

The Structure of Genesis: Generations of Blessing against the Curse

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The phrase "This is the account of..." (Gen. 2:4, 5:1, 6:9, 10:1, 11:10, 11:27, 25:12, 25:19; 36:1, and 37:2)¹ alternatively introduces narrative and genealogical texts. The narratives focus on particular people and situations; the genealogies link one epoch to another (e.g. 5:1 between Adam and Noah), or provide a brief genealogical account of someone who then disappears from the narrative (Ishmael in 25:12). In structuring Genesis these accounts variously focus the reader on the succeeding generations of Adam and Eve's descendants, blessing and curse, order and disorder.

From one generation to the next: the toledoth

Genesis tells its story by focusing on particular people: Adam, Noah, Abram, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph; but it does not begin with any of these. Before the reader gets any sense of what these people do the narrative depicts God's creation of all things and creatures, and his declaration that all this is very good (1:1-2:3). Within this creation God blesses the man and the woman and gives them a unique task (1:28; cf. 2:15).

The subsequent narrative devotes ten sections to telling the story of human work within the creation. Each section begins with the phrase "This is the account of. . ." (*ÿlh twldwt*) as in Genesis 2:4: "This is the *account* of the heavens and the earth when they were created." "Account," a translation of the Hebrew *toledoth*, is a nominal form of the verb "to bear" (*yld*) which stands for that which was produced or generated. Thus, in the sentence "the *account* of the heavens and the earth" *account* refers to the end result, or what became of the heavens and the earth, and "of the heavens and the earth," refers to the starting point.² Thus, the section beginning in 2:4 is not the story of heaven and earth, but what happened with the creation as a result of Adam and Eve's response to God. Literarily speaking, then, these opening formulas recall the antecedent narrative as the basis from which the narrative tells what happened subsequently.

These *toledoth* formulas shape the entire Genesis narrative. By linking the ongoing story to its antecedents these ten accounts describe what happened to the good creation under human direction, each one locating a specific starting point in human response to God's creation. It started good (2:4, see "good" in 1:1-2:3), but ended with the divine curse and human vengeance (3:17; 4:23, 24); the story of Adam (5:1-2) begins with God's blessing and ends with human perversion and God's repenting of having created man (6:1-7); the story of Noah begins with a righteous man (6:9) and ends with a curse on Canaan (9:25); the sons of Noah story (10:1) ends with the arrogance of Babel (11:1-9); and the story of Sem (11:10) ends with a reference to Abraham as the son of Terah (11:26). Similarly in 11:27, 25:12, 25:19, 36:1 and 37:2. In sum, the ten accounts of Genesis 2:4-50:26 describe what

happened to and in the creation, depicted in Genesis 1:1-2:3, under the direction of Adam and Eve and their descendants.

A closer examination of the narrative development reveals a shift from a universal to a particular point of view. The first five *accounts* (2:4-11:26) treat the descendants of Adam and Eve, the nations. No nation receives favorable treatment; they all move away from God; all are affected by the flood; and all are scattered from Babel. Except for Noah, no one is righteous; all the nations are subjected to the curse. With the Terah *account* (11:27) this perspective changes: God instructs Abram to separate himself from his ancestral home and go to the land, i.e. the promised land. After this the *accounts* focus on Abram and his descendants, but among these only Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph receive extended attention. Others are only briefly mentioned in relation to the major characters and short genealogical accounts (Abraham's other sons, 25:1-4; Ishmael, 25:12-18; Esau, 36:1-37:1). At Genesis 11:27, then, the narrative interest of Genesis, having begun with a universal perspective, shifts to God's particular blessing of one family and its divinely appointed role among the nations. This focus controls the narrative interest to the end of Genesis, throughout the remaining Old Testament, and into the New Testament (Matt. 1:1, 18; Gal. 3:29).

