

# THE DRAMA *of* SCRIPTURE

Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story

SECOND EDITION

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## PREFACE TO FIRST EDITION

This book had its beginnings in a meeting of Mike Goheen and Craig Bartholomew in Birmingham, England, in the summer of 2000. Needing a text for the biblical theology course he taught, Mike approached Craig (a biblical scholar) to write one. Craig proposed that the two of them work together on the book, to keep it sensitive to biblical scholarship (Craig's strength) as well as missiology and worldview studies (Mike's focus). It has been said that if you want to ruin a friendship, you should write a book together! We're happy to report that as we have come to the end of this project we are still good friends. In fact, the project has been mutually enriching.

*The Drama of Scripture* is written with first-year university students in mind. It is designed as a text for an introductory course in biblical theology taught at Redeemer University College in Ancaster, Ontario, Canada. As a Christian university, Redeemer is committed to distinctively Christian scholarship that is shaped by the Bible. We want our students first to understand the true nature of Scripture: it is God's story, the true story of the world. Only when it is understood for what it is can it become the foundation for human life, including the life of the scholar. Our second goal for students is that they learn to articulate a thoroughly biblical worldview by systematically developing the most comprehensive categories of the Bible's story line: creation, sin, and redemption. This book is written to meet the first goal, set the basis for the second goal, and quite naturally lead to it.

*The Drama of Scripture* tells the biblical story of redemption as a unified, coherent narrative of God's ongoing work within his kingdom. After God created the world and human rebellion marred it, God set out to restore

what he had made: “God did not turn his back on a world bent on destruction; he turned his face toward it in love. He set out on the long road of redemption to restore the lost as his people and the world as his kingdom.”<sup>1</sup> The Bible narrates the story of God’s journey on that long road of redemption. It is a unified and progressively unfolding drama of God’s action in history for the salvation of the whole world. The Bible is not a mere jumble of history, poetry, lessons in morality and theology, comforting promises, guiding principles, and commands; instead, it is fundamentally coherent. Every part of the Bible—each event, book, character, command, prophecy, and poem—must be understood in the context of the *one* story line.<sup>2</sup>

Many of us have read the Bible as if it were merely a mosaic of little bits—theological bits, moral bits, historical-critical bits, sermon bits, devotional bits. But when we read the Bible in such a fragmented way, we ignore its divine author’s intention to shape our lives through its story. All human communities live out of some story that provides a context for understanding the meaning of history and gives shape and direction to their lives. If we allow the Bible to become fragmented, it is in danger of being absorbed into whatever *other* story is shaping our culture, and it will thus cease to shape our lives as it should. Idolatry has twisted the dominant cultural story of the secular Western world. If as believers we allow this story (rather than the Bible) to become the foundation of our thoughts and actions, then our lives will manifest not the truths of Scripture but the lies of an idolatrous culture. Hence, the unity of Scripture is no minor matter: a fragmented Bible may actually produce theologically orthodox, morally upright, warmly pious idol worshippers!

If our lives are to be shaped by the story of Scripture, we need to understand two things well: the biblical story is a compelling unity on which we may depend, and each of us has a place within that story. This book is the telling of that story. We invite readers to make it their story, to find their place in it, and to indwell it as the true story of our world.

There are three important emphases in this book. First, we stress the comprehensive scope of God’s redemptive work in creation. The biblical story does not move toward the destruction of the world and our own rescue to heaven. Instead, it culminates in the restoration of the entire creation to its original goodness. The comprehensive scope of creation, sin, and redemption is evident throughout the biblical story and is central to a faithful biblical worldview.

Second, we emphasize the believer's own place within the biblical story. Some refer to four questions as foundational to a biblical worldview: "Who am I?" "Where am I?" "What's wrong?" "What's the solution?" N. T. Wright adds an important fifth question: "What time is it?"<sup>3</sup> He thus asks us, "Where do we belong in this story? How does it shape our lives in the present?" As part of our telling of the Bible's grand story, we will explore the biblical answers to these five questions.

Third, we highlight the centrality of mission within the biblical story.<sup>4</sup> The Bible narrates God's mission to restore the creation. Israel's mission flows from this: God chose a people to again embody God's creational purposes for humanity and so be a light to the nations, and the Old Testament narrates the history of Israel's response to their divine calling. Jesus comes on the scene and in his mission takes upon himself Israel's missionary vocation. He embodies God's purpose for humanity and accomplishes the victory over sin, opening the way to a new world. When his earthly ministry is over, he leaves his church with the mandate to continue in that same mission. In our own time, standing as we do between Pentecost and the return of Jesus, our central task as God's people is to witness to the rule of Jesus Christ over all of life.

We have also borrowed from Wright his helpful metaphor of the Bible as a drama.<sup>5</sup> But whereas Wright speaks of *five* acts (creation, sin, Israel, Christ, church), we tell the story in terms of six acts.<sup>6</sup> We add the coming of the new creation as the final, unique element of the biblical drama. We have also added a prologue. This prologue addresses in a preliminary way what it means to say that human life is shaped by a story.

