specialized vocabulary may be simple and flat.

Genesis is not like that at all. It's full of metaphors and anthropomorphism. It talks about God's speaking creation into existence by his word, his repentance at the sin of mankind, his smelling the pleasing aroma of Noah's sacrifice, or his setting himself a reminder, so he doesn't forget his promises. That is the rainbow that he puts in the clouds.

We're not to understand from these things that God has a tongue or that he can believe that his former actions were wrong or that he has nostrils to smell the smoke of burning flesh or that he's prone to forgetfulness. Right? While Genesis historical - it records events that actually happened - it's not history writing in the modern sense of the word.

Maybe, Genesis is theology. Of course, the answer is yes and no. Genesis records theological truths about God and man and sin and salvation. But it's not what we think of as systematic theology. It's not organized by topic but as a story.

Maybe we just need to say, okay, Genesis is a story. It's a narrative. And that's fine. As long as we don't read "story" as meaning something fictitious. Genesis is not a bedtime story. It's not a fable or a fairy tale. Again, what it records is historical, and true.

So then, what is Genesis? I keep giving you all these options and saying, no, yes, or not quite. So then what is it? What is Genesis?

Well, we could try to combine some of those genres, right?

Genesis is a theological history, narrating the beginning of creation, the beginning of man and the beginning of God's relationship to man. That would be true.

But, the element that is most missing in all of the above is this: Genesis is revelation. That's not really a genre, but that is what Genesis is: God's self-revelation. God tells the story of himself and the history of his dealings with his people *so that we might know him*, especially through His Son, Jesus Christ.

That brings us to the question of authorship: **who wrote Genesis?**

The truth is we have no idea who wrote many of the books of the Bible. Who wrote Judges, or Ruth, who wrote the book of Kings or Chronicles, who wrote Job, or, for that matter, Jonah. Jonah is the main character of Jonah, but we're never told that he's the author of the book. We don't know. And that's okay.

God inspired men to write books to reveal himself. Who those men were is often of little consequence. Not always, but often, of little consequence.

We just finished a series on the book of Hebrews. One of the things we recognized about the book of Hebrews is we don't know for certain who the author is; there are lots of conjectures and suggestions. One of them may be true. But in the end, we don't know and that's okay.

Because God ultimately is the one revealing Himself through His Word. The book of Genesis is what the book of Genesis is, regardless of who wrote it. It tells us what it tells us, regardless of who God used to do the telling. We shouldn't get too hung up on authorship. God is the divine author of Genesis, whoever the human author might have been.

Traditionally, Moses has been understood as the author of Genesis and for good reasons. The author's authorship of Genesis is really tied up in the authorship of the

first five books of the Bible, which are called the five books of Moses. Within these five books, we see Moses writing things down. Moses wrote down God's curse on Amalek. In Exodus 17, he wrote down the covenant that God made with his people at Sinai or what is called the book of the covenant according to Exodus 24. And, while Leviticus and Numbers don't say Moses wrote them, they do say in the last verse of both books that the contents of the book were revealed by God to Moses implying that Moses wrote both. Moses first preached the sermon that is Deuteronomy, and then wrote it down and called it the Book of Law, according to Deuteronomy 31:24.

The New Testament writers assume that Moses is the author of these books. Jesus says the purity laws of Leviticus are commanded by Moses. In Matthew 8:4, Jesus uses Moses as was the common designation of his day to refer to the first five books in contrast to the Psalms and the prophets. If Jesus, the one who died and rose and who now has all authority in heaven on earth, says that these books are by Moses. Well, really, that's good enough for me.

There are some difficulties though.

Deuteronomy, for example, records Mose's death and burial by God. Did Moses record thirty days of weeping after his own death? Or, did he write the fact that no one knows where Moses was buried? Did Moses himself state that no prophet like Moses has arisen in Israel? The Book of Numbers tells us that Moses was more humble than any other person on the face of the earth. Did Moses write that? Now, I guess, if he were that humble, he could write that in all humility. But it seems unlikely.

