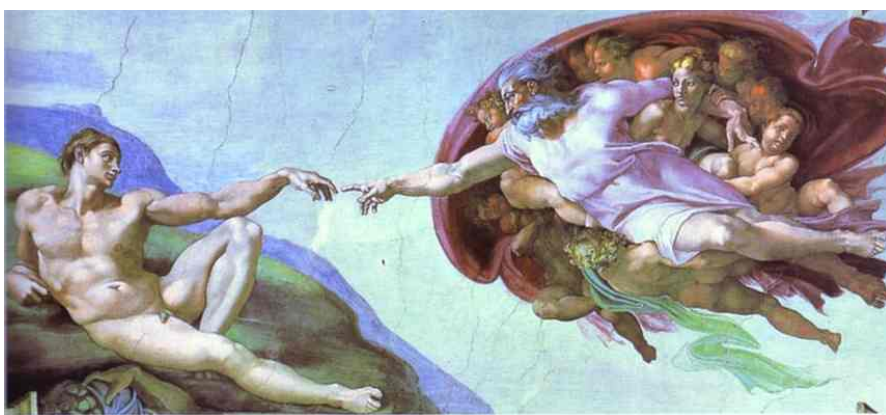


THE BOOK OF GENESIS

JACK M. SASSON

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Course: THEO5950 Special Topics on Biblical Studies I.
Sessions: Fall 2025, Fridays, 7pm–9:30pm.
Room: **FYB UG01.** It will be used for the first session (Sept. 5th; get-acquainted and background to Genesis), as well as for the Midterm (see below). Otherwise, students may meet there during the entire course or at any other place more convenient to them.
Format: Zoom.
Consultation: email: <jack.m.sasson@gmail.com>.

Teaching Assistant: Cheung Yiu Ming 張耀明 (<andy@avoda.hk>) is a doctoral student in Hebrew Bible at CUHK with also a phenomenal competence in computer and online technologies. He will assist you (as he does me) in facilitating this zoom course. As you will read below, he will also help you when preparing assignments and submitting papers or exams.

Description: General exegesis of the Book of Genesis for student with little or no knowledge of biblical Hebrew. concentrating on developing its major themes and defining its purposes, with special attention to its affinity to Ancient Near Eastern literatures and cultures.

Learning Outcomes: Students will have a deeper understanding of the context and evolution of a foundational book in Hebrew lore. In the *Book of Genesis* are developed themes and patterns of behavior that are crucial to ancient Israel's convictions about its attachment to the unique God ruling the universe. It details the origins of the world and the place of humans in it, the selection of a single individual to affirm a covenant with God, and the birth of the Hebrew nation. It does so by focusing on family stories that are remarkably familiar to our own existence today.

Key Point: The *Book of Genesis* consists of 50 chapters in our current translations. They move from the creation of human beings to the enticement of Hebrew patriarchs (and matriarchs) into

abandoning the Promised Land for the fleshpots of Egypt, where the Hebrews lose their freedom during centuries of slavery. The events will be background to one of God's greatest miracles on behalf of his chosen people. As well, they will generate models for proper behavior between family members and faithful attachment to divine expectations.

Format:

In each of our sessions, we will focus on a number of these chapters—Most will be inspected in detail; a few, in mere outline—depending on their contents and on the emerging themes that are crucial to Hebrew consciousness.

Lectures will lean on PowerPoint to help you focus on issues. They will not be posted online, so do take notes on them during presentations. I am leaving it to you to follow through; but I expect that at each session, wherever we have progressed in *Genesis*, you will be up to date in reading Von Rad (or whatever decent Genesis commentary you are consulting).

Please note that commentators often cite important terms in Hebrew characters or transliterations, a disadvantage for those who have not studied the language; but it is rarely a major problem. Do not hesitate to ask me for clarification.

Reference Texts:

- Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (2nd Edition; ISBN-10: 0465022553; Basic Books, 1983).
- Ronald Hendel, ed., *Reading Genesis: Ten Methods* (ISBN-10: 0521732395; Cambridge University Press, 2010).
- Hermann Gunkel, *The Stories of Genesis* (ISBN- 0941037215, D&F Scott, 1998)
- Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis - A Commentary* (Old Testament Library; ISBN-10: 0664227457; Westminster John Knox Press, 1973).

Optional References: Books such as those cited below are best accessed or purchased online, often available in used copies).

- *The Bible*. Any complete non-paraphrased translation will do; so buy one only if you do not have it. If so, then RSV or Tanakh (Jewish Publication Society) is preferred. *The Jewish Study Bible: Second Edition* is a good resource with good annotations to the Tanakh translation (including Genesis) as well as cogent essays (Oxford University Press, 2014; ISBN 10: 0199978468 / ISBN 13: 9780199978465).
- If you have not taken a course on the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), you may consult a decent specialized Bible dictionary or encyclopedia (such as those mentioned below) and read articles under such titles as: BIBLE (CONTENTS); CANON; TEXTUAL CRITICISM; TEXTS AND VERSION: FORM CRITICISM; ARCHEOLOGY AND THE BIBLE; SEPTUAGINT; REDACTION CRITICISM.