If you are using this text for a course or Bible study, you can access resources on our website [www.biblicaltheology.ca](http://www.biblicaltheology.ca) that will enhance your use of this book: a course syllabus, PowerPoint slides, a reading schedule for a thirteen-week course, supplementary reading, and more. Many more resources can also be found at [www.missionworldview.com](http://www.missionworldview.com).

Projects of this scope always involve contributions from many people besides the authors, and there are several to whom we here express our gratitude. First, we thank the many students at Redeemer University College who read the manuscript at various stages and offered critical comment, especially Elizabeth Buist, Elizabeth Klapwyk, Ian Van Leeuwen, and Dylon Nofziger. We appreciate the help Dawn Berkelaar provided in a small section of the book. For the diagrams and drawings in the book, we

are grateful for Ben Goheen's artistic talent. Fred Hughes, formerly head of the School of Theology and Religion at the University of Gloucestershire, has been supportive of this project from its inception, has read the entire manuscript of an earlier version, and has offered many helpful suggestions. He also opened up the opportunity for Mike and Craig to work together, inviting Mike as a visiting scholar to the International Centre for Biblical Interpretation at the University of Gloucestershire during the summer of 2002, when we wrote most of the manuscript. We are also thankful for the support of Redeemer University College, which from the beginning of the project has offered support and assistance of many kinds. We are indebted to our friends and colleagues Gene Haas and Al Wolters in the Religion and Theology Department at Redeemer, and Wayne Kobes in the Theology Department at Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa. Both Gene and Wayne also teach first-year biblical theology courses and have been helpful with their advice. Al has been a mentor to both authors, and we have greatly appreciated his wise counsel and unflinching support.

In the United Kingdom Alan Dyer and Mark Birchall were always supportive of this project and made many helpful comments as they read the manuscript more than once. Sadly, about the time we handed the manuscript over to the publisher, Mark went to be with the Lord. He will be sorely missed. In South Africa Wayne Barkhuizen made helpful comments on the manuscript.

Jim Kinney, director of Baker Academic, has been very helpful and encouraging. He and some of his colleagues read an early draft and offered insightful criticism and counsel that significantly shaped the final manuscript. Undoubtedly, the one to whom we are most indebted is Doug Loney, our colleague at Redeemer, dean of Arts and Humanities and a member of the English Department. Doug has given to this project much time and skill as a writer, taking our manuscript in its two different writing styles and turning it into what we believe to be a lively and coherent text. We also thank Doug's wife, Karey, and Mike's wife, Marnie, for their patience and support. We dedicate this book to our Redeemer colleagues, Doug Loney and Al Wolters, and to Gordon Wenham of the University of Gloucestershire, whose faithful work in Old Testament studies over many years has been a blessing to us both.

# PROLOGUE

## *The Bible as a Grand Story*

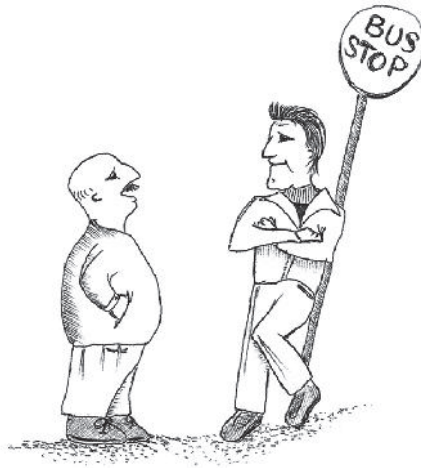


Figure 1 Bus Stop Encounter

Alasdair MacIntyre offers an amusing story to show how particular events can be understood only in the context of a story.<sup>1</sup> He imagines himself at a bus stop when a man standing next to him says: “The name of the common wild duck is *histrionicus*, *histrionicus*, *histrionicus*.” The meaning of the sentence is clear enough. But what on earth is he talking about? This particular action can be understood only if it is placed in a broader framework of meaning, a story that renders the sentence comprehensible. Three stories, for example, could make this particular incident meaningful. The

man has mistaken him for another person he saw yesterday in the library who asked, “Do you by any chance know the Latin name of the common duck?” Or he has just come from a session with his psychotherapist who is helping him deal with his painful shyness. The psychotherapist urges him to talk to strangers. The young man asks, “What shall I say?” The psychotherapist says, “Oh, anything at all.” Or he is a Soviet spy who has arranged to meet his contact at this bus stop. The code that will reveal his identity is the statement about the Latin name of the duck. The point is this: the meaning of the encounter at the bus stop depends on which story shapes it. In fact, each story gives the event a different meaning.

