

THE THEOLOGICAL CHARACTER OF GEN 1-11 (THE PRIMEVAL HISTORY)

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Genesis 1-11, commonly called the Primeval History, has been given much detailed attention. Some see it as a “‘Prologue’ to the Pentateuch rather than as part of the main body of the work.”¹ Others describe it as “the standard example of the amalgamation of sources” which mark “events . . . set in primeval time or mythological time or in the era ‘before history.’”² It has also been described as “a broad introduction to the history, which commences with Abraham.”³ The narratives have been carved up between the J and P sources,⁴ though without any degree of agreement or consensus. Martin Noth describes it as an addition to the Pentateuch, prefixed by the Yahwist who “invested his work with that theological breath and depth that made it one of the most important components of the transmitted Pentateuch.”⁵ Rolf Rendtorff contends that the “primal history” is a hodgepodge of sagas dominated by “ideal-typical figures” (chaps. 2, 4, 6-8), “isolated mythological elements” (3:1-24; 6:1-4), “theological outlines” in narrative-like material (1:1-2:3; 9:1-17), and “genealogies” (chap. 5; chap. 10;

¹R. Norman Whybray, *Introduction to the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 29. He sees them as “universal stories” which “do not constitute a single narrative sequence.” These stories are legendary and parabolic in nature. *Ibid.*, 35.

²John J. Scullion, *Genesis: A Commentary for Students, Teachers and Preachers* (St. Paul, MN: Liturgical, 1992), 9.

³E. A. Speiser, *Genesis*, Anchor Bible, vol. 1 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), 9. Cf. Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 1 (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), xlv, who claims, “Clearly Gen 1-11 serves simply as background to the subsequent story of the patriarchs.”

⁴For example, see Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 16.

⁵Martin Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*, trans. with an introduction by Bernhard W. Anderson (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1981), 40.

11:10-32).⁶ What has not been investigated, however, is the theological character⁷ of these chapters. This paper seeks to fill that gap by discussing five such theological motifs.

Supernatural Events

First and foremost is the Creation of the heavens and the earth and all therein (Gen 1-2).⁸ All of this was created by divine fiat through the word of God. In fact, every creative act of God is introduced with the words, "And God said . . ." (1:3,6,9,11,14,20,24,27,28,29).⁹ Because God speaks, the non-existent becomes existent. Indeed,

The way of God with his world is the way of language. God speaks something new that never was before. . . .

Creation by such speech shows God's authority.¹⁰

E. A. Speiser supports this idea when he comments that here "we are given the barest statement of a sequence of facts resulting *from the fiat of the supreme and absolute master of the universe.*"¹¹

Perhaps the most captivating account of God's creative activity is the one that details the making of humanity (1:26-29; 2:7,18,21-25). Human beings are

⁶Rolf Rendtorff, *The Old Testament: An Introduction*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 132. In fact, he disposes of the JEDP sources for the Pentateuch and replaces them with six larger independent units covering: Primeval history, patriarchal history, Exodus story, Sinai experience, wilderness sojourn, and settlement in the land. *Ibid.*, 6-25.

⁷Wenham, xlv-xlvi, provides a fleeting glimpse of "the theological relationship" of chaps. 1-11 with (1) ancient Near Eastern thought, (2) Gen 12-50 and the rest of the Pentateuch, and (3) modern thought.

⁸Our interest here is not to compare and contrast the Genesis account with other ancient cosmologies. For a brief overview of that, see Speiser, 8-11, who believes that the biblical "account goes back to Babylonian prototypes" (10). Cf. Whybray, 35-37; S. G. F. Brandon, *Creation Legends of the Ancient Near East* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1963); G. F. Hasel, "The Significance of the Cosmology in Gen. 1 in Relation to Ancient Near Eastern Parallels," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 10 (1972): 1-20; *idem*, "The Polemic Nature of the Genesis Cosmology," *Evangelical Quarterly* (1974): 81-102; W. H. Shea, "A Comparison of Narrative Elements in Ancient Mesopotamian Creation-Flood Stories with Gen. 1-9," *Origins* 11 (1984): 9-29; T. Frymer-Kensky, "The Atrahasis Epic and Its Significance for Our Understanding of Gen. 1-9," *Biblical Archaeologist* 40 (1977): 147-55.

