

## CRITICAL ISSUES IN THE BOOK OF GENESIS

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### **Introduction**

Genesis comes from the Hebrew ‘Bereshit’ which is translated to mean the beginning of something or formation of something. Genesis is that biblical book that gives an account of how the world came into being and the origin of all species. The book of Genesis is one of the books in the Hebrew bible that has raised critical questions in the world of biblical scholarship. These questions have led various biblical scholars to investigate and study the book of Genesis in its depths. Biblical scholars are not in agreement about these issues. The following piece of discussion seeks to discuss the critical issues in the book of Genesis considering what different scholars mention about those issues. The article will discuss the following issues: authorship, date, creation stories, historicity, theological themes, women in Genesis, flood narratives, Genesis and the Ancient Near Eastern Traditions, inconsistencies and many other issues that are going to follow.

### **Authorship**

The question who wrote the book of Genesis is one of the most crucial questions that has provoked many biblical scholars. Generally, traditionally it was believed that it was Moses who wrote the first five books of the Hebrew bible. However, this has been an issue of concern among biblical scholars since the position that Moses wrote the book of Genesis is not a convincing one. Ceresko in his book, “Introduction to the Old Testament” quotes Richard Simon questioning the idea that Moses is the author of the Pentateuch which includes the book of Genesis which is under scrutiny in this paper. He mentions that there are incongruities in the creation and the flood stories that are in Genesis. Looking at Genesis 1:26-27 and Genesis 2:4,7, he says that, “ We now understand that these differences in detail between the two creation accounts reflect two sources that have been woven together in these chapters.<sup>1</sup> The argument that Ceresko brings about in his analysis of the book of Genesis shows that this was not the work of one man or source, but two sources are at play. Whybray also affirms what Ceresko notes by saying that there is evidence of more than one source

used in the construction of the biblical narratives in the book of Genesis, there is a combination of two or more sources (14).

F J Sheed also argues that “Genesis is a compilation.”<sup>2</sup> Sheed is of this view because of the same reasons raised by Ceresko and Whybray which are lack of a consistent story that could have been written by one person that is Moses in this case. Therefore, from the above criticisms of the traditional view that Moses is the author of the book of Genesis and the whole of Pentateuch, it is clear that he is not. There are various sources at play which are trying to account for the beginning of a story of a people. Hence Moses cannot be attributed to be the author of Genesis. This will lead one to the documentary hypothesis by Wellhausen which will be discussed on the critical issues on the creation and flood stories.

Moreover, the question of dating of the writing of the book of Genesis rises questions whether Moses is the author of the Pentateuch. Biblical scholars have proposed that considering the time Genesis could have been written, it cannot be Moses who can be said to be the author of such narrative. According to Sheed, the information that is in the Pentateuch was written years later after the time of Moses. Sheed possess crucial question in giving a critique of Moses’ authorship of Genesis, he asks, “what could Moses in the thirteenth century or the compiler in the sixth, know of the beginnings of the human race thirty thousand years or hundred years before?”. He goes on to mention that the compilation of the book of Genesis is believed by biblical scholars that it took place near the end of the Babylonian exile that is around 500BCE. Clifford and Murphy in the Jerome biblical commentary argue that “These stories have been written and edited for different generations...”. If this is the case, it would be impossible for Moses to have been the author of the book of Genesis because during this period, Moses was long dead and he couldn’t have survived all these generation as Murphy and Clifford puts it. Sheed does not deny that Moses plays a prominent role in the Pentateuch, but that does not mean that he is the author. Whybray N supports this by mentioning that the book of Genesis even talks about “persons who lived and events that took place before Moses was born”.<sup>3</sup> Rast W. E mentions that the composition of the book of Genesis did not take place in one moment but it was composed through stages and in different centuries.<sup>4</sup> Gunkel emphasizes the point that

what is written in the Pentateuch was passed to generations orally and it was not committed to writing for many centuries.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, considering the possible dates that the book of Genesis could have been committed to writing, Moses cannot be said to be the author of the book of Genesis.

