

What This Book Is About

Most of the Bible consists of stories. Why? Partly because God knew that people like and remember stories better than lists of abstract propositions. And even more important, the stories remind us that *life* is a story, and that God is not an abstract doctrine, but a Person.

The Bible is God's account of His love for a species of creatures who have consistently hesitated to return that love. It's been a rocky romance from the beginning. So the Bible ought to be treated as a story—a five-star drama rather than a legal treatise.

But many modern readers have trouble getting into the story because the style (in the literary tastes of two and three millennia ago) and content (according to ancient customs the original writers felt no need to explain) bewilder them. The purpose of *The Story of Stories* is to tear down those barriers and present the tale in a vivid and intelligible form for contemporary readers.

You can read this book cover to cover like a novel, or you can sample what it says about a specific section or book of the Bible. The table of contents in the front and the index in the back can both help you find particular passages.

There are many, many details that have been left out of this book—not because they're unimportant, but because this is not a scholarly reference book. And yet, it is thoroughly researched, and is *not* fictionalized. The technical work and theological reflections of many scholars—more than could possibly be listed—have gone into this book.

Certainly there are plenty of good reference texts available, but they often deal with debates that tend to leave ordinary mortals in the dust. So, for the sake of simplicity and readability, the story of God reaching down to man—which is truly the story of all stories—is told in a literary style, yet with the deepest respect for God and His Book.

The Story of Stories is certainly no substitute for the Bible itself. In fact, you'll want to investigate "the Original" often as you read. But this book will give you a sense of the flow, the drama, and the over-arching themes of the Bible, as well as a deeper appreciation for the Author of this compelling Story.

C · H · A · P · T · E · R

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Beginnings

Genesis 1-3

Inside most of us is a nagging feeling that things aren't going the way they were meant to go. We're not the people we were meant to be. And there's more to life than meets the eye. So we start asking questions:

What's going on?

Is there any point to this exercise?

Does anybody care?

How did we get into this mess, anyway?

Genesis is a Greek word meaning "beginning." The book of *Genesis* is the first book of the Bible, so it is (not surprisingly) about beginnings: of the earth, the human race, marriage, languages; and also of how we got into this mess. It launches the tale of the making, breaking, and restoring of the friendship between God and humans.

"God" is the name *Genesis* uses in its first sentence to name a Being with personality and aliveness, a Being who is communicating to us from beyond our world. *Genesis* doesn't argue for His existence; it assumes it. After all, the book was written by a man named Moses who had an intimate friendship with this God, so His existence seemed obvious.

The events of Genesis occurred long before Moses was born. Many of them were passed down orally in his family, some were probably written family records, and Moses got the straight story from God when God assigned him to write the book. Imagine penning a book by discussing the material with a Being whom you could not see but whose presence and personality you were constantly aware of! To Moses, this was not spooky stuff; God was his Boss and Comrade.

Moses was the leader of a motley rabble of fugitive slaves who wanted to know just what we want to know: How did we get into this situation? What's going on? And who is this God? So Moses wrote, *In the beginning . . .*

Creation

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1). God has always existed. He is perfectly, exuberantly content in Himself, but He enjoys expressing His personality in making things. For He is not a force like electricity, or a concept, but a Being with character and creativity and life. In fact, He is the very essence of those things.

That's why we refer to Him with capital letters. Moses wrote in Hebrew, and in Genesis his word for God is *Elohim*. In Hebrew, *el* means "god" and *elohim* means "gods." But God is a "he," not a "they." Moses used the plural to convey God's majesty, His endless potential. It's like spelling His name with capitals.

God's way of creating is to speak things into existence. His word is so powerful that He simply uttered, "Light!" and the whole spectrum of electromagnetic energy with all its intricate properties came into being.

God took six "days" to create the physical universe. (The length of a "day" before the earth rotated and revolved around the sun is debatable: some say twenty-four hours; others say millions of years.) He started with a formless, empty void. On the first three days He gave form to what was formless by organizing atoms into energy and matter, air and water and land. On the second three He filled what was empty: the universe with stars, moons, and planets; the earth with animals and a special creature called man. (Genesis describes the Creation from the perspective

of our earth. The rest of the universe is not the point of the story, even though it is just as precious to its Creator.)