This is also true of human life. In order to make sense of our lives we depend on some story. Some story provides the broader framework of meaning for every part of our lives. Again MacIntyre says it well: “I can only answer the question, ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question, ‘Of what story do I find myself a part?’”<sup>2</sup> Our lives—the questions and events and decisions and relationships that fill it—take their meaning from within some narrative.

This brings us to another example, a story that is perhaps closer to our own experience of life than a fable about bus-stop encounters and Latin names for ducks.



Figure 2 Percy and Abby

Percival and Abigail, a young man and woman, find themselves at the same table during an after-service social for newcomers to the church. Over coffee and egg-salad sandwiches, they begin to talk of this and that. Eventually the others at their table have wandered away, and someone has rather pointedly removed their coffee cups and begun to stack chairs. But



Percy and Abby barely notice these things. Each is beginning to think that it might be worthwhile to get to know this other person just a little better. So they arrange to meet again, at a quiet café, for dessert and (of course) more coffee. But their real reason for meeting there is that it's a much better place for private conversation than that crowded church hall. (Out of respect for this young couple's privacy, we have decided not to include another cartoon here.)

As the conversation picks up again, Abigail and Percival gradually find themselves telling each other bits and pieces of—what? Yes, of course: they begin to tell the stories of their lives. How he is the youngest of four and the only boy, spoiled rotten by three dotting sisters. How she was born in New Delhi, while her parents were serving at the consulate, and spent her high school years in four different countries. Little by little, they lay down the broad strokes of the plot and begin to fill in the details: Percy's hardly been two hundred miles from the family farm (though he longs to travel). Abby speaks four languages and can understand a couple more. His childhood holidays were spent with a boatload of cousins at his grandparents' cottage in Muskoka. She once celebrated New Year's Day by snorkeling in Mauri Bay (South Africa). And so on and on, through the memories of childhood faiths and fears, first summer jobs, education plans, and hopes for the future.

The only proper answer to "Tell me about yourself" is to tell a story or a series of stories. By sharing these personal narratives, we come to know one another. We want to understand not only who that other person is now, at this moment, but also how he or she came to be so. What are the experiences, ideas, and people that have shaped their lives? Their personal stories give the context and explain much about their lives. Yet as they continue their conversation, they might ask: Are we left with our own personal stories to make sense of our lives? Or is there a true story that is bigger than both of us, through which we can understand the world and find meaning for our lives? Are our personal stories—apart or together—parts of a more comprehensive story?

The story in which I find significance and purpose might be simply "the story of my life," the narrative of my private biographical journey. But it might be broader than this: the story of my family or my town—even of my country and my civilization. The more deeply I probe for meaning, the larger the context I will seek. And this leads to a very important question:

Is there a true *story of the whole world* in which I am called to live my life? Lesslie Newbigin puts it this way: “The way we understand human life depends on what conception we have of the human story. What is the real story of which my life story is part?”<sup>3</sup> Is there a “real story” that provides a framework of meaning for *all* people in all times and places, and therefore for my own life in the world?

Many people today have abandoned the hope of discovering such a “real story.” They would argue that a true account of the world can’t be found, that individuals and communities must be content with the separate meanings to be discovered in their own more modest and limited stories. A commitment to pluralism often implies that we should not even look for any such overarching story, one which could be true for all people, all communities, all nations—for to find such a thing would imply that not all stories are equally valid.

Yet there are many others who would claim that there *is* one true and real story that gives meaning to all people and all communities. Muslims, for example, believe that their story (told in the Koran) is the true story of Allah, his creation of the world, his rule over history, and his final triumph. One day, a Muslim might say, all people will see that this is the one true story. Similarly, the modernist who is still committed to the Enlightenment story believes that account of reality to be true: that humankind will ultimately conquer nature by the application of human reason alone and that science and technology will help us build a better world for all. This story is still believed by many people in Western Europe and North America.

The Christian too believes that there is *one* true story: the story told in the Bible. It begins with God’s creation and human rebellion and runs through the history of Israel to Jesus and on through the church, moving to the coming of the kingdom of God. At the very center of this story is the man called Jesus in whom God has revealed his fullest purpose and meaning for the world. Only in this one narrative can we discover the meaning of human history—and thus the meaning of your life and mine.

This kind of story is basic and foundational. It provides us with an understanding of the whole world and of our own place within it. Such a comprehensive story gives us the meaning of not merely personal or national history but *universal* history. Today an account of this sort is sometimes called a grand story or metanarrative, and its implicit claim is that “a

story . . . is . . . the best way of talking about *the way the world actually is*.<sup>4</sup> The Muslim, the modernist, and the Christian each believes that his or her story alone is the *true* story of the world, that the Enlightenment story of human progress, or the Koran, or the Bible will ultimately be acknowledged by all to be true. But note that these stories cannot coexist as uniquely true. We must choose.