### **Inconsistencies in some stories in Genesis**

Furthermore, another critical issue that has been raised on the book of Genesis is that there are two creation stories. The stories found in Genesis Chapter 1 and Genesis Chapter 2 talk of the same thing that is the origins of the universe but in a different manner. Whybray commenting on Genesis 2 mentions that, “It is evident that this narrative, which could stand by itself as a complete and independent story, has taken up themes and motifs quite different from those employed in Chapter 1”.<sup>6</sup> This takes us to the documentary hypothesis by J Wellhausen who argued that in the writing of the biblical narratives especially the books of the Law (Torah) there were four major sources that were at play which came from different traditions. These sources are ‘J- Yahwist/ Jehovist, E- Elohist, P- Priestly and the D- Deuteronomistic.’<sup>7</sup> These two stories of how things came to be show that there were not written by a single writer. Morgenstern discusses this issue of Genesis as it is commented by Shwally. He notes that Shwally observes that the conceptions of Yahweh in the two narratives are different. In Genesis 1 God is depicted as a transcendental being who creates all things by the word of mouth. In her words Morgenstern noted that, “The conception of a deity so transcendental and spiritual that he creates merely by uttering his divine fiat, “Let such and such be”. This for Morgenstern differs with the concept that is depicted in Genesis chapter 2 in which God is more of an anthropomorphic conception of God. Morgenstern continues to say that the story in Genesis 2, “is radically different from the conception of a deity makes and fashions things, some of them even in His own image” (171). Ceresko noted that in chapter 2 of Genesis, that it is the J source that depicts a God who is near to His creatures in their day to day living.<sup>8</sup> The two theological ideas brought in the two creation stories show that there are inconsistencies within the book of Genesis and which account can be taken to be the true one and the reliable one.

Moreover, biblical scholarship has also posed some questions on the

flood stories in Genesis. These stories leave a biblical scholar with divergent theologies. In Genesis there are two flood stories that are found in Genesis 6 and 7. Sheed notes that there is evidence of the works of two sources which are the J and E. These two sources left the stories unsettled at the end. In Genesis 6 Noah is said to have been instructed to “Of all living creatures you shall bring two of every kind in the ark...” (Genesis 6:19). In another account he is instructed to “Of every clean animal, take with you seven pairs...of the unclean animals, one pair...” (Genesis 7:2). These two accounts show the inconsistencies that are there, and this leads scholars to debate which one of these accounts is the reliable one.

### **Historicity**

Moreover, the historicity of the book of Genesis is also doubted. It is not clear whether what is in the book of Genesis depicts what actually happened in the beginning of time. It seems that the book of Genesis tells a story of trying to give an account of the beginning of the universe. If it is a historical story, one can ask the question who was there when the Genesis took place? Also, questions have been raised whether there are extra biblical materials that support the historicity of the book of Genesis. Most scholars tend to believe that the stories in the book of Genesis, especially the first part of it are more of mythical and sagas than historical stories. Morgenstern cements this by mentioning that, “... practically all scholars are agreed as to the dependence of the story in its principal details upon the great Babylonian creation myth”<sup>9</sup> This points to the fact that the Genesis story is based on a myth that was circulating in Babylon. McKenzie J L in his article “Myth and Old Testament” argues that, “It is not a tenable view that God in revealing Himself also revealed directly and in detail the truth about such things as creation and the fall of man; the very presence of so many mythical elements in their traditions is enough to eliminate such a view”<sup>10</sup>

The argument brought by McKenzie points to the idea that what is in the book of Genesis did not actually happen but there are myths told in a quest to try to communicate certain theological themes such as the fall of the human person and trying to explain why people die.

In addition to the above, however Thomas Horne seems to hold different

views with regards to the historicity of the book of Genesis. He believes that what is in the book of Genesis happened. According to Horne, “The style of these chapters, as indeed, of the whole book of Genesis, is strictly historical, and betrays no vestige whatever of allegorical or figurative description; this is so evident to anyone that reads with attention, as to need no proof”.<sup>11</sup>

However, Horne disputes the allegations laid against the book of Genesis that it is allegorical or that it is a myth by the way the first eleven chapters are written. For him, he tries to scrutinize the language that is used, and he argues that it is not language of an allegory or a myth. Looking at these two divergent views, one can argue that the first eleven chapters of the book of Genesis cannot be taken as historical accounts as scholars like Morgenstern and McKenzie have put it. One can put the question that if it is a historical account, who was there who witnessed this taking place and are there archeological evidence that can be put forward to support this? Thus, although there are disagreements among biblical scholars, one can doubt the historicity of Genesis but that it is a story that is said to pass on a certain theological message.