⁹Cf. Ps 33:6,9. Susan Niditch, *Ancient Israelite Religion* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 53, describes this as "the magisterial word of God, which is immediate, powerful and unchallenged."

¹⁰Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis, Interpretation* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 25.

¹¹Speiser, 8 (emphasis mine).

manifestly superior to the rest of creation because they were “made in the image and likeness of God” (1:26),¹² given dominion over all other living things (1:27), formed by hand of God (2:7), and designed to communicate through intelligent speech (2:23). Walter Brueggemann’s comment is perceptive,

Human creation is treated as superior and non-human as subordinate (1:25-30; 2:15): human creatures are designated to *order, rule, and care for* the other creatures; creatures are to *obey and to be responsive to* human creatures.¹³

Another supernatural event is the talking serpent, which deceives Eve into disobedience (3:1-6). This episode introduces other narratives dealing with evil, which describe factors on a supernatural scale. These include the following: the extreme evil of people that portends the Flood, where it rained for forty days continuously and the water continued to cover the earth for another 150 days (7:24); the death of all living things, except for those who were in the ark (7:21); and the building of the tower of Babel as people exalted themselves (11:1-4).

Disobedience and Evil

The account of creation is followed immediately by that of the fall of humanity (chap. 3). By not resisting temptation, the woman’s full senses were tantalized (3:6) and she refused to be obedient to the divine command, “You may freely eat of all the trees of the garden. But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat” (2:16,17a).¹⁴ Both Adam and Eve made a willful, intelligent decision to act contrary to God’s imperative (3:6). This singular disobedient act opened the floodgates to the consequences of evil. These include: shame—for the first time they realized their nakedness and became ashamed (3:7); hiding from God, as they sensed the loss of their identity (3:8-9); blame, each refusing to accept responsibility for their actions (3:10-13); and eventually, death (5:5). Herein was the fulfillment of the divine pronouncement, “In the day that you eat of it, you shall surely die” (2:17b).

From this point onward, the Primeval History catalogues several heinous acts of disobedience and evil. Gen 4 records Cain’s brutal murder of his brother Abel, such that God Himself recoils in horror: “The voice of your brother’s blood cries

¹²For a compact discussion on this, see Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 147-58. Whybray, 8, is certainly persuasive: “Whatever may be the precise meaning of these terms . . . , they set mankind apart from all the other creatures and put them in a unique relationship with God himself. In none of the other creation stories with which this story can be compared is such a high status attributed to mankind.”

¹³Brueggemann, 11-12 (emphasis his).

¹⁴Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible quotations are translations by the author, with emphasis indicated by italics.

unto me from the ground" (4:10). In his anger, "Cain assumes to himself power over life and kills his brother, Abel,"¹⁵ who, unlike Cain, was careful to follow the divine prescription in bringing the offering required (4:3-7).

Further, the evil of human beings is described as being beyond the superlative:

And God saw that the wickedness of mankind was great in the earth, and that every *imagination of the thoughts of his heart* was only *evil* continually. And the LORD was very *sorry* that He had made people on the earth, and *he grieved deeply* [lit., to His heart]. (6:5-6)

Again,

The earth was corrupt before God and the earth was filled with *violence*. And God looked upon the earth, and indeed it was corrupt; for everyone had corrupted his way on the earth. (6:11-12)

Two ideas here warrant investigation. The first concerns the "eruption of sin,"¹⁶ which from the Fall "had grown like an avalanche."¹⁷ This is highlighted by the vocabulary of the passage. *Yāser* ("imagination"), from *yṣr*, to "form," "mold," or "fashion" (cf. 2:7,8; Isa 29:16), denotes purpose or frame. In this context it bespeaks a determined purpose or mental framework; that which is molded by the mind. *Mahṣ^ēbā* (thoughts) often suggests forethought and premeditation, while *lēb* (heart) signifies the center or seat of emotion, understanding, and the will. All of these were contaminated and corrupted, such that, from inception, every idea was "intrinsically 'evil' (*ra*'), a comprehensive and general term of condemnation, especially for things disapproved by God."¹⁸ Further, the earth was filled with *hāmās* (violence). This word does not refer to the fury and ferocity of natural catastrophes. It speaks of "extreme wickedness."¹⁹ It denotes brute force, the exploitation of the weak by the strong, the poor by the wealthy. It designates the "cold-blooded and unscrupulous infringement of the personal rights of others, motivated by greed and hate and often making use of physical violence and brutality."²⁰ Living things were to have filled the earth (1:22,28), but now violence fills the earth. Indeed, "Few texts in the Old Testament are so explicit and all-

¹⁵Michael D. Guinan, *The Pentateuch* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1990), 27.

