“In the beginning” of the Bible there is placed the Book of Γένεσις (Genesis), which is the Greek word for Birth, Origin or Creation. That name was given by the old Greek translation, the Septuagint, whereas the original Hebrew title was taken after the first word (Gen. 1:1) of the simple but powerful opening sentence of this writing: “Bereshit”, meaning “as when first” or “in the Beginning”. Both titles may be considered most appropriate, because they emphasise one of the main topics of this book, the origins of all things. The Genesis account contains answers – at least from the viewpoint of the Jew, Christian and Muslim believers – to such fundamental questions as: how the universe originated, when, how and why the mankind came into being, and what is the cause of death in humans. Moreover, it penetrates the past to great depth and gives further details about the origins of the races and languages of mankind. Whether one actually believes in these particular biblical stories today or not, one thing cannot be doubted: it is ranked among the most influential writings in human history. Just two examples of many may here suffice: for centuries this book has been invoked to portray women as inferior to men, often leading to discrimination against women; the Church Father Tertullian\(^1\), for instance, when he comes to speak about women, associates them repeatedly with Eve and describes them finally as “diaboli ianua” (“devil’s gateway”). The authors of the American Declaration of Independence also had the same story in mind when they composed the ringing statement: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator”. But not only in the culture of the past, but even in that of the present does Genesis play a significant role. In the modern western civilisation (and beyond) many social norms, practices and attitudes towards gender, marriage and homosexuality are related to Genesis and its interpretation.

The putative author\(^2\) of this influential work, along with the rest of the Torah/Pentateuch, is Moses, the central human character of much of this literary entity of five books, one of the greatest teachers for the Jews, one of the

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2 For a useful introduction to the layers of Genesis, for the so-called Yahwistic and Elohistic sources and further bibliography, see Fischer, Genesis, pp. 156-66.
biggest prophets for the Muslims and a forerunner of Jesus Christ for the Christians. Like other manuscripts of this era, there is no evidence, external or internal, in favour of any claimant to the authorship of the book. It was not until the Greco-Roman Period that the tradition of Mosaic authorship gained currency and in the past it was scarcely challenged. Today, however, most scholars regard Genesis as an amalgam of the work by several authors or teams of authors, who incorporated diverse traditions and different narrative sources. This compilation most likely took place at different locations over a period of several centuries, beginning sometime after the establishment of the monarchy in Israel in the 9th century BC or later, while the last part of this synthesis should be dated in postexilic times, about the 6th or 5th century BC. A strong narrative link between these different sources and traditions is forged by the “toledot” headings (“generations” or “descendants”). Setting them within this framework has given the sense of an integrated whole and a connection to the different stories and the two main sections of the 50 short chapters of Genesis; i.e. the first section with the first eleven chapters which deal with primeval history, from the Creation to the Deluge and the recreation or the multiplication of humanity after the catastrophic destruction of men and animals by the Flood; and the second section with the remaining 39 which cover events from the ancestral history, beginning with God’s promise to Abraham and ending with the story of Joseph and his death in Egypt. Despite the long lists of generations, the authors succeeded in giving an impressive and fascinating account, which in a masterly way, after the wide-angle overview of the beginning of the Creation, focuses on the ancestors of the Jews; the themes include stories of deception, love, desire, jealousy, murder, betrayal, adventurous journeys, flaws, failures and, of course, end with a solution or at least a promise of a solution or a salvation. Perhaps this is another reason, why there is such a plethora of versions and interpretations of Genesis, both in literature and visual arts.

Among all these noteworthy works of visual art through the centuries, two deserve particular attention: the so-called Cotton Genesis (London, British Library, Cotton Otho B. vi) and the Vienna Genesis (Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vind. theol. gr. 31), which are the central concern of this chapter. We have therefore to focus our attention on two Early Byzantine manuscripts whose images are among the oldest witnesses of picturing Genesis and at the same time some of its most extensive illustrations. Their

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3 As their detailed description would go beyond the scope of this paper, the Ashburnham Pentateuch (“Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms. nouv. acq. lat. 2334) and other later medieval illustrated manuscripts of the Genesis are excluded. For these, see Verkerk, Ashburnham and Lowden, “Genesis”, pp. 42-8.