The discontinuity between the universal and particular narrative interests, however, may not obscure the underlying unity: that of God's ongoing blessing of the human community as evidenced by the birth of descendants throughout the generations of Adam and Eve. Because of God's blessing (1:28) Adam and Eve's descendants enjoy the blessing of fertility: at home with children, in culture with the development of music and other arts, including the building of cities. God has blessed the human community with enormous gifts and powers which remain theirs to exercise, even though he has cursed the earth, made human work difficult, and expelled man from his presence.³ This continuity of God's blessing is underscored by the *account* formulas: they remind the reader of the power of human procreation by using the nominal form of the verb "to bear; to give birth;" the verb also regularly appears in the genealogies of Genesis (5, 10, 11, 25, 36). Although the blessing of fertility and human cultural activity continue unabated, these can not solve the fundamental problem. Rather, it leads to the Lord's frustration of Adam's descendants attempts at solving their problems through their cultural resources (11:1-9).⁴ Despite receiving enormous cultural powers from God human history is one of increasing conflict with him so that Babel becomes a shameful monument to humanity's attempt to generate its own secure existence. "In Adam" humanity cannot overcome the Lord's curse (3:14, 17; 4:11; 5:29; 9:25; Ro. 5:12).

"In Abram" the curse is also a problem, for he is also part of this community of nations of whom Adam is the father. It is, therefore, important to note that the shift to the particular with Abram and Sarai is accompanied by a reference to Sarah's barrenness (11:30). Unlike the nations, Abram and Sarai cannot generate descendants, human infertility becomes the unique consequence of the curse for them; they are completely dependent upon God. Even though this discordant note is located at the beginning of the second five accounts, it is completely overwhelmed by the symphony of God's promises (12:1-3), an instruction of blessing that will shape the subsequent accounts of Abram and his seed.⁵

As structured by the ten *accounts*, Genesis moves from a refusal of instruction and the consequence of expulsion from the presence of God through the first five accounts; beginning with the sixth the narrative moves from an instruction to go to the promised and Abram's obedience to it, and because of a universal famine (Gen. 46:1-7; cf. 12:10), to another place of "exile" from the promised land, Egypt. Although Joseph is exiled in Egypt, this descendant of Adam "in Abraham" has received a promise, has experienced its first-fruits in Egypt, and waits in eager expectation its greater fulfillment (50:24-25; cf. Rom. 8:19). According to Genesis, God has brought the descendants generation of Abraham closer to his presence than those who remain under the curse "in Adam." He has done so by partially fulfilling the blessing he promised to Abraham.

Gen. 1:1-2:3:		The creation of the heavens and the earth
Gen. 2:4-50:26:		What became of them among Adam and Eve's descendants?
	2:4-11:26	Among the nations: refusal of instruction and expulsion from God's presence. 2:4 the account of the heavens and the earth (n) 5:1 the account of Adam (g-n) 6:9 the account of Noah (n) 10:1 the account of Shem, Ham and Japheth (g-n) 11:10 the account of Shem (g)
	11:27-50:26	Among Abraham and his seed: submission to instruction and moving towards God's presence, i.e. the promised land 11:27 the account of Terah (n) 25:12 the account of Ishmael (g) 25:19 the account of Isaac (n) 36:1 the account of Esau (g) 37:2 the account of Jacob (n)

Curse and Blessing in Genesis

After the fall, Adam, Noah and their descendants experience God's blessing (1:28; 9:1, 7) under the shadow of the curse (*ḅrr*: 3:14, 17; 4:11; 5:29; 9:25). The curse has the effect of excluding the person cursed from the security, justice and successes of the community whose blessings he had earlier enjoyed.⁶ So the descendants of Adam keep moving away from God's presence: they wander restlessly (4:12), wantonly fill the earth with violence (6:11, 13, cf. 1:28), and seek the security of a city built for their own reputation (11:1-9). Thus, in spite of the continuing blessing evidenced by enormous human growth in the first five "accounts", the effect of the curse makes itself felt. Death is now a regular part of the

human experience. It is inescapable for all of Adam's descendants, except for Abram and Sarai and their descendants (1 Cor. 15:45-49; Gal. 3:14).

If Babel memorializes humanity's attempt to secure its own existence, then Sarai's barrenness, emblematic of the future that awaits all nations, continually reminds Israel that her life, well-being, and reputation are totally dependent upon God. "Barrenness," whether associated with human infertility (Rebekah [25:21], Rachel [29:31]) or famine (12:10, 41:56-57), does not disappear from the narrative after God begins dealing with Abram. Rather, it becomes the occasion for demonstrating the true origin of fertility, i.e. God's blessing, and for defining the only place where a blessed future is secure, i.e. "in Abram." (41:56-57; and Ex. 16; Num. 11; Deut.7:12-14; 11:13-17).