¹⁶Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, Old Testament Library, rev. and trans. John Bowden (London: SCM, 1972), 117.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸Wenham, 144.

¹⁹R. Laird Harris, "*hāmās*," *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 1:297.

²⁰H. Haag, "*hāmās*," *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. J. Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, trans. John T. Willis (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 4:482.

embracing as this in specifying the extent of human sinfulness and depravity.²¹ In short, the people had an insatiable appetite for evil.

The second idea concerns God's sorrow and grief for making mankind. The word *niḥām̄tī* (I am sorry; 6:6,7), translated in the KJV as "it repenteth me,"²² is better understood in terms of regret. God regretted that He had made mankind. The word *wāyyit 'āṣṣēb* (and he grieved deeply) expresses "the most intense form of human emotion, a mixture of rage and bitter anguish."²³ Gerhard von Rad elucidates,

In daring contrast to what is said about the human heart there follows a word about what takes place in God's heart: grief, affliction, and disappointment in man . . . This strong emotion of God indicates that God did not make the decision to destroy all life in unconcerned, cold indifference.²⁴

The evil of paternal disrespect is noted in the closing verses of Gen 9, where it is reported that Ham looked upon the nakedness of his drunken father (v. 22). For this his son Canaan was cursed (v. 25).²⁵

Finally, Gen 11:1-9 decries the disobedience and evil of those who, in apparent defiance of God's promise not to destroy the earth (8:21), were determined to build a great city, a great tower (of Babel), and a great name (11:4). By this action, they "attempted to defy God . . . , so making themselves as powerful as God himself (11:6)."²⁶ Michael Guinan's conclusion merits attention here:

While the modalities vary, the sin in each of these stories is one and the same; as humans we overstep the limits of creaturehood and play God The snake spells this out clearly for Adam and Eve, "You will become (like) gods!"²⁷

²¹Wenham, 144.

²²The root is used thirty-eight times, mostly with God as subject. The word normally used to denote human repentance, that is, turning from sin to God, is *śub*. God is free of sin, so when He "repents" (cf. Exod 32:14; Judg 2:18; 1 Sam 15:11) it means that "he relents or changes his dealings with men according to his sovereign purposes." Marvin R. Wilson, "*nāḥam*," *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 2:571.

²³Wenham, 144.

²⁴Von Rad, 118.

²⁵This is the first place where the contrast between honorable and dishonorable conduct of sons toward their father is mentioned. It is also the first place where the role of the sons affects the course of history. See Claus Westermann, *Genesis: A Practical Commentary*, trans. David K. Green (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 69.

²⁶Whybray, 3.

²⁷Guinan, 27-28.

Punitive Judgment

The consequence of disobedience and evil was punitive judgment following a “legal process” where God is judge.²⁸ The Primeval History denotes this in every instance where there is a refusal to obey God. In quick succession, the narrative describes the different punishments placed on all parties involved in the Fall. Gen 3:14-15 denotes the curse placed on the serpent; sorrows are multiplied for the woman, and the perfect unity and equality with her husband is disrupted (3:16); because of his disobedience, the earth is cursed for Adam’s sake. Life becomes a struggle as the earth yields thorns and thistles and mankind will have to sweat to make a living (3:17-19a). The finality of judgment is seen in the declaration of death, “You were made out of soil and you will once again turn into soil” (3:19b Contemporary English Version [CEV]). This is the fulfillment of 2:17b, the divine declaration, “In the day that you eat of it, you shall surely die.”

While Adam and Eve did not collapse that day in a lifeless heap, the process of death had started. Before this first sin, the creation called forth by God was in perfect peace and harmony; everything existed in right relationship. Those relationships were now broken. Indeed, “Death is the breaking and collapse of all these relationships on all their levels. Death is not just a moment at the end, but a whole realm of brokenness that affects our lives on all levels.”²⁹

Cain is adjudged guilty and receives a curse for his brother’s murder. The very earth which drank his brother’s blood is now cursed for him (4:11). Indeed, “When you work the land, it will not yield its strength to you. You shall be a *fugitive* and a *wanderer* in the earth” (v. 12). Verses 12 and 14 are the only places in the Hebrew Bible where the expression “*fugitive and wanderer*” is found. As part of the curse formula, it denotes “a driven, hunted existence.”³⁰ The evil deed demanded divine attention and action.