To manage all of His earthly creation, God made this creature called man in His own image. Not in His physical image (God isn't a material being), but with abilities to reason, to create, to make moral choices, and to love. The Hebrew for man—*adam*—means "dust," but this dust-creature was something with which God could relate person to person. Man would be His friend and the resident manager of His earth. Man had two sexes, male and female, and together they reflect the glory of their Creator.

God looked at the ordered and life-filled world He had made, and He pronounced it "very good" (Genesis 1:31). It was so splendid that He took another whole day and rested to enjoy it. (God is a dedicated artist, but He's no workaholic!)

Focus on Man

The story of creation pretty much ignored most of the universe and focused on earth. Thereafter the Bible zeros in on people and pays little attention to the rest of the earth. (Geology and botany are probably very important to the God who invented rocks and plants, but they are not what the Bible is about.)

The invention of man was a risk. Sun, ocean, tree, and fish wouldn't give God any trouble; they would function according to the laws He had built into them. But a creature free to choose to obey and love could equally choose to betray and reject. And God had given that creature authority over the whole earthly creation. The One who uttered neutrons into existence was yielding much control over His masterpiece and exposing Himself to the pain of jilted love. Pain! He could have existed into eternity without pain, but He risked anguish in order to have something outside Himself to love that could love Him back.

This was the genius of God's invention. He had previously made creatures who were pure spirit: they could reason, make choices, and perceive qualities in God like His majesty. "Holy, holy, holy!" they cried as they worshiped Him unceasingly for His greatness and perfection. But His love was beyond their capacity to grasp. A being needed feelings—even passion—to understand what it would mean to offer oneself to another vulnerably and to

share — well, to share love. God was a passionate, self-giving Being, and His angels were utterly unable to appreciate this side of Him. On the other side, animals had feelings but could not reason and make moral choices; their love lacked consciousness and maturity. Man was God's ingenious hybrid — spirit and soul, reason and passion, the finest reflection of Himself that God could produce.

So God put His first man in a garden where a mighty river and warm mist provided water for a lush array of fruit trees. To practice his Godlike qualities of creativity and authority, Adam/Man was to begin with gardening and naming the animals. To practice his ability to make moral choices, he received one restriction, so that he could choose whether to obey his Parent. In the middle of the garden grew "the tree of life" and "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." Adam could eat from any tree except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Of the tree of life God said nothing.

When Genesis focuses on man, it adds a personal name for Elohim, *YHWH*. English Bibles render this word as "the LORD" with capital letters, or as "Jehovah" or "Yahweh." Modern scholars think "Yahweh" is the most probable original pronunciation, so we will use it (substituting "Yahweh" for "the LORD" in Scripture quotes). Adam knew God as Yahweh, but not for thousands of years did Yahweh disclose the meaning of that name.

Yahweh had made Adam need relationship the way he needed food and water. Most of all he needed relationship with Yahweh, but he also needed it with someone physical like himself. None of the animals would suffice because they didn't bear Yahweh's image. Adam needed a partner who could share his noble work. So Yahweh took part of Adam and made a second dust-creature like him. The two became man and woman, husband and wife. They were completely open to each other, emotionally and physically. They were an inseparable unity: "one flesh." Adam may have been the leader, but there was no dominating or manipulating.

Treason

Earth and its inhabitants were "very good." All but one — an invader from outside the physical universe, a spirit who camou-

flaged himself as a snake. He had been the highest of God's angelic servants until he rebelled. According to tradition, his name had been Lucifer ("lightbearer"), but it became Satan ("the adversary") and Abaddon ("the destroyer"). He simply did not care to spend eternity worshiping his Creator; he considered that boring and beneath him. So he declared his independence and set up a rival kingdom.

That meant war. A number of spirit beings joined with the rebel, while the rest fought for God. When his direct attack failed, Satan resolved to strike at God indirectly by corrupting His physical creation. He would smash the hopes of this foolish God who tied His own hands by giving choice to dust-creatures. He would claim earth for his own kingdom, reduce its inhabitants to slavery, and make them an eternal grief to their spurned Creator.

Most of this information is inferred from comments scattered later in the Bible (such as Isaiah 14:12-15, Ezekiel 28:11-19, Revelation 12:1-9). In Genesis we see only the Snake appearing to the woman as one of her harmless and loyal subjects. She was queen of her garden and feared nothing.

First the Serpent politely dropped a question: Did God really ban you from eating fruit from these fine trees? (How unreasonable! Tyrannical!)