The Lord's promised blessing begins to undo the curse ("to bless" or "blessing" 5 times, equal to the number of occurrences of "to curse" [ῥrr] in 3:1-11:26), but with emphasis on Abram: "you" in 12:2-3 is second person singular; the nations will remain under the shadow of the curse. The main verbal sequence in 12:2-3, composed of first person singular verbs, indicates that God himself will accomplish this, and that he has separated Abram from the culture of Babel for this express purpose. A break in this sequence at 12:3b--"should there be one who regards you with contempt I will curse him"--underscores the primacy of God's purpose to bless.⁷ God pronounced the curse upon Adam and his descendants--the nations--for their refusal of his instruction. Now, although it is God's intention to bless Abram and through him the nations, God so identifies this purpose with Abram that he will curse anyone who treats Abram lightly. God will not allow Abram to suffer the kind of opposition he himself receives in Genesis 3:1-11:26, not from outside (Pharaoh and Abimelech, 12:10-20; 20:1-18) nor from inside (27:41; 37:19, 20) Abram's family. The curse which brings forth barrenness will be replaced by blessing: God will make Abram into a great nation.

It is important to recognize that with Abram God only *begins* to undo the curse; the effects of the curse continue among him and his seed. Sarah's struggle to realize the blessing by her own ingenuity has its parallel in Jacob's deceit of Isaac and the brothers' deceit of their father Jacob in their selling of Joseph into slavery. And death overcomes all. But none of these prevents God's blessing: he miraculously gives Isaac life, twice; he trains Jacob into admitting he has stolen the blessing from Esau; and he guides Joseph to a regal position from which he saves Abraham's seed from death and administers the blessing of food to all the peoples of the earth. When they arrive in Egypt Abram's descendants are seventy (46:27). Even Ishmael and Esau are blessed with many descendants (25:12-18; 36:-37). Instead of barrenness there is blessing "in Abram" for his descendants and the nations.

Thus, if we go back to the beginning of the patriarchal narratives, the *account* of Terah (11:27), and ask: What became of Terah? we may confidently answer, what began in a culture of disobedience and barrenness has ended with fruitfulness, blessing, and confident expectation of reaching the land about which the Lord first spoke to Abram. From the point of view of God's blessing Abram, the subsequent narrative is developed in three narrative moves: what God begins to do through Abram (11:27-25:10), Jacob (25:19-35:29), and Joseph (37:2-50:26).⁸ From the point of view of curse and blessing the narrative moves from Adam and Eve's descendants outside of the garden to Abraham and Sarah's

descendants in Egypt. Although they have not yet arrived in the presence of God, he has been with them all the way from Ur and Haran to Egypt.

1:1-2:3	God blesses the creation	
2:4-11:26	From blessing to curse in Adam: outside the garden	
	2:4-4:26	From blessing to curse in Adam (n)
	5:1-6:8	From blessing in Adam to wickedness (g-n)
	6:9-9:29	From judgment to renewed blessing (n)
	10:1-32-11:9	Blessing by birth upon the sons of Noah to scattering (g-n)
	11:10-26	Blessing by birth through Shem (g)
11:27-50:26	From curse to blessing in Abram; towards the land	
	11:27-25:11	God blesses Abram and his seed (n)
	25:12-18	God blesses Ishmael (g)
	25:19-35:29	God removes barrenness from Abram's family: Jacob and Esau (n)
	36:1-37:2	God blesses Esau (g)
	37:2-50:26	God blesses the nations "in Abram": Joseph (n)

Although Joseph is "exiled" in Egypt, he has experienced the first-fruits of God's blessing of Abraham's seed and the nations in Egypt; he lived to see his children's children, and died blessed (50:23; Ps. 128:6). "In Abram" God has rescued these descendants of Adam from the curse and blessed them. He has done so by confronting the tumult of the nations "in Abram."