Certainly the Flood qualifies as punitive judgment. God declared:

“I’ll destroy every living creature on earth! I’ll wipe out people, animals, birds, and reptiles. I’m sorry I even made them. . . . Cruelty and violence have spread everywhere. Now I’m going to destroy the whole earth and all its people.” (6:7,11 CEV)

Retributive justice was meted out to the people because of the magnitude of their evil (6:5). The offenses of humanity were so terrible that God was sorry that He had created them (v. 6). Social order had broken down; the “violence” (*ḥāmās*) of the people was superfluous. This indicates that people had gone beyond

²⁸Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 253.

²⁹Guinan, 28.

³⁰Westermann, *Genesis: A Practical Commentary*, 34.

repentance. God was justified in destroying them. The totality of the judgment is heard in Gen 7:21-23:

And *all* flesh died that moved on the earth: birds, cattle, beasts, and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth, and *all* humanity; *all* in whose nostrils was the breath of life; *all* that was on the dry land died. And he wiped out *all* living things that were upon the face of the earth: human beings, cattle, creeping things, and the birds of the sky; they were *all* wiped out from the earth.

The cosmic order collapsed. The created order was broken, and there was a virtual return to *tōhū wābōhū* (Gen 1:2). In effect, the Flood reversed creation.

Punitive judgment is also witnessed in the dispersement of the people at the Tower of Babel. In their hubris, they pursued plans to exalt themselves by raising “a city and a tower with its top in the heavens” (11:4). The consequences of this were far-reaching, as God Himself indicates: “These people are working together because they all speak the same language. *This is just the beginning. Soon they will be able to do whatever they want*” (11:6 CEV, emphasis mine).

Therefore, the Lord “came down,” that is, intervened in human history. The builders were intent on making a name of glory for themselves, but God’s will nullified their plans, and the only name they received was an inglorious one, Babel, which bears “a pejorative connotation.”³¹ Humanity intended to avoid scattering, but God effected precisely this measure. Even here the curse of death is smelled, for now the people cannot communicate with each other in order to foster good relationships.

In every instance of punishment, God speaks the sentence. But the judgment is not arbitrary or imposed from the outside. Guinan’s comment is persuasive and relevant:

The punishment flows from and expresses the inner nature of sin. We humans are created from the life-giving word of God and breathe with the breath of God (2:7). To reject God is to turn our back on the source of our life; it is to reach out and turn off that air supply. What is the cutting off of life but death? Since we have broken our relationship with God, the source of life, our relationships with ourselves, other persons, the animal world, natural creation itself, all begin to come apart. In place of life, peace and justice, we return to chaos. . . . Our last breath is simply the last step.³²

³¹U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1984), 248.

³²Guinan, 30.

Salvation

God provides opportunity for salvation to the disobedient whose actions incur His just punishment. In fact, in the curse placed on the serpent,³³ God introduces the provision for salvation. Gen 3:15 records, "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; it shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel." Commonly called the Protouangellion, this underscores the *divine initiative*.³⁴ God takes the first step to effect this salvation. It is also noteworthy that the promise of salvation is given *before* exacting the judgment on humanity.

The divine initiative is to be noted in Gen 4:9, where God questioned Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?" Cain's insolence is seen in his peevish answer, "Am I my brother's keeper?" God certainly knew the answer, as v. 10 indicates. But even as the punishment is given (vv. 11-12) and Cain laments that it is "greater than I can bear" (vv. 13-14), God's mercy is revealed. This is pictured in two ways: (1) Cain is not killed (no *lex talionis*); (2) God puts an identifying mark on him to prevent his slaying and threatens vengeance on anyone who should kill him (vv. 14-15).³⁵ There are to be no vendettas. "No human being has the right to interfere with the execution of God's punishment."³⁶

The Noah cycle (chaps. 6-9)³⁷ demarcates several points of God's salvific activity. Despite the evil of human beings which caused the forfeiture of their lives, "Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord" (6:6). He "was a just man,

³³Commenting on the fact that the devil, through the medium of the serpent, provoked the fall of mankind, Herbert Lockyer, *All the Messianic Prophecies of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), 59, says, "He was the first to learn of a Deliver who would come to destroy his devilish works. To him was given the initial promise and prophecy of redemption from the sin he had brought into God's fair universe."