We realize how difficult it is to hear this, in the midst of a society that has tacitly adopted the philosophy of pluralism. Pressure for harmony among cultures and nations would seem to urge us to regard the Bible as just another volume in the world's library of interesting stories, of which perhaps none—or all—might be more or less reliable. But to do so would be to treat the Bible as something other than what it claims to be: the one true story of the world. According to the biblical narrative, the meaning of our whole world's history has been most fully shown to us in the person of Jesus. One may either embrace that story as true or reject it as arrogant and false, but one must not simply reshape the Bible to suit one's own preferences. The Bible's claim to tell the true story of our world's history and meaning is fundamental to its structure.

Sadly, many Christians have not recognized the essential shape of the Bible. A Hindu scholar of world religions once said to Newbiggin:

I can't understand why you missionaries present the Bible to us in India as a book of religion. It is not a book of religion—and anyway we have plenty of books of religion in India. We don't need any more! I find in your Bible a unique interpretation of universal history, the history of the whole of creation and the history of the human race. And therefore a unique interpretation of the human person as a responsible actor in history. That is unique. There is nothing else in the whole religious literature of the world to put alongside it.<sup>5</sup>

His complaint was that even Christian missionaries to India had not recognized the Bible to be indeed a “unique interpretation of universal history, the history of the whole of creation and the history of the human race.” Instead, they had reduced it to the status of just one more book of religion. This Hindu scholar recognized that there is nothing in the whole religious literature of the world to put alongside the Bible.

Why have Christians who claim to believe the Bible not seen what treasure they have? The problem is that (especially under the pressure of the

Enlightenment story) the Bible has been broken up into little bits: historical-critical bits, devotional bits, moral bits, theological bits, narrative bits. In fact, it's been chopped into fragments that fit into the nooks and crannies of the Western cultural story! When this is allowed to happen, the Bible forfeits its claim to be the one comprehensive, true story of our world and is held captive within *another* story—the humanist narrative. And thus it will be that other story that will shape our lives.

Australian sociologist John Carroll, who does not profess to be a Christian, believes that the reason that the church in the West is in trouble is because it has forgotten its story. In his view the “waning of Christianity as practised in the West is easy to explain. The Christian churches have comprehensively failed in their one central task—to retell their foundation story in a way that might speak to the times.”<sup>6</sup>

This is serious because the “whole point of Christianity is that it offers a story which is the story of the whole world. It is public truth.”<sup>7</sup> And so an essential part of our theological and missional task today is to “tell this story as clearly as possible, and to allow it to subvert other ways of telling the story of the world.”<sup>8</sup>

We agree—and that's why we've written this book, in which we seek to tell the story of the Bible as a whole, coherent drama. We invite you to come along with us. You may be a Christian who wants to understand his or her story better. You may have other reasons to be interested in understanding what the Bible is all about, a book that has had such a formative influence on Western culture. In any case, we invite you to come along with us on a journey in which the claim is made that *God is acting in history for the salvation of the world*.

We have adopted N. T. Wright's very helpful metaphor of the Bible as a drama. While he speaks of the Bible as a five-act play, we employ a six-act structure. We also adopt what we believe to be the most comprehensive images found in Scripture, that of the covenant (Old Testament) and kingdom (New Testament). The outline is as follows:

Act 1: God Establishes His Kingdom: Creation

Act 2: Rebellion in the Kingdom: Fall

Act 3: The King Chooses Israel: Redemption Initiated

Scene 1: A People for the King

Scene 2: A Land for His People

Act 4: The Coming of the King: Redemption Accomplished

Act 5: Spreading the News of the King: The Mission of the Church

Scene 1: From Jerusalem to Rome

Scene 2: And into All the World

Act 6: The Return of the King: Redemption Completed

We believe this to be the true story of the world. We invite you to find your place in it.

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## ACT 1

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# GOD ESTABLISHES HIS KINGDOM

### *Creation*

The first five books of the Bible are called the Torah or Law of Moses. Though this does not necessarily mean that Moses wrote every word, most of them came through him, and he is certainly the central figure in the story they tell. The second book, Exodus, tells of Moses's birth and his emergence as the leader through whom God works to bring the Israelites out of Egypt. After that, Moses is in almost every chapter till the end of Deuteronomy. But that accounts for only four of the five books. Where did the first one come from, and why is it included as part of the Law of Moses when it tells a story that happened long before Moses himself was born?

### Who Is the “LORD God”?

It probably doesn't matter too much to you that “Michael” is a Hebrew name meaning “(He) who is like God” or that “Craig” is a Gaelic word that means “a rocky outcrop.” In our culture, though names are important, we do not often attach special meaning to them. But in the Old Testament world we are preparing to visit in act 1, the meaning of names is often quite significant. And no names are more important than those identifying God in Genesis and the other Old Testament books.

In Genesis 1, the Hebrew word *Elohim* (translated simply as *God* in our English Bibles) is the general name for God used throughout the ancient Near East. And the Bible says that “God” brings the whole creation into existence out of nothing. But in Genesis 2:4, another name begins to be used. “God” is now called “the LORD God” (*Yahweh Elohim*). This is a highly unusual way of referring to God, and it is meant to reveal some important things about who he is.

