

Background:

Genesis is the introduction to the Torah (The Five Books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy) and to the rest of the bible. Genesis ("origin") tells the story of the creation of the world to the death of Joseph in Egypt. In telling this story, Genesis introduces us to God, his relationship to humanity, and God's goal: to work with humanity in order to move it and the world toward ultimate perfection. Along with these major themes, Genesis introduces a series of subthemes that are essential both to the Torah and the rest of the bible: the basic unity of all mankind, its propensity for evil, human rebellion, and the covenant between God and Abraham's people. As you read through Genesis (and the bible) you may want to consider how these and other themes are being developed.

The book of Genesis consists of two distinct literary entities: (1) the first eleven chapters which relate the stories of creation and ancient mankind, and (2) the chapters that follow which speak of Abraham and Sarah and their descendants. These parts are held together by a brief genealogical bridge (11:27-32). I have subdivided the questions below to make them easier to follow. I have suggested questions which are either literary or theological. You certainly don't need to answer all of them, but you may want to think about the difference between the types of questions literary critics and theologians ask.

I. The Stories of Creation and Ancient Mankind: Genesis 1-11**A. Creation: Genesis 1.1-2.3**Literary Questions:

Compare the creation story given in Genesis to other creation stories we have read this year (e.g. Hesiod, Ovid, Lucretius) and other creation stories you may already know (e.g. the big bang theory, other "mythological" traditions). How would you characterize the style of each of these stories? You may want to consider elements such as the nature of the language, devices for giving order, manipulation of characters, the creation of tension, abstraction, type of narrator. What is the point of each of the stories? Don't just summarize the plots; rather, abstract a message out of each story. How are meaning and style related?

Theological/Philosophical Questions:

1. What does it mean to be created in the image of God?
2. Many have claimed that Genesis 1:28 provides "justification" for the exploitation of the environment. But rabbinical scholar Robert Gordis argues that the Hebrew Bible prohibits such exploitation. Having read the beginning of Genesis, what side of this debate do you fall on & why?

B. Primeval History: Genesis 2.4-11:26Literary Questions:

This section consists of several stories (fall of Adam & Eve, fall of Cain & Abel, Sons of God and daughters of men, flood, Noah and his sons, and the tower of Babel) loosely strung together by the means of genealogies. Most of the stories are etiologies (a story that explains how a feature of the everyday world got that way). For example Genesis 2-3 explains why women have pain in childbirth. Go through each of the stories in Genesis 1-11 and ask yourself the following questions: is this story an etiology? If so, what question does a child ask a parent that this story answers? What comment does the story make on the human spiritual condition?

God is a principal actor in these stories. Sketch his character. What is God's primary anxiety? How does this God compare to other Gods we have read about this year? Do they share this God's concerns?

Theological/Philosophical Questions:

1. The nineteenth-century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche once commented: "The world is beautiful but has a disease called humanity." After reading Genesis 1-11, how would you respond to such an observation?
2. Cain murdered his brother because he failed to understand that he was his brother's "keeper" or "guardian." How does the story of Cain and Abel shed light on recent human destruction (e.g. in Yugoslavia, W.W.II, etc)?

3. Rabbinical scholars have suggested that the story of Noah shows that "one righteous person can make a difference in saving the world." Was Noah a righteous person? Is following God's orders enough to make a person righteous? Can you think of anyone how follows orders but isn't righteous?

II. Abraham, Sarah, and their Descendants

A. The Line of Terah (Abraham): Genesis 11:27-25:18

Literary Questions:

1. Adam, Noah, and Abraham are the three major human characters in the story told in Genesis 1-25. Do they stand in some sort of structural, functional, or symbolic relation to one another?
2. What, if anything, do the two episodes of Abraham passing Sarah off as his sister and the Lot subplot have to contribute to the unfolding drama?
3. Is Genesis 22 the climax of this plot? This story was originally an etiological tale. What do you think the question was that this section answers? I ask this question to get you to think about the nature of Hebrew storytelling. How do the Hebrews take stories with seemingly minimal spiritual import and transform them into masterpieces of religious literature?

Theological/Philosophical Questions:

1. Did Abraham do the right thing when he lied to the Pharaoh about Sarah's identity? Is a half-truth or white lie permissible when it can save a life? Under what other conditions might half-truths be justified?
2. Genesis 18-22 deals with the meaning of "loyalty" to God. How does this section develop theological concerns raised in the story of Eve and of Noah?
3. What are some of the lessons that Genesis 23-25 teaches us about preparing for the death of a loved one and about dealing with our loss?

B. The Line of Isaac and Jacob: Genesis 25:19-50:26

Literary Questions:

Describe the plot of the narratives of Jacob (25:19-33) and Joseph (37:2-47:26) paying particular attention to the nature of the conflict and its resolution. Describe Jacob and Joseph and compare them with Adam, Noah, and Abraham. Now set each of these stories in the context of all of Genesis and ask how each advances the plot. Specifically, do we learn anything new about the conflict that inhibits a return to harmony? What gains do Jacob and/or Joseph make toward overcoming the conflict? Does this succession of heroes represent some kind of linear progression? If so, toward or away from what? What about God? Does he develop as a character, or is he the same at the beginning and end of Genesis?

Theological/Philosophical Questions:

1. 28:10-32:3 What is the meaning of angels in the Torah? What is the difference between proper and improper prayer? How should one deal with dishonest people?
2. 32:4-36:43 What is the appropriate response to the violence of rape? How does this compare to responses to rape we have seen in Roman literature?
3. 37:1-40:23 How should we measure loyalty and success?
4. 41:1-44:17 What should we do with dreams? How does this discussion of dreams compare to those in Greek and Roman literature? What statement does this section make about the choice between revenge and caring? How does it compare to discussions of revenge in the Greek and Roman literature we have read?
5. 48:18-47:27 What does Judah's plea tell us about the importance of speaking out for justice?
6. 47:28-50:26 If the body is merely a repository for the soul, why does Jacob request that his bones be brought back to the land of Israel?

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