"No," said the woman, "only the one tree is off limits. We'll die if we even touch that one." Now God had said nothing about touching the tree; already God's instructions and character were blurring in her mind.

Into this tiny crack of doubt the Viper thrust a wedge. "You won't die," he declared. (God is a liar!) "For God knows that when you eat from that tree, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." (God doesn't love you. He wants to keep you in slavery and ignorance. Rebellion is the only rational course to protect yourself.)

Everything the woman knew about God's loving care, His desire for her and Adam to rule the earth, His wisdom and gentleness — all was forgotten as she considered the Snake's charges. The fruit's scent and color enticed her senses. And its deeper properties — its capacity to give her wisdom beyond what God had seen fit to grant — tantalized something else welling up within her. The

Serpent knew its name, though she did not. The name belonged to the knowledge of evil she had not yet tasted. It was pride.

So this woman — who lived in unimaginable luxury as queen of virtually all she surveyed — chose to grab for yet more status and sensual pleasure. Had she waited, would God have given her the sweet fruit with the joy of knowledge in His own time? We can't say, for she elected what the Bible calls *sin* — falling short of God's best, rejecting His instructions, seeking to take by force what He would give by grace.

But the Snake hadn't won yet. The man was the senior partner in this marriage, and he might still have run to his Lord and begged pardon for his bride. We don't know what might have happened if the man had done that.

Because he didn't. The story tells us that Eve was deceived (maybe Adam didn't explain Yahweh's command to her properly), but Adam made a clear-eyed choice. Understanding the implications, he chose pride and sensuality over patience and trust. And when *both* of them had eaten the fruit, they understood evil from the inside. They felt guilty, exposed, shameful. They tried to cover their naked bodies. When Yahweh came to enjoy their company, what had before been delight was now sheer terror. Something in their minds had been twisted so that their perceptions of reality were distorted. They were paranoid — their beloved Friend seemed a grim enemy. They hid.

Yahweh knew what had happened. But in order to give every chance for a change of heart, He called out from a distance, "Where are you?" Are there any shreds of sanity that I can reach?

But instead of a gentle probe, the deluded man heard a harsh demand. Instead of crying out for forgiveness, he made excuses and blamed the woman — "the woman *you* gave me" — for the trouble. She blamed the Snake. The diagnosis was clear: acute paranoid psychosis. No signs of remission.

Heaven wept. The ache of rejection touched the Infinite One, and He embraced it. A spurned Lover, a betrayed Parent, He could have battered these rebels back into submission.

But Yahweh had foreseen this tragedy long before He formed these choosing creatures. He already had a plan to deal with their

loss of mental and moral health, a plan that would astonish not only the fallen spirits who thought Him mad, but also the loyal ones who knew only the cool obedience of pure rationality. When He wooed these renegades back with love instead of power, the cosmos would marvel and understand.

Yahweh's first step was to curse the Snake. It would eat dust for the rest of its existence — a hint of degradation, but also an ominous sign since man was made of dust. Furthermore, the battle for the earth was not over. There would be permanent war between the descendants of the woman who served Yahweh and the descendants of the Serpent who served him. And one day a Descendant of this woman would finally crush that Snake, even though He would be bitten in the contest.

Next Yahweh turned to the woman. The price of choosing pride and delusion was the warping of womanhood: childbearing would be agony, and marital partnership would degenerate into lust, futile craving for intimacy, and fearful domination.

The man's cost was a curse upon his beloved earth. He would still have the dignity of tending it, but his labor would be bitter toil ending in the futility of death and dust.

There was no cruelty in these judgments. The joys of marriage and childbearing and fruitful labor were not wholly taken away, and Yahweh was merely declaring the natural consequences of the humans' choice. He had warned that stealing the fruit would bring death, and so it had: moral death, the death of friendship with God and intimacy between man and wife, the death of clear thinking and feeling — with a scent of corruption permeating every aspect of life.

Physical death would come, too. Yahweh banished the humans from the garden so that they would not also steal from the tree of life. For as much as it grieved Him to see His beloved ones decay and die, it would be far worse for them to live forever physically in moral and relational death. He planned to use physical death to restore real life.

As a sign of this, He killed an animal for the first time and used its skin to clothe His humans. Innocent blood was shed to cover their shame. It would not be the last time.