³⁴Contra Whybray, 34, who claims that "God appears to be reacting at every turn to what mankind is doing rather than taking the initiative." See also my article, "The Remnant and the New Covenant in the Book of Jeremiah," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 34 (1996): 242-44. Whybray, 30, is correct, however, when he states, "The most obvious difference between the Israelite 'universal history' and the others is that the Israelite stories . . . are monotheistic. All the others are polytheistic."

³⁵Verses 16-17 establish Cain's progeny and the building of a city, implicitly indicating the fulfillment of God's word.

³⁶Westermann, *Genesis: A Practical Commentary*, 35. He is also correct in noting "that the mark was placed specifically and only on Cain and cannot be extended to some tribal grouping or by extension, race of people." Indeed, "the form of the mark is unknown, and cannot be inferred from the narrative." *Ibid.*

³⁷Brueggemann, 15, declares, "This cycle presents the sorry picture of old creation and the beginning of new creation. This cycle is structured in the reverse order from the 'Adam cycle [chaps. 1-5].' That cycle began with affirmation and ended in indictment. This cycle begins in indictment in 6:5-8 and is resolved in 8:20-22. The decision to destroy in 6:11-13 is resolved in 9:1-17."

perfect in his generations, and Noah walked with God" (v. 7). He was found "righteous" before God in that generation (7:10). It is noteworthy that "God's initiative of grace towards Noah is mentioned *before* there is any reference to Noah's faith and righteousness."³⁸ God determined to destroy the earth but provided for the salvation and safety of the just and also the preservation and continuity of life on the earth (6:17-21; 7:2-4). The instrument of safety was the ark, built according to God's specifications (6:14-16), and guaranteeing protection, for "Noah only remained alive and those that were with him in the ark" (7:23b).

Five points of significance are to be underscored in this narrative with regards to God's salvific activity:

1. *Divine Action.* The absolute destruction caused by the flood is described in Gen 7: 21-24. Gen 8:1, however, explicates salvation, "And God remembered Noah, and every living creature, and all the cattle that were with him in the ark. And God caused a wind to blow over the earth and the waters receded." The root *zkr* (remembers), does not mean simply bringing something back to one's mental attention (as though God had forgotten Noah and the others), but is intentional in speaking of action. It pinpoints "inward mental acts accompanied by appropriate external acts."³⁹ This is understood in that God "remembered Noah," and immediately he acted by causing a wind⁴⁰ to effect the recession of the waters. Gordon Wenham correctly states, "When God remembers, He acts"⁴¹ Bernhard W. Anderson shows how this idea is depicted in a chiasmic outline or palistrophe, which demonstrates the effect of God's remembering:

³⁸David Atkinson, *The Message of Genesis 1-11: The Dawn of Creation* (Leicester, England, and Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1990), 137 (emphasis mine). He adds that in vv. 5-7 the stress is placed on "man . . . man . . . man" "Noah is part of the world of sinful humanity. It was within this sinful humanity that 'grace found Noah'" (137-38).

³⁹Thomas E. McComiskey, "zākar," *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 1:241.

⁴⁰The verb 'br (to blow) is used in the *Hiphil* (causative) form.

⁴¹Wenham, 184.

Transitional introduction (6:9-10)

1. Violence in God's creation (6:11-12)
2. First divine address: resolution to destroy (6:13-22)
3. Second divine address: command to enter the ark (7:1-10)
 4. Beginning of the flood (7:11-16)
 5. The rising flood waters (7:17-24)
- GOD'S REMEMBRANCE OF NOAH [8:1a]**
6. The receding flood waters (8:1-5)
7. The drying of the earth (8:6-14)
8. Third divine address: command to leave the ark (8:15-19)
9. God's resolution to preserve order (8:20-22)
10. Fourth divine address: covenant blessing and peace (9:1-17)

Transitional conclusion (9:18-19).⁴²

Noah and the others were not saved because of their obedience or ingenuity in constructing the ark (though both were important). They were saved precisely by divine initiative and action. Noah, and those who elected to join with him, had "found grace in the eyes of the LORD" (6:8).