Two key passages in the Old Testament (Exod. 3; 6:1–12) shed light on the mysterious name *Yahweh*<sup>1</sup> (or *Jehovah*, as in some older versions of the Bible). These texts tell how God reveals himself to Moses as *Yahweh* when he calls Moses to lead the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. The name *Yahweh* is the title God chooses to identify himself as the divine Redeemer, the God who rescues his people from slavery and meets with them at Mount Sinai (Exod. 19:4).

When the names *Yahweh* (Lord) and *Elohim* (God) are joined as in Genesis 2:4, it makes the powerful point that the same God who rescues Israel from slavery is the God who has made all things, the Creator of heaven and earth.<sup>2</sup> “*Yahweh*, the God of the Hebrews, is also the God of all the earth over which his lordship shines forth through the hail and thunder.”<sup>3</sup> The Israelites first come to know God (through Moses) as their Redeemer; only afterward do they learn of his role as the Creator. And it is not so different for us, even though we live so much further along in the biblical story. When we come to know God through the saving work of his Son, Jesus, we are meeting him first as our Savior and Redeemer—but God is still the Creator of all that was or is or shall be: he is the one eternal Lord God, *Yahweh Elohim*. Thus, the minute we start to witness to our faith and to tell *the Christian story* (rather than just our own personal story), we are inevitably driven back to the start of it all: the creation itself. “In the beginning, God . . .”

## A Faith for Israel

The first scene of any story is worth paying attention to, and the first scene of the biblical story is no exception. The first chapters of Genesis, telling the story of creation, were written for the Israelites long ago in a culture quite different from ours. Though some aspects of the creation stories in

Genesis 1 and 2 may seem strange to us, we need to remember that they made perfect sense to the people of Israel when they first heard them. This is so because the writer is using imagery and concepts familiar to his own audience. Once we read the first chapters of Genesis against the backdrop of the ancient world in which they were written, we begin to see the power of the message this story is meant to convey.

Several scholars have pointed out a strong polemical or argumentative aspect to Genesis 1 and 2. The ancient Near East had many competing accounts of how the world came into existence. These stories were common in Egypt when Israel was captive there and in Canaan when Israel began to take it over as its land. It would have been only too easy for the Israelites to adopt the stories of those who lived in the land before them or alongside them and who (after all) supposedly knew the land much better than they did themselves. Many of the gods worshiped by the Canaanites were closely associated with the fertility of the land. The newcomers struggling to learn how to farm there would be tempted to call out to these gods rather than to the Lord God.

We know quite a bit about the sort of creation stories circulating in the ancient world. It is fascinating to see how the story told in Genesis 1 and 2 deliberately contradicts certain important elements of them. For example, look at how Genesis 1:16 describes the sun and the moon. The text refers to the sun not by its normal Hebrew name but instead merely as “the greater light,” which God made for the day. Similarly, it calls the moon “the lesser light.” Why? Probably because the sun and moon were so often worshiped as gods by the people among whom the Israelites were now living. In the Genesis story readers cannot mistake the sun as a divinity to be worshiped. The Scripture clearly describes the sun as a created thing, an object placed in the heavens for the simple, practical purpose of giving light. The attention is thus all on the One who has created this marvelous light, the One whose power is so great that he can merely say a word and an entire universe springs into being. No mere light in the heavens deserves to be bowed down to. God alone is divine; he alone is to be worshiped. Though the whole of creation is “very good” (Gen. 1:31), it is so because the One who has created it is infinitely superior to anything he has made.

And this transcendent Creator is *not* like the capricious gods described in the Babylonian creation story (the *Enuma Elish*), who make humankind merely to serve as the gods’ servants, to wait on them and keep them happy.



In Genesis, the God who creates the world sets men and women within it as the crowning touch on what he has brought into being. The creation itself is described as a marvelous home prepared for humankind, a place in which they may live and thrive and enjoy the intimate presence and companionship of the Creator himself.

### What Kind of Literature Is Genesis 1?

The creation stories of Genesis thus are argumentative. They claim to tell the truth about the world, flatly contradicting other such stories commonplace in the ancient world. Israel was constantly tempted to adopt these other stories as the basis of its worldview, in place of faith in the Lord God, who created the heavens and the earth. However, the Genesis creation narrative is more than a polemic. It also aims to teach us positively what faith in God means for how we think about the world he has made and how we live in it. It does this in a story form. And it is precisely this story form that we need to be sensitive to if we are not to misinterpret it.