- If you have had no exposure to the cultures of the Ancient Near East, you may want to consult H. W. F. Saggs's *Civilizations before Greece and Rome* (Yale Univ. Press, 1989). Other books are also useful; just consult with me about any that strikes your fancy. **OR** you may, instead, consult any decent specialized encyclopedia in your reference room (e.g., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*; *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*; *Oxford Companion to the Bible*) and read articles under the following entries: *Assyria*, *Babylon*, *Canaan*, *Ugarit*, *Phoenicia*, *Egypt (Ancient)*, *Hittites*, *Hurrians*. A fine reference set is my multi-volume *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, with plenty of readable essays. Read, at the minimum, the overview essays in Volume 2: by Murnane (On Egypt), by Charpin (on Mesopotamia), by McQueen (on the Hittites), by Lemche (On Canaan). Do take a look at the essays on Society (V. 1) and on Religion (V. 3).
- A number of essays that link (some better than others) *Genesis* to documentation from the Ancient Near East is Richard S. Hess and David Toshio Tsumura (eds), *I studied inscriptions from before the flood: ancient Near Eastern, literary, and linguistic approaches to Genesis 1-11* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1994).

Suggested references

- *Genesis* has never lacked academic and/or theological interest, with books and articles galore continuing to surface in journals, books, and software. You are invited to search the web and locate bibliographic treasures on your own, as this too, is part of the education process. Below, I mention some basic online bibliographic tools. But there are tons more....
- The greatest *Genesis* commentaries from past centuries remain effective today, even when so much has been published on the subject. Among the most useful are: John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (2nd ed; ICC; Edinburgh, Clark, reprint 1930); Samuel R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis* (London: Methuen, 1904); and Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis: Translated and Interpreted* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, reprint 1997).
- Ephraim Speiser, *Genesis* (AYB 1, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964) is the most "Albrightian" single effort by an academic who is not a committed conservative, setting up the case for historical plausibility. Claus Westermann's *Genesis* (2 vol. Minneapolis, Augsburg, 1984-85) is the most detailed commentary to date. Umberto Cassuto's *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis* (2 vols, Jerusalem: Magnes Press, reprint 1961) is saturated in the excitement generated by the great archival discoveries (Ugarit, Mari, Nuzi) made from the 1920s on.
- For conservative Christians, the 2 volume *Genesis* commentary of Gordon J. Wenham (Word Biblical Commentary, Waco, TX, 1987) offers solid exegesis with theological comments.

- Recently out is Ronald Hendel's *Genesis 1-11* (AYB, 1A New Haven: Yale University Press, 2024). When complete, it will likely be a major contribution to the study of Genesis. Check it out for its extensive bibliography. Available from October 2025 is Avid Dentelski's edition of Genesis (*Sefer Bereshit*), color-coded to reflect source division (JEDP) according to the Documentary hypothesis. Its commentary segments, however, are in modern Hebrew. See at <<https://tinyurl.com/2k33kr2c>>.
- George W. Coats, *Genesis, with an Introduction to Narrative Literature* (ISBN-10: 0802819540; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) is a very useful book that outlines the forms (units) in Genesis, with decent comments and good bibliography. It can be had used for less than \$10 via the web. I recommend it but do not require it.
- Several fine readings of Genesis are now available, some more insightful than others, among them is Leon R. Kass's *The Beginning of Wisdom: The Book of Genesis* (ISBN-10: 0226425673; Free Press, 2003), a fat book that has irritated as much as pleased.
- Tremper Longman III, *How to Read Genesis*. (ISBN 0877849439; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2005) is a brief book from an *evangelical* point of view. It could be useful to people who wish to preach from Genesis. (Part 1, principles for reading Genesis; Part 2 Genesis as literature; Part 3 Genesis and ancient Near Eastern literature; Part 4, overview; Part 5, how Christians might read Genesis).
- Kristen E. Kvam, Linda S. Schearing, & Valarie H. Ziegler, eds. *Eve and Adam: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Readings on Genesis and Gender* (Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999). Globes of the book are googled at <http://tinyurl.com/chauozn>.

Online bibliography & Resource

- Downloadable from <<https://tinyurl.com/mvmzyrmf>> is Victor Matthews's recent (2023) bibliographic compilation on the Book of Genesis. Please consult it when you wish to follow up on issues that intrigue you. You may also consult its lists when preparing your "take-home" Midterm or when drafting your term paper. At the same site, you will have access to bibliographies on other Biblical books should you chose a topic that would benefit from them.
- *Old Testament Abstracts* may be accessed online from most academic institutions. It gives brief notices on articles, monographs, and multi-authored related to OT/Hebrew Bible studies. Topics covered include antiquities, archaeology, biblical theology, and philology.

