

ESCHATOLOGY IN THE BOOK OF GENESIS

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Introduction

When we think of the Old Testament's teaching on the end times, our attention generally turns to the writing prophets. Isaiah, Zechariah, and Daniel first come to mind, not to mention other prophets.

But eschatology in Genesis? A general assumption is that Genesis is all about beginnings, not endings. After all, the name Genesis means "origins."

Approach

In considering the eschatology of Genesis, it will be helpful to look at two areas. Often overlooked is the book's literary construction; structure indicates certain emphases within the message. For example, how often are themes repeated? In what place within the book's framework are they introduced or resolved? These questions will help reveal the literary scheme of Genesis.

Next, the message itself must be considered. What are the themes and sub-themes that underlie the narrative of the book?

THE IMPORTANCE OF LITERARY STRUCTURE

From Beginning to End

Genesis is a book of origins. Beginnings, nonetheless, may indicate something about endings. This is because beginnings show direction, and possibly purpose and design. God did not create the heavens and the earth and call all things good just to have sin derail his cosmic plans. While we may be thwarted in our own personal plans, God is able to carry through on His purposes (Rom. 4:21). The origins that God established may be a picture of the destination He has always intended.

Genesis lays the foundation for the rest of the Bible. Remember that Moses gave this revelation to God's people perhaps while they were still in Egypt, or at least while sin's oppression was still fresh in mind. Its message of an initial paradise in God's creation taught the Hebrews that God had a good purpose for mankind. A short life of drudgery and an untimely death in a brick pit were not part of His original plan. This picture of paradise also teaches modern man that sin and misery are not God's ultimate desire for him.

Consider also the opening phrase of Genesis, “In the beginning God” Instant focus on beginnings anticipates the latter days of the world. These opening words of Genesis teach that creation is not eternal from ages past. The next step in the author’s chain of logic is the implication that creation will not last eternally. Creation had a beginning. Human history will not continue in a sin-cursed world but will have a conclusion as surely as it had a beginning.

The Beginning and End of Genesis: Thematic Structure

If we can read the conclusion of an account as well as its beginning, then an even clearer picture of design is painted. It is like reading the introduction and conclusion of a mystery novel to know the design of the author. This approach is especially helpful in interpreting a book like Ecclesiastes.

Read the end of Genesis in the light of its introduction. The Joseph narrative in the closing chapters may seem to have little to do with the creation account of the book’s first two chapters. This narrative does have everything to do with the fall of man in Genesis 3. Joseph summarizes that his brothers’ intentions and actions were to choose evil (Gen. 50:20, the key verse of the book). Choosing evil is the heart of the fall of mankind at the beginning of the book. Apart from total dependence upon God, Joseph’s brothers at the end of the book characteristically choose sin.

To walk with God as Joseph did, however, means to seek goodness. Goodness is inextricably connected to God. Especially in His work of creation God creates and sees all things “good.” When the sacred author deliberately concludes Genesis on the theme of “good and evil,” this repeated idea serves as dual book ends to color the message of everything in between.

In other words, the major theme of Genesis is that autonomous man intends evil, while God intends good. Humans may think they are free in making moral choices between good and evil, but they will always choose evil (Gen. 6:5) when the God of goodness is left out of the decision. The lesson of the Joseph narrative is that God sovereignly “works all things together for good” for those who walk with him (Rom. 8:28).

Finally, what does the theme of good and evil have to do with eschatology? In general terms the future of human history is bleak without the intervention of God. In specific terms God does overrule and will bring about His originally intended good. An examination of the outworking of His plans in the covenants leads to this conclusion.

The Beginning and End of Genesis: the Complementary Theme

Genesis speaks of beginnings, and beginnings anticipate conclusions. Not surprisingly, the end of Genesis does speak of future developments. One of several crucial junctures in the Pentateuch, Genesis 49 records Jacob’s prophecies about the “latter days.” This passage about the future deliberately balances the book’s early account of beginnings.

Genesis 49 holds a messianic prediction in verse 10. It is the “Shiloh” promise. The tribe of Judah will be the royal tribe of Israel, and out of Judah will come One Who bears the ruling scepter. All people will obey this One called Shiloh. In the light of the rest of the Bible, it is very easy to understand Shiloh as the Lord Jesus ruling at His second coming.

Jacob’s descent into Egypt teaches one other eschatological note at the end of Genesis. Not incidentally is his family numbered at 70 souls going into Egypt. The numerical symbolism is a picture of fullness. The interpretation principle of first mention leads our minds back to Genesis 10. There, too, 70 souls that constitute the family of Adam are mentioned.

As Jacob’s family goes into Goshen to incubate into a great nation, his seventy descendants represent all the posterity of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Through this new nation God will work with the rest of the nations represented by the 70 families in Genesis 10. It seems that Moses is portraying Israel as the new humanity and Abraham as a new Adam. God’s future blessing to the nations will come through the family of Abraham.

The Beginning and End of the Bible: a Canonical Consideration

Finally, Genesis and the Book of Revelation help interpret the other. Together they give us a snapshot of God’s direction. His plan of redemption is moving toward the goal of His original design of creation.

In the context of the rest of God’s revelation, the first message of the Bible shows remarkable harmony with the last message of the Bible. Images of paradise in Revelation 21 & 22 and a new heaven and earth with a tree of life close out the canon. The future God portrays is an amplified reflection of the first creation.

The Book of Revelation may focus on endings and Genesis on beginnings, but these two are amazingly harmonious in their image of the way things ought to be and will be.