In order to understand the Genesis story of creation, we must understand something about the kind of writing it is. Scholars themselves have difficulty in describing this. Gerhard von Rad sees it as “priestly doctrine” so rich in meaning that “it cannot be easily over-interpreted theologically.”<sup>4</sup> Henri Blocher sees the creation account as an example of carefully crafted wisdom literature.<sup>5</sup> But what is important is that the story told in the first chapters of Genesis has been very carefully put together: the evidence of craftsmanship in the telling is clear. Hence, we need to focus as much on the *way* in which the story is told as on the details themselves and weigh whether these details are meant to be read as a modern historian or scientist would read them. Indeed, this is a difficult question: the story told here is of the mysterious inauguration of history itself. But the broad outlines of the Genesis story are certainly as clear to us as they were to those who first heard it. God is the divine source of all that is. He stands apart from all other things in the special relationship of Creator to creation. The fashioning of humankind by God was intended to be the high point of all his work of making and forming. And God had in mind a very special relationship between himself and this last-formed of all his creatures.

In these chapters we are told the story of creation but not to satisfy our twenty-first-century curiosity concerning the details of *how* God made the world. For example, we wonder whether God created over a long period of time or caused all that he made to spring into existence instantly. However, the Genesis story is given so that we might have a true understanding of the world in which we live, its divine author, and our own place in it. As John Stek rightly says of the creation accounts in Genesis:

Moses' . . . intent was to proclaim knowledge of the true God as he manifested himself in his creative works, to proclaim a right understanding of humankind, the world, and history that knowledge of the true God entails—and to proclaim the truth concerning these matters in the face of the false religious notions dominant throughout the world of his day.<sup>6</sup>

Over against pagan religious notions dominant in Egypt and Canaan, Genesis 1 proclaims the truth about God, humankind, and the world. When contrasted with the ancient Near Eastern myths, the portrait of God, humanity, and the world becomes clear. This opening act introduces us to the main actors in the play—God and humanity—and the world in which the historical drama will unfold.

Pagan myths	Genesis 1
gods	God
humanity	humanity
world	world

Figure 3 Pagan Myths versus Genesis 1

## The God Who Brings All Things into Being

Reading the first chapter of Genesis is a bit like what might happen to you at a really great art exhibition. Suppose you are sitting quietly, overwhelmed by the beauty and power of the magnificent paintings. Then someone approaches you and says, “How would you like to meet the artist?” Genesis 1 is an introduction to *the* Artist. And what an introduction it is! The first three words of the Hebrew Bible may be translated: (1) “in the beginning,” (2) “[he] created,” (3) “God” (acting subject). In three short Hebrew words, we are transported back to the origin of everything, to the mysterious,

personal Source of all that is: the eternal, uncreated God. This God, who himself has no beginning and no end, merely speaks a word of command in order to bring into being everything else that exists.

The idea of creation by the word preserves first of all the most radical distinction between Creator and creature. Creation cannot be even remotely considered an emanation from God. It is not somehow an overflow of his being, his divine nature. Instead, it is a product of his personal will. The only continuity between God and his work is his word.

Genesis 1 introduces us to God as the infinite, eternal, uncreated person who by his creative actions brings the whole of creation into existence. The “heavens and the earth” (1:1) refers to the whole of creation. Light and darkness, day and night, sea and sky and land, plants, animals and humankind—all come from this God, from his powerful and good activity of creation. As von Rad says, “The idea of creation by the word expresses the knowledge that the whole world belongs to God.”<sup>7</sup>

This is truly one of the points through which logic can barely wade, whereas faith can swim. “The place where the Bible begins is one where our own most impassioned waves of thinking break, are thrown back upon themselves, and lose their strength in spray and foam.”<sup>8</sup> In the book of Revelation, one of the great causes for continual worship of God is his work in creation:

You are worthy, our Lord and God,  
to receive glory and honor and power,  
for you created all things,  
and by your will they were created  
and have their being. (Rev. 4:11)

This hymn of praise in the last book of the Bible is set in the very throne room of heaven. This is appropriate because it echoes a truth about God implied from the beginning of the creation account in Genesis. By causing the creation to come into being by his word of power, God establishes it as his own vast kingdom. He thus establishes himself as the great King over all creation, without limits of any kind, and worthy to receive all glory, honor, and power in the worship of what he has created.

In the ancient Near East, people knew all about authority. Among them, the power of even tribal or national rulers was nearly absolute. And in a

variety of ways in Genesis 1, God is pictured as *the* Monarch, the royal one whose sovereignty extends by right and by power over the whole of his creation. The lightest word of a mortal king in the ancient world was to be understood as a command by anyone who heard it. But this immortal King speaks, and by his divine command the whole of creation springs into existence exactly as he intends. As God creates, he names what he creates, and this again is an expression of his sovereignty. “The act of giving a name meant, above all, the exercise of a sovereign right. . . . Thus the naming of this and all subsequent creative works once more expresses graphically God’s claim of lordship over the creatures.”<sup>9</sup>

In Genesis 1, God’s word of command, the repeated phrase “Let there be . . .” brings into existence a creation characterized by precision, order, and harmony:

Just as God is the One who sets time in motion and set up the climate, he is likewise responsible for setting up all other aspects of human existence. The availability of water and the ability of the land to grow vegetation; the laws of agriculture and the seasonal cycles; each of God’s creatures, created with a role to play—all of this was ordered by God and was good, not tyrannical or threatening.<sup>10</sup>

God’s creation is “good,” and this created goodness merely highlights the Creator’s own incomparable goodness, wisdom, and justice. He alone is the wise King over the great kingdom of all that is.