The genealogy of Genesis 36 says, *These are the kings who reigned in the land of Edom before any King reigned over the Israelites.* The phrase *before any King reigned over the Israelites* seems to be written in a time when kings did reign over the Israelites. That timeline would place the time of its writing in the days of Saul or possibly even David or later.

So, we have these hints that maybe Moses wasn't the author, which brings us to the field of what has been called source criticism and the documentary hypothesis.

For about 100 years, there was a certain view of the five books of Moses that reigned. The idea was that Genesis had four different sources and an editor brought these four documents together into one book. The thought was that you could discern the documents by looking at the vocabulary and topics of each story. One document was called J for the jahwist, because he always used the name Jahweh or Jehovah for God. And another E for its author called the elohist. The document's writer used the name Elokim for God. The third was called P for priestly because it focused on priestly matters. And, the final document was called D for the deuteronomistic, because he seemed to have his own set of concerns.

Theorists believed that any variation in language and then its repetition in the story was seen as evidence to support four documents. To be honest, over time, the theory got out of control - you went from four sources to six and eight and more. But, there were things in Genesis that this documentary hypothesis couldn't explain. Sometimes a name for God was used in the wrong place. For example, the yahwist used elokim. And that had to be explained away as a later addition. It's important to remember that these hypothetical documents do not exist. They were assumed to have existed, but we don't actually have any record of them. They were a hypothesis; they were theoretical documents. And while this idea reigned in Biblical scholarship from the 1880s to the 1980s, it did eventually meet its end.

What ultimately toppled this hypothesis was a new kind of critical study of Scripture: literary criticism.

Literary critics said, "Maybe there were these documents at some point, but what we have in our hand is the finished product and we must focus our scholarly energies on this."

What happened when they did so was something remarkable.

They realized that there were other explanations for the data that the documentary hypothesis was using. For example, different names for God or different vocabulary for covenants might not mean a different author, but a single author choosing different words to communicate a different nuance. Stories that seem to be repeated may not be an example of a different source of the same story, but repetition for the purpose of storytelling.

Storytellers give different angles on a story to emphasize significant points. In fact, Hebrew poetry does this all the time; it is based on repetition and variation.

One of the assumptions of the documentary hypothesis is that the original four sources were completely consistent writings in the vocabulary they used, but that the final editor was kind of an idiot. He just put them together and he didn't realize that his sources contradict one another. He put all these things together into this mishmash of a self-contradictory text or so they say.

But, maybe the editor or the final author knew exactly what he was doing. Maybe, he was a master storyteller and everything they see as inconsistencies, or evidence of multiple authors, is actually a master storyteller using every trick at his disposal to tell his story well.

We don't have any evidence of multiple authors. We have evidence of brilliant storytelling, which, in my mind, brings us back to Moses.

Given all that we know, here's my own understanding of the book of Genesis and the Pentateuch. Moses wrote the Pentateuch.

Moses was raised and educated in Egypt. He was, therefore, a highly educated person. He likely was well-read, as well-read as anyone in his day.

And so we might wonder, did Moses use other things to write this book of Genesis? Well, maybe. Genesis 5:1 says, *This is the book of the generations of Adam*. That title is a common title in Genesis. And it's possible that the genealogy that follows was already written down and Moses was quoting from that pre-written book. That possibility could be true of all the genealogies in Genesis. How else would Moses have known who was the father of Jared, or Enoch or Methuselah? Well, he could have known by direct revelation, or certainly, he could have known because someone else had written it down before him.

Either way, the result is the same: the book of Genesis that we have before us. In fact, in Numbers 21:4, Moses explicitly quotes another book. He says, *Therefore, it is said in the book of the Wars of the Lord*, and then he quotes that book.

In the books of Kings and Chronicles, the writer does the same thing. One refrain in the Book of Kings says, *Now the rest of the acts of Rehoboam and all that he did, are they not written in the Book of The Chronicles of the Kings of Judah?*

And, 2 Chronicles 9:29 says, *Now the rest of the acts of Solomon, from first to last, are they not written in the history of Nathan the prophet, and in the prophecy of Ahijah the Shilonite, and in the visions of Iddo the seer concerning Jeroboam, the son of Nebat.*" The writer of Chronicles points us to multiple other writings that contain the story of Solomon.