IMPORTANT THEMES

Paradise Lost

Genesis, as a book of origins, describes the beginnings of creation as “good.” When man debuts in paradise he has unbroken harmony with God. Then Moses describes the corruption of God’s creation design: the origin and consequences of sin are introduced.

Still, sin and death are not the end of the original story. Paradise and fellowship with God were God’s design for mankind. This is why, in the midst of pronouncing judgment, God also pronounces the “protevangelium” in Genesis 3:15. The Bible’s “first gospel” statement is found early in this book, a book that is the watershed of divine truth. The protevangelium promises a Deliverer to defeat man’s enemy.

A question arises about the nature of Adam and Eve's hope. When the Deliverer would come to crush man's enemy, the Serpent, would God restore the blessing of peace with God in paradise as well? In other words, what is the nature of the gospel hope? Is it one-sided, only an emancipation from sin and death, or does it ensure the positive hope of reopening the gate of paradise as well? Of course, the latter blessing is included also. "Blessing" was a major element of the Lord's creation design (Gen. 1:28).

Restoration through the Covenants

Genesis 1:28 introduces two other major themes in the Pentateuch.¹ With regard to God's design for man, the ideas of the "earth/land" and "fruitfulness" are seminal issues when it comes to the creation of mankind. Significantly, these three creation themes of "blessing," "land," and "fruitfulness" reappear in God's covenants with Noah (Gen. 9:1), Abraham (Gen. 12:2,3; 13:14-17), and Israel (Num. 6:24-26; Deut. 6:1-3).

Something deadly lies in between the creation design of "blessing, fruitfulness, and land" (Gen. 1:28) and the next mention of these themes in the covenants. It is sin and rebellion. That Moses still reiterates these creation themes even after man's fall is most significant. His message from God is that the Creator intends to re-establish His original design for mankind. He will do this through His gracious covenants.

While faithful Bible students do not doubt the surety of God's promises, some still believe that the covenant promise of the land was conditional or that it has already been fulfilled. This school of thought rejects a realized Messianic kingdom on the earth. Though too limited in scope to answer objections against a future Messianic kingdom, the thesis of this article is to show the connection between paradise lost and paradise regained. What was promised to Abraham and his children is nothing less than what was given to Adam and Eve in Paradise.² God gives the same promises to the spiritual children of Abraham (Rom. 4; Gal. 3).

Restoration and the Resurrection

The biblical teaching of the resurrection is tied up in the covenant promises. The resurrection is a cardinal doctrine of every eschatological system. Abraham himself believed in

¹ Conspicuously absent in the biblical theology of the Pentateuch is any development of the Genesis 1:28 theme of mankind "subduing and ruling" creation. Many modern Reformed students have a penchant for imposing this theme, the so-called "cultural mandate," as a creation model for understanding man's present God-given role in creation. Biblical theology shows that, struggle as he might, man is unable to fulfill this mandate. Genesis 9:7 implies that the mandate was removed from the shoulders of corporate mankind. Instead, the perfect Man, Christ Jesus, will fulfill this original design as the last Adam (Phil. 3:21).

² See my review of Dumbrell's *Covenant and Creation* in this issue of the *WRS Journal* to see the unity of God's one covenant first made with Adam and then Noah and Abraham.

the resurrection; his expectation of returning together with Isaac after sacrificing his son implies this hope (Gen. 22:5; cf. Heb. 11:17-19).

Only by believing in the resurrection could Abraham understand how and when God would deliver the covenant promises of paradise. Genesis 15 is a key passage here. Immediately after rescuing Lot who had chosen the well-watered plain for his herds, a discouraged Abraham is met by God. God reaffirms His pledge to His servant to *multiply* him (15:5-6) and to give him the promised *land* (15:7). In response to his request for assurance about the land (15:8), God swears it to Abraham in covenant ritual.

The wonder of this passage, however, is that God thereupon informs Abraham that much of his posterity, co-heirs of the land, will never even live in the land (15:13). Abraham himself will die (15:15), apparently without having received the land promised by God's covenant.³

God's better plan is that none of the Old Testament saints inherit the covenant promises separate from all the saints who will stand at the resurrection (Heb. 11:13(c)16; 39,40). In Genesis 15 God caused Abraham to understand that the land was his, but that he would not possess it till after the resurrection in the kingdom (cf. Lk. 13:28-29).⁴ This helps us understand the hopes of the patriarchs, especially Jacob and Joseph, who insisted on being buried in the land that God had promised.

Conclusion

What mankind lost in Adam's rebellion, God planned to restore through the seed of faithful Abraham. The covenant themes of blessing, fruitfulness, and land are creation themes (Gen. 1:28). They are a bridge of hope that crosses over the curse and chaos described in the early chapters of Genesis.

The covenant made with Abraham was not a novel, alternate approach to the original plan for mankind. Rather, it was rooted in the original design of creation: perfect fellowship with God in paradise. This is the fullest meaning of the Immanuel doctrine.

Genesis shows where mankind went wrong. It also graciously reveals where God is leading His people. In the covenants God promises a future inheritance achieved through the resurrection of the saints. Ultimately, Genesis teaches that God is leading us to a new creation "in which righteousness dwells."

³ At Sarah's death, the pilgrim Abraham bought a burial ground since he owned none of the promised land.

⁴ Incidentally, Jesus again implies the same understanding when arguing for the resurrection against the Sadducees: "God is not the God of the dead but of the living" (Matt. 22:31-32). In effect He argues that the patriarchs were alive in the days of the burning bush as well as in His own day. God will fulfill His covenant oath when resurrection bodies are given to the patriarchs. Then they will inherit the material kingdom promises that were also promised to Moses at the burning bush (Ex. 3:8).