2. *New Creation.* The formulaic expression, "Be fruitful and multiply" (*p^erú úr^ebú*), is issued three times to the survivors of the flood (8:16-17; 9:1,7). This divine imperative undoubtedly points back to the Creation account where the same divine mandate is given (Gen 1:22, 28). This command, with its attendant blessing to repopulate the earth⁴³ signals a fresh start for humanity, a new opportunity, and a new creation.⁴⁴ Also, the governance of humanity over the animal kingdom is reflected in 1:28 and 9:2. Further, God's provision of food for mankind to eat in 9:3 reflects the same idea as does 1:29. Finally, 1:27 and 9:6b parallel each other in that both describe mankind as being made in the image of God. Wenham depicts the creation ideas as paralleled in Gen 1 and 9 as follows:⁴⁵

⁴²Bernhard W. Anderson, "From Analysis to Synthesis: The Interpretation of Gen. 1-11," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 97 (1978): 38. Cf. Gordon J. Wenham, "The Coherence of the Flood Narrative," *Vetus Testamentum* 28 (1978): 337-39.

⁴³Westermann, *Genesis: A Practical Commentary*, 10, believes that this "blessing links the primal events (1:28; 9:1-2; 8:17) with the patriarchal history (35:11; 47:27; 28:3; 48:4) and with the history of the nation (Exod. 1:7)."

⁴⁴Verses 18-19 implicitly advocate the idea of regeneration, since they describe those exiting the ark as being paired: Noah and his wife; their sons and their wives; and every living thing after their kind. This is suggestive that all living things were ready to execute the divine mandate.

⁴⁵Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 192.

9:2 “The fear of you . . . is upon everything”	//	1:28 “rule over every living creature”
9:3 “. . . yours to eat: as I gave you the green vegetation”	//	1:29 “I have given you . . . for food”
9:6b “in the image of God he made man”	//	1:27 “God created man in his image”

3. *Worship*. Immediately upon exiting the ark, “Noah built an altar to the Lord. And he took from every clean animal and from every clean bird, and offered burnt offerings on the altar” (8:20). This act of reverence and worship⁴⁶ met with divine approval as God solemnly declared not to annihilate life on earth again (v. 21). It must not be conceived that Noah’s worship prompted this divine response; rather, what must be understood is that the promise to maintain life on the earth is part of the covenant ideal which God had initiated even *before* the flood (6:18).

4. *Covenant*. This is central to the Noah cycle. The word *b’rît* (covenant) is found eight times (6:18; 9:9,11,12,13,15,16,17) and is mentioned here for the first time in the Hebrew Bible. Pivotal to this idea is the fact that God initiates the covenant. Once again the *divine initiative* comes into prominence. Further, the covenant in this cycle is used only within the context of salvation. It has a positive intentionality. Finally, it has far-reaching implications. The covenant is made with Noah and his progeny (6:18; 7:9) but is effective for “all living things” (9:10,12), for “perpetual generations” (9:12), and for the entire “earth” (9:13,17); further, it is an “everlasting covenant” (9:17).⁴⁷

5. *Promise*. The essence of the Noahic covenant is God’s promise of the continuity and perpetuity of life on the earth. Gen 9:11 records this fact:

“I will establish my *covenant* with you” [Covenant].
 “All flesh *will not be cut off anymore* by the waters of a flood;
 and there will not be a flood again to destroy the earth” [Promise].⁴⁸

The ratification of the covenant is seen in the sign of the rainbow (9:12-13). Every time the rainbow appears in the storm cloud, it provides luminescent evidence that God has taken the initiative to save humanity and is honoring His

⁴⁶Worship, as a human response to God’s salvation, triumph, and victory on behalf of His people is a celebrated fact in the Hebrew Bible. Cf. Exod 15; Josh 8:30-35; Judg 4-5; 1 Sam 7, especially v. 12; 2 Sam 6:12-18; 2 Chron 20:26-29.

⁴⁷For an understanding of God’s covenant with Israel as a central theme in understanding the OT, see Ernest W. Nicholson, *God and His People: Covenant and Theology in the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986).