- The catalogue of the *École biblique et archéologique française de Jérusalem* (<<https://biblio.ebaf.edu/>>) usefully collects studies published in several languages, indexing them by individual chapters and verses (e.g., Gen 14:12). In this way, students can spot where to follow up on topics that interest them.
- Sefaria is a free, digital library and interactive platform dedicated to making Jewish texts widely accessible. It hosts a vast collection of Jewish sacred texts including the Tanakh (Hebrew Bible), Talmud, Midrash, rabbinic commentaries, and more. Users can access original Hebrew texts, often alongside English translations, interlinked commentaries, and related texts instantly.

This link (<<https://www.sefaria.org/Genesis?tab=contents>>) will take you to rabbinic comments on the *Book of Genesis*.

Assessment/ Grading scale:

1. **A map assignment.** Download and print maps of the Ancient World and of Israel from <<https://tinyurl.com/8xhpt79c>> and <<https://tinyurl.com/44k73y9p>>. **ID list and instructions are in a separate page below.** The maps are **DUE SEPTEMBER 19.** **5% of total grade.**
2. A WRITTEN REACTION (4 pages; 12pt, double space--no footnotes) to Robert Alter's *The Art of the Biblical Narrative*. You are invited to compare (and contrast) with the approach taken by Gunkel in his *The Stories of Genesis*. At the conclusion, outline at least 5 ways that Alter and Gunkel differ: Perspectives, backgrounds, goals, audience, etc. **Due OCTOBER 3. 20% of total grade. (The Paper MUST be submitted via the Webpage of the Chinese University Plagiarism Identification Engine VeriGuide. A soft copy and a signed Academic Honesty Declaration Statement from VeriGuide should be post onto the BLACKBOARD.)**
3. A MIDTERM. By October 3, I will assign a question dealing with Genesis for you to research. On **OCTOBER 24**, you will come to class without notes or pre-prepared answer and write on that topic. This is **NOT** a communal enterprise; so you must not consult with each other on it. In preparing for it, however, you may ask help from reference librarians if you wish. **30% of total grade.**
4. A FINAL PAPER (15 pages, 12pt, double space; notes: up to 6 pages, 12pt, 1.5 space). Select a research topic (with minimal bibliography) and have me approve it by **OCTOBER 17** (much earlier is much better). Paper is due a week after the last session, **DECEMBER 4.** **45% of total grade. (The Paper MUST be submitted via the Webpage of the Chinese University Plagiarism Identification Engine VeriGuide. A soft copy and a signed Academic Honesty Declaration Statement from VeriGuide should be post onto the BLACKBOARD.)**

Course Components:

The course consists of lectures, oral drills, written assignments and a lot of memorization, self and group revisions. The time allocation (on average per week) of the learning activities is as follows:									
Online Lecture		Online Class interaction		Web-based Learning		Reading and research		Written assignments	
In class	Out of Class	In class	Out of Class	In class	Out of Class	In class	Out of Class	In class	Out of Class
1.5 hrs	NA	1 hr	NA	NA	NA	NA	1.5 hrs	0.5 hr	2 hrs
M		M		M		M		M	
M: Mandatory activity in the course O: Optional activity									

SCHEDULE OF INSTRUCTION (TENTATIVE)

	Date	Gen	Topic	Reading Assignment
1	9/05		Introduction(s)	von Rad: pp.13-43 Hendel: pp.1-12 Hendel: "Sources & Redaction" pp.47-70
2	9/12	1-3	Foundations	von Rad: pp.45-67, 73-102 Hendel: "Translation" pp.157-75 Hendel: "Gender & Sexuality" pp.71-91
3	9/19	4-6	Populating the Earth	von Rad: pp.67-73, 102-118 Hendel: "Literature" pp.13-27
4	9/26	7-11:9	Flood and aftermath	von Rad: pp.118-155 Hendel: "Rabbinic Interpretation" pp.119-135
5	10/03	11:10-14	Abram	von Rad: pp.155-181 Hendel: "Cultural Memory" pp.28-46
6	10/10	15-20	Abraham	von Rad: pp.181-230 "Interpretation in the Early Church" pp. 136-156
7	10/17	21-27	Isaac	von Rad: pp.230-281 Hendel: "Inner-Biblical Interpretation" pp.92-118
8	10/24	"TAKE-HOME" MIDTERM		
9	10/31	28-32:3	Jacob in Aram	von Rad: pp.281-316 Hendel: "Modern Theology" pp.186-214
10	11/07	32:4-36	Jacob in Canaan	von Rad: pp. 316-347 Hendel: "Modern Literature" pp. 176-195;
11	11/14	37-45	Joseph in Egypt	von Rad: pp.347-400
12	11/21	46-50	Israel in Egypt	von Rad: pp. 401-440
13	11/28	RESEARCH TIME--MEET WITH TA FOR FINAL INSTRUCTIONS IF NEEDED		
14	12/04	FINAL PAPER IS DUE 12/04		

All use of AI tools is prohibited: In any kind of learning activity or assessment that will be counted towards the final course grades (or used for evaluating attainment of the desired learning outcomes), students are not allowed to submit work which is produced with the collaboration of or supported by the use of any AI tools (e.g. ChatGPT)*.