As King, however, God does not hold himself distant from his creation. We see this already in Genesis 1:2, in which the Spirit of God hovers over the waters like a mother bird who has given birth and will care for and raise her offspring to maturity.<sup>11</sup> God is not a monarch who rules from afar and takes no interest in his territories or his subjects. Having built his kingdom, God reigns over it in a deeply personal way. Genesis 1 and 2 portray God as highly relational. He speaks not only to give commands but also to express his own involvement in the making of the cosmos. For example, there is the mysterious phrase “Let us . . .” in Genesis 1:26 (which we take to be God addressing the heavenly council of angels). This draws attention to God’s personhood and his will that there should be other entities distinct from (and yet related to) himself.<sup>12</sup> But most dramatically, when God creates humankind, he blesses them and speaks to them directly: “Be fruitful

and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen. 1:28). There is a personal relationship between the divine King and his human subjects. God has a particular task and invites them to participate in it with him, filling and ordering the world, which he has given them for their home. The personal character of God is shown even more clearly in Genesis 2 and 3. The Lord God (*Yahweh Elohim*) walks in the garden with Adam and Eve and shows the most intimate, personal concern for them, their needs, and their responsibilities.

### Humankind as God’s Image

The high point of the Genesis story of creation is the making of humankind (1:26–28). In the Bible, a man or woman is a creature designed and made by God as part of God’s world. However we relate God’s activity of creation to scientific theories,<sup>13</sup> if we are faithful to what the Bible has to say about who we are, we cannot think of ourselves as merely the random products of time and chance (as do advocates of atheistic evolution). Humankind is *creaturely*, and according to Genesis (and the rest of the Bible), each human being is a special creature at that.

In Genesis 1 and 2 the teaching about humankind is rich and manifold. Unique among the creatures, humankind is personal. God addresses only the man and woman: they enjoy a uniquely personal relationship with God. As Augustine observed long ago in his *Confessions*, we are made for God, and our hearts are restless until we find our rest in him.<sup>14</sup> This relationship between the creating God and his human creatures is stunningly evoked in Genesis 3:8. God is in the habit of “walking in the garden in the cool of the day” and meeting with the man and woman he has put there. Gordon Wenham has observed how Genesis portrays the garden in terms reminiscent of the tabernacle, in which God lives amid his people.<sup>15</sup> Men and women are made for intimate relationship with God, and our earthiness is no obstacle to that relationship. God walks regularly with Adam and Eve in the huge garden he has set aside for them. He discusses with them how this great park is developing, how its plants are growing under their care, and how the animals are getting along.

Modern scholars often refer to *two* creation stories in Genesis, seeing a distinction between what is told in 1:1–2:4a and 2:4b–25. This is misleading.

Although these two sections are distinct, they are closely related. Genesis 1 looks at humankind in its relationship to the world. In the process the three great places of the world are brought into existence: earth, sky, and sea. Genesis 2 focuses on the man and the woman in their relationships to one another and to God.<sup>16</sup> As embodied humans the first couple can only live in a particular place, and thus in Genesis 2 and 3 we move from the whole world to the home of the first couple, a marvelous urban-style park called Eden.<sup>17</sup> The two passages use different images and metaphors because they are bringing into focus different aspects of what it means to be human.

In Genesis 1:26–28 God creates humankind *in his image*, in his likeness. Note that the words *image* and *likeness* make the same point. Though God is the infinite Creator and humanity is merely his finite creation, there is something fundamentally similar between them. *Image* is a metaphor. As we unpack it, we need to bear in mind that its function as a metaphor is to draw our attention to a striking similarity between humans and God while not for a moment denying that we are radically different from God. Earlier we recognized that God as Creator is radically different from everything he has created—including ourselves. But if humankind is created “in God’s image,” then in some way we are like the One who created us. This likeness is clarified in the verses that follow.

In Genesis 1:26, God says, “Let us make mankind in our image, . . . so that they may rule . . . over all the creatures.” He then says to the human beings he has created, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over . . .” (1:28). From this it should be clear that the fundamental similarity between God and humanity is humankind’s unique vocation, its calling or commissioning by God himself. Under God, humanity is to rule over the nonhuman parts of creation on land and in sea and air, much as God is the supreme ruler over all. As von Rad explains:

Just as powerful earthly kings, to indicate their claim to dominion, erect an image of themselves in the provinces of their empire where they do not personally appear, so man is placed upon earth in God’s image as God’s sovereign emblem. He is really only God’s representative, summoned to maintain and enforce God’s claim to dominion over the earth. The decisive thing about man’s similarity to God, therefore, is his function in the nonhuman world.<sup>18</sup>

In God's kingdom, which he has set up by creating it, the special role he has assigned to humanity is that we should serve as his "underkings," vice-regents, or stewards. We are to rule over the creation so that God's reputation is enhanced within his cosmic kingdom.