⁴⁸The CEV puts it well, “I promise every living creature that the earth and those living on it will never again be destroyed by a flood.”

covenant promise to preserve life on the earth. It is the assurance that God “remembers [His] covenant” (9:15) and is acting in a decisive manner in keeping His promise. It functions, therefore, as a visible manifestation that human beings can trust God’s covenant commitment.

The sign of the rainbow is of great significance. Usually signs are given to remind humanity of God’s presence and of their obligations to the covenant. For example, circumcision, as the sign of the Abrahamic covenant, functioned to remind Abraham of his responsibilities. However, “The rainbow is a sign that is seen by *man* but serves to remind *God* of His promises.”⁴⁹ Anderson’s conclusion about the dramatic movement of the passage is apropos:

Thus the *Urgeschichte* in its final form displays an overall design: a dramatic movement from the original harmony of creation, through the violent disruption of that order and the near return to chaos, and finally to a new creation under the rainbow sign of the everlasting covenant.⁵⁰

Salvation may also be glimpsed in the story of the Tower of Babel. Far from being “a negative and menacing note,”⁵¹ it demonstrates God’s salvific activity. Since “nothing will be restrained from them which they have imagined to do” (11:6), people were increasing their independence from God. He knew that humanity’s hubris, which involved “the whole earth” (11:1),⁵² could place their very existence in jeopardy. Therefore, God confused their speech and scattered⁵³ them abroad, instead of destroying them *in toto* again. This episode, therefore, embraces God’s earlier promise not to decimate the earth (8:21-22; 9:11,15). It affirms His claim and concretizes human trust in Him. And while the scattering indicates judgment, it is also the means by which the people escaped annihilation. Judgment and salvation are, as it were, two sides of the same coin.

On the whole then, we can agree with von Rad’s evaluation that Gen 1-11 demonstrates “the growing power of sin in the world,” which is paralleled by the equally powerful “growth of grace.”⁵⁴ “The story of the Fall, the Cain narrative,

⁴⁹Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 195. Cf. M. V. Fox, “The Sign of the Covenant,” *Revue Biblique* 81 (1974): 557-96.

⁵⁰Anderson, 39.

⁵¹Whybray, 3.

⁵²Whybray, 35, is correct “that the Tower of Babel account contains no proper names and mentions no individuals at all,” which is particularly notable after the plethora of proper names in chap. 10. The builders are curiously called “the whole earth” (v. 1) and “they” (v. 2). It is true that 10:9-10 tell us that Nimrod founded Babylon, but it remains true that in the account of the building of the tower, no personal names are given.

⁵³The irony here is that “scattering” is precisely what the people were attempting to avoid (11:4).

⁵⁴*Ibid.*

and the Flood story all show God's redemptive activity, forgiving and sustaining at the same time as he punishes."⁵⁵

Genealogies

The Primeval History contains four genealogical lists:⁵⁶ 4:17-22, the descendants of Cain; 5:1-32, the *toledoth* of Adam; 10:1-32, the *toledoth* of the

⁵⁵Gerhard von Rad, *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays*, trans. E. W. Trueman Dicken (London: SCM, 1984), 64-65. He adds, "Only in the story of the building of the tower does the divine judgment appear to be the last word, when the nations are scattered and the unity of the human race is lost." Ibid. It is evident that I disagree with this position.

⁵⁶There are two types of genealogies in the OT: ascending genealogies, which usually have a linking formula, "x the son of y" (Gen 10:1-7), and descending genealogies, which commonly follow the formula, "x begat y" (Gen 4:17-22; 5:3-32; 10:8-32; 11:10-29). The first is generally used to trace ancestral links back to an important figure in the past, as in Gen 10:1-7 where Shem, Ham, and Japheth go back to Noah (10:1), the father of the new beginning, the new creation. The latter type generally includes information beyond the ancestral links, such as their ages (5:4-21; 11:10-26) and actions (10:8-11, which deals with Nimrod, who first built in the land of Shinar, the same place where the Tower of Babel was later erected; cf. 11:2-9). See T. C. Mitchell and Alan R. Millard, "Genealogy," *New Bible Dictionary*, 3d ed., ed. I. Howard Marshall, A[llan] R. Millard, J.I. Packer, D.J. Wiseman (Leicester, England, and Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1996), 400.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to deal with the thorny issues of the arrangement and differences in numbers between the MT and other ancient witnesses. For a brief overview, see R. R. Wilson, *Genealogy and History in the Old Testament: A Study of the Form and Function of the Old Testament Genealogies in their Near Eastern Context* (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1972); G. F. Hasel, "The Genealogies of Genesis 5 and 11 and Their Alleged Babylonian Background," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 16 (1978): 361-74; idem, "Genesis 5 and 11: Chronogenealogies in the Biblical History of Beginnings," *Origins* 7 (1980): 23-37; idem, "The Meaning of the Chronogenealogies of Genesis 5 and 11," *Origins* 7 (1980): 53-70; K. Luke, "The Genealogies in Genesis 5," *Indian Theological Studies* 18 (1981): 223-44; F. H. Cryer, "The Interrelationships of Gen. 5:32; 11:10-11 and the Chronology of the Flood," *Biblica* 66 (1985): 241-61; Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 121-25; 248-53.