And, 2 Chronicles 12:15 says, *Now the acts of Rehoboam, from first to last, are they not written in the chronicles of Shemaiah the prophet and of Iddo the seer.*"

and, 2 Chronicles 16:11, *The acts of Asa, from first to last, are written in the Book of the Kings of Judah and Israel.*

Clearly, there were other written documents which recorded the events of the kings of Israel before the Biblical writers came along. Why could that not have been the case with Moses when he sat down to write Genesis? It doesn't make him any less inspired anymore than it makes the writers of Kings and Chronicles less inspired. Moses, like any good historian possibly used some primary source material, right?

So did Luke when he wrote his gospel. He tells us in Luke 1 that he investigated the things that he was about to talk about.

What about editors? Did Moses write of his own death? Did he commend his own humility? Did he write the words before there was an Israel? And before there were kings? Or did others come along after Moses and edit what he had written?

Well, let me ask you, before we answer that question, another more important question. How will the answer to this question shape your faith?

Does it matter if Moses was edited? Cannot an editor be inspired as much as an author?

The Psalms were clearly edited. The songs were written by different people. Moses, David Solomon, Asaph, Heman, Ethan, the sons of Korah. But at some point, someone decided, hey, we should bring these together in a book. I don't know if you've ever noticed, but the songs are actually separated into five books. And at the end of each of the five books is a doxology. So Psalm 41: 13, ends, *Blessed be the Lord the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting, Amen, and Amen.* You see the same thing as a form of doxology at the end of Psalm 72, Psalm 89, Psalm 106, and Psalm 150.

Someone came along at some point and organized the Psalms as we have them today and added those doxologies to the end of each of the five books.

That doesn't make the songs any less inspired. God did that. He had the writers write the songs, and he had the editor edit the Psalms into the form in which we have them today.

What if Joshua took all of the writings that Moses had made over his lifetime, and Joshua brought them together into the five books. He could have added the section on Moses' death, together with the mourning period that followed. What if Samuel, the last of the judges and the one who anointed the first two kings of Israel, took what Moses and Joshua wrote, and then he copied it down and made some editorial comments of his own. 1 Samuel tells us, in fact, in chapter 10:25, that Samuel did write down God's law in a book that would explain the references to the kings in Israel.

So Moses, Joshua, and Samuel don't sound too far-fetched for us.

Of course, even if we don't know whether and how Moses used primary sources or who might have edited it, after the fact, that doesn't take away from divine inspiration.

God is the ultimate author of Genesis, so we can say this about it:

2 Timothy 3:16 All Scripture is breathed out by God, and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

1 Corinthians 10:11. *Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come.*

The most important thing that we can say about the book of Genesis is found in the words of Jesus in John 5: 46-47.

Jesus says, "If you believe Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote of me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?"

Ultimately, the writer of Genesis, Moses, wrote of Jesus. It's through Genesis that we hear of the seed of the woman who will crush the head of the serpent; through Genesis, that we hear of the child of promise who will bring rest. It's through Genesis, that we hear the child of Abraham who will bless the nations; and through Genesis that we hear of the substitute lamb whom God himself will provide.

We will have to wait for those things until next week. For now, let's remember to hear the Word of God. Here is the book that he has given us: the theological history that God himself has revealed that we might know him and know His Son, Jesus Christ.

In light of those things, Let's pray.

Our Father, we do pray that as we approach this book, we would approach it with expectant hearts ready to hear from you - the story that you would have us here through your servant Moses. Give us soft hearts ready to listen; expectant hearts, ready to be convicted, encouraged, changed, challenged and pointed to your Son, Jesus Christ. Open our hearts that we would be not only hearers of the Word, but doers of the Word in a way that brings you glory and honor in your world. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.