### **Genesis and the Ancient Near Eastern writings and traditions**

Moving on looking at the biblical narratives in Genesis such as creation and flood stories one can note that some of them look the same with some of the Ancient Near Eastern stories and legends. This has led biblical scholars to question whether what is in the book of Genesis was unique to the stories of the Israelite people or they were borrowed. Scholars have argued for and against the influence of the creational stories from the ancient near Eastern traditions like the Egyptian and the Babylonian. Gunkel asserts that the creation stories in Genesis and the legend of Enuma Elish have slight things in common such that one cannot conclude that they were influenced by them. His argument is mainly based on the concept of God that is derived from Genesis and the Enuma Elish. Gunkel says in Genesis there is the idea of monotheism whilst the Enuma Elish conveys a polytheistic idea of God.<sup>12</sup>

However, B W Anderson postulates that there are two probabilities: the first one is that the fathers of Israel could have borrowed some traditions

from where they came from or from the Ancient Near Eastern Traditions. He noted that, “Probably the patriarchs brought with them from ... some of the traditions that were later transformed and incorporated into the religious epic now found in the first eleven chapters of Genesis”.<sup>13</sup> Anderson compares the stories and argues that there are formal similarities with the stories in Genesis. He compares them with, “From the first Dynasty of Babylonia comes the creation story known as the Enuma Elish, as well as the flood story preserved in the Gilgamesh Epic”. He goes on to compare the story of the ‘Tower of Babel’ in Genesis 11:1-9 with that of ‘Etemenanki’ in Babylon. The above scholarly evidence points to the fact that what is in the book of Genesis especially what is in the first eleven chapters could have been taken from the places where people like Abraham came from or travelled to. Another possibility is that what is in Genesis could have been influenced by the interactions of the Israelites and other nations and they could have copied the time when they were in Babylonian exile as other scholars put it. Thus, the uniqueness of Genesis is a critical issue in the world of biblical scholarship.

### **Women in Genesis**

Lastly this paper discusses issues about how women are presented in the book of Genesis. Some feministic scholars have challenged the way women are presented in Genesis. Phyllis Bird mentions that “The harlot was... she was in every period a figure of disrepute and shame (Genesis 34:31)... subjected to punishment and death (Genesis 38:24). But the harlot was tolerated in every period by men who incurred no legal penalties”.<sup>14</sup> This shows how women were treated in a patriarchal society that if they were caught harlotting, they were punished but the men they were caught with were not punished. This has caused dissention among scholars whether the bible creates an image that men are superior to women. In short Bird noted that, “These writings portray a man’s world”. Thus, there seems to be a bias against women in Genesis together with other examples in the Genesis stories.

In a nutshell one can note that there are many issues in Genesis that have been questioned by biblical scholars in dialogue in the above paper. The paper has looked at the critical issues that include women in Genesis,

creation stories, Genesis and the Ancient Near Eastern traditions, authorship of Genesis, its historicity and some notable inconsistencies in the Genesis stories. This is as discussed in the above piece of discussion.

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- <sup>2</sup> Sheed F.J. *Genesis Regained*. Sheed and Ward Ltd. London 1969. 13, 4, 9, 5
- <sup>3</sup> Whybray Norman R. *Introduction to The Pentateuch*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. Michigan Cambridge, 1995. 2
- <sup>4</sup> Rast Walter E. *Tradition History and the Old Testament*. Fortress Press, New York, 1972. 4
- <sup>5</sup> Gunkel Hermann. *The Legends of Genesis*. The Open Court Publishing Co. New York, 1964. 25
- <sup>6</sup> Whybray Norman R. *Introduction to The Pentateuch*. 42
- <sup>7</sup> Wellhausen Julius. *Prolegomena to The History of Israel*. Translated from German By Sutherland Band Allan Menzies. Adam & Charles Black, Edinburgh 1885. 5
- <sup>8</sup> Ceresko Antony R. *Introduction to The Old Testament: A Liberation Perspective*. 70
- <sup>9</sup> Morgenstern Julian. *The Sources of the Creation Story--Genesis 1:1-2:4*. The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures, Vol. 36, No. 3 (Apr.,1920), pp. 169-212. The University of Chicago Press: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/528125> Accessed: 21-10-2019
- <sup>10</sup> McKenzie, John L. "Myth and the Old Testament," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*. 1959. 29
- <sup>11</sup> Horne, Thomas H. *An Introduction to the Critical Study and Knowledge of the Holy Scriptures*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker. 1970. 205
- <sup>12</sup> Gunkel Hermann. *The Legends of Genesis*. 41
- <sup>13</sup> Anderson Bernhard W. *The Living World of the Old Testament*. Longmans, Green and Co Ltd. London 1958. 20
- <sup>14</sup> Gottwald Norman (ed). *The Bible and Liberation: Political and Social Hermeneutics*. Orbis Books, New York 1983. 253, 272