Improper/unauthorized use of AI tools in learning activities and assessments will constitute acts of academic dishonesty and will be handled according to the University's Procedures for Handling Cases of Academic Dishonesty.

In case of queries, students should seek advice from the course teacher.

Academic Honesty and Plagiarism: The CUHK policy and regulations regarding academic honesty apply to all work in this course. Information in this regard may be found at the following link: <http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/policy/academichonesty/>.

GENERAL GRADING POLICY

The grading follows the general grading policy of the CUHK outlined below (in short form):

Grade A / Excellent: Outstanding performance on ALL learning outcomes. Demonstrates the ability to synthesize and apply the principles or skills learned in the course in a manner that would surpass the normal expectations at this level and typical of standards that may be common at higher levels of study.

Grade A- / Very Good: Generally outstanding performance on all or almost all learning outcomes. Demonstrates the ability to synthesize and apply the principles or skills learned in the course in a manner that would fully fulfill the normal expectations at this level and occasionally reaches standards that may be common at higher levels of study.

Grade B / Good: Substantial performance on all learning outcomes, OR high performance on some learning outcomes which compensates for slightly less satisfactory performance on others, resulting in overall substantial performance. Demonstrates the ability to apply the principles or skills learned in the course in a comprehensive manner that would sufficiently fulfill the normal expectations at this level.

Grade C / Fair: Satisfactory performance on the majority of learning outcomes. Demonstrates the ability to partially apply the principles or skills learned in the course in a manner that would meet the basic requirement at this level.

Grade D / Pass: Barely satisfactory performance on a number of learning outcomes. Addresses the task inadequately by meeting the basic requirement at this level only in some areas while responding minimally with possibly tangential content in others.

Grade F / Failure: Unsatisfactory performance on a number of learning outcomes, OR failure to meet specified assessment requirements. Fails to address the task and likely does not understand what the task requires. In other words, the work completely misses the point.

Book of Genesis: MAP ASSIGNMENT

Due Friday September 19, 2025

Please place the following seas [s], countries [c], towns [t], rivers [r] and islands [i] on the map I have handed to you. (-> means that you should place an arrow for an item that is off the map.) Use red or green ink, but preferably NOT blue or black. Write all names on the map: DO NOT USE NUMBERING SYSTEM!

*Place your name on the map and on this list. **Scan your completed maps and post them to me**, together with this list, checking on it all items that you could NOT find.*

NB. t= town; c=country/land; i= island; r=river; s=sea.

In some atlases, "kh" = "h" (for example Khatti is found under Hatti).

MAP 1. BIBLE LANDS Download from <<https://tinyurl.com/8xhpt79c>>

Aleppo = Halab [t]	Elam [c]	Nineveh [t]
Alexandria [t]	Euphrates [r]	Nippur [t]
el-Amarna [=Akhetaten]	Hazor [t]	Nuzi [t]
Assur [t]	Italy [c]	Persia [c]
Assyria [c]	Khabur [r]	Rhodes [i]
Babylon [t]	Khatti (Hittites) [c]	Rome [t]
Byblos [t]	Khattusha=BoghazKoy [t]	Sumer [c]
Crete [i]	Mari [t]	Susa [t]
Cyprus [i]	Memphis [t]	Tigris [r]
Damascus [t]	Mitanni [c]	Ugarit [t]
Ebla [t]	Nile [r]	Ur [t]
Egypt [c]		Urartu [Ararat][c]

MAP 2. ANCIENT ISRAEL. Download and print from <<https://tinyurl.com/44k73y9p>>

Ashdod [t]	Hebron [t]	Moab [c]
Beersheva [t]	Jabbok [r]	Mt Hermon
Bethel [t]	Jaffa = Joppa [t]	Mt Sinai
Bethlehem [t]	Jericho [r]	Mt Nebo
Dan [t]	Jerusalem [t]	Samaria [t]
Dead Sea [s]	Jordan [r]	Sea of Galilee
Edom [c]	Lebanon [c]	Shechem (Nablus) [t]
Egypt [c]	Masada [t]	Sidon [t]
Gaza [t]	Mediterranean [s]	Syria [c]