sons of Noah; and 11:10-29, the *toledoth* of Shem.⁵⁷ These genealogical tables serve several functions:

1. They “link the narratives together in a chronological series.”⁵⁸

2. They provide details relevant to the people and culture of that time. For example, in the list of 4:17-22, we find that Cain built a city named after his son, Enoch; Jabal was the progenitor of nomads; Jubal was the father of musicians; and Tubal-Cain was a skilled artisan in bronze and iron. These arts were all beneficial to the sociological make-up of ancient societies.

3. They are “an attempt to account for the origins and geographical locations of the nations of the world”⁵⁹ (cf. chap.10).

4. The final list (11:10-29) introduces Abram (later Abraham), the father of the Patriarchal History. He is the founder of the nation whose ancestry consumes Gen 12-50. As such, this genealogical table provides the link that affords a sense of continuity⁶⁰ between the Primeval and Patriarchal History. Wenham describes it this way:

However we look at it, 11:10-26 stands very much as a bridge passage between the primeval history and the patriarchal stories. The contents too point in the same direction. It traces the chosen line from Shem, the son of Noah, down to Abram, son of Terah. Like chap. 5, which links Adam and Noah, this chapter runs from Noah’s sons to Abram. Each stands at the head of a new epoch in world history: Adam, the first man; Noah, head of the new post-flood humanity; Abraham, father of Israel the chosen people.⁶¹

This sense of continuity is important to the structure of the book.⁶²

An interesting fact concerning the genealogical tables in Gen 5 and 11 is the extraordinarily long ages of the patriarchs. It may very well be that the singular purpose of mentioning these ages was “to emphasize the mortality in spite of [the]

⁵⁷This introductory formula, “These are the generations of” or “This is the account of” (*’āleh tôl’ dā*), occurs several times in the book of Genesis: 2:4, the only place where it is used without being associated with personal names; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10,27; 25:12; 25:19; 36:1,9; and 37:2. Since its usage is fairly equally distributed between both Primeval History (chaps. 1-11) and Patriarchal History (chaps. 12-50), it is argued that this expression is one indicator of the literary unity of the book. Further, since it is used as a connective link in the history of the patriarchs, there is no reason to doubt the historical value of the narratives in chaps. 1-11. See Herbert Wolf, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Pentateuch* (Chicago: Moody, 1991), 82.

⁵⁸Whybray, 3.

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰Brueggemann, 15, underscores that “chapters 10-11 occupy a transitional position. . . . They make a shift from *primeval history* to *world history*.”

⁶¹Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 249.

⁶²Whybray, 3.

vigorous longevity of these Patriarchs, thus bearing out one result of the Fall.”⁶³ Indeed, these genealogies contribute to the picture of death. We may note that initially, these tables list the “long, long lives of people, but then the life-spans get shorter and shorter. In other words, the power of death is getting stronger; it grabs humans sooner and sooner.”⁶⁴

Conclusion

The Primeval History is not to be regarded merely as an introduction to the book of Genesis or to the rest of the Pentateuch. It has sound theological character, as has been explicated in five motifs: supernatural events, disobedience and evil, judgment, salvation, and chronologies. In fact, these same themes are found in the wider context of the book of Genesis and the Pentateuch as a whole. The theological connections, therefore, between the Primeval History and the Patriarchal History (and the rest of the Pentateuch) will make for further fruitful study.

⁶³Mitchell and Millard, 400.

⁶⁴Guinan, 29.