Genesis 1:26–28 has become notorious in some environmentalist circles because of Lynn White's argument that this teaching has been used to justify much of the environmental destruction characterizing the modern world.<sup>19</sup> This passage does understand humankind's vocation as one of rule or dominion, but it is incorrect to read it as legitimizing a ruthless mastery over nature and exploitation of it. In God's own creative work, he acts for the good of what he has made and not for his own selfish pleasure. For example, he creates a perfect home for humankind. And at every point in God's work within it, the creation is described as "good" and "very good." Over this good creation, God calls the human "ruler" to serve as steward or undersovereign, to embody God's own care for and protection of his good creation in his own sovereign rule over the earth. Psalm 8:6 expresses this wonderfully: the glory of human beings is that God has made them "rulers over the works of [his] hands." It is impossible to read this as suggesting that humans are free to do what they like with God's workmanship. Above all things, the human caretakers are accountable to the divine Creator of the world entrusted to their care.

To be human means to have huge freedom and responsibility, to respond to God and to be held accountable for that response. Thus, a better way of expressing the concept of humankind's dominion over creation may be to say that we are God's royal stewards, put here to develop the hidden potentials in God's creation so that the whole of it may celebrate his glory.

Imagine that you are a fifteenth-century sculptor and one day receive a message from Michelangelo asking if you would be willing to come to his studio to complete a piece of work he has begun. He mentions that you are expected to continue his work in such a way that Michelangelo's own reputation will be enhanced by the finished product! God's call to us to have dominion over his creation entails this sort of compliment to what we are capable of achieving as his stewards. It also brings a correspondingly heavy responsibility for what comes out of our stewardship. If this is what being made in the image of God involves, then clearly our service for God is to be as wide as the creation itself and will include taking good care of the environment. The passage that begins in Genesis 1:26 is often helpfully

referred to as the cultural or creation mandate. It enjoins us to bring every type of cultural activity within the service of God. Indeed, there is a dynamic element to the image of God. God himself is revealed or “imaged” in his creation precisely as we are busy within the creation, developing its hidden potentials in agriculture, art, music, commerce, politics, scholarship, family life, church, leisure, and so on, in ways that honor God. As we take God’s creative commands of “Let there be . . .” and develop the potentials in them, we continue to spread the fragrance of his presence throughout the world he has made.

Genesis 1 describes humankind not as tyrants exploiting the earth but as stewards ruling *coram deo*, before the presence of God. In the history of Christian thought there is a debate about whether the active or the contemplative life—the life of prayer—is better. In our view, the image of God holds both inseparably together. We image God not just in our actions but also in developing a deep relationship with God, just as the first couple would walk with God in the garden as their cohabitant. The nature of our relationship with God is expressed in how we look after his good creation. And we do this not merely as individuals but as partners.

In Genesis 1, humans are made “male and female.” A gender distinction is built into creation so that God’s image-bearers are always male or female, man or woman. That is, we always stand in relationship to one another, as well as in relationship to God. None of us can be fully human on our own; we are always in a variety of relationships. Humans are made for God. Genesis 2 focuses more closely on this and the other relationships in which humans live out their lives by virtue of the way God has made the world. Genesis 2:18–25 tells the story of God’s creation of Eve as a suitable helper and companion for Adam, illustrating once again the special nature of God’s love for his creatures. God expresses his love by providing what is best for the human persons themselves. Adam’s rule over the earth is embodied in his naming of the animals: just as (in Gen. 1) God named the creation as he formed it, so here Adam is permitted to name the animals God has made. Adam thus has one relationship to God and another to the animal world. But Adam is also made for *human* companionship. This is expressed at the deepest level in his relationship of marriage with Eve, a union whose intimacy is captured in the observation that these two individuals become “one flesh” (2:24).



Adam and Eve’s call to rule the creation manifests itself in Genesis 2 in their responsibility to work in the garden and care for it (2:15). From the description given in Genesis 2:8–14, this “garden” is more like a major national park than one of our household gardens.<sup>20</sup> It is large, with rivers running through it and lots of trees and animals. Adam and Eve thus are the first farmers and conservation officers. Once more we see that to be human is to be in relationship in some way to the creation, as one who works within it, explores its potential, and cares for it. Humans are made for God, and also for one another and for the creation, to be at work within it. According to Psalm 8, it is our *glory* to work and so to present the image of God.

The different relationships in which Genesis 1 and 2 envisage humankind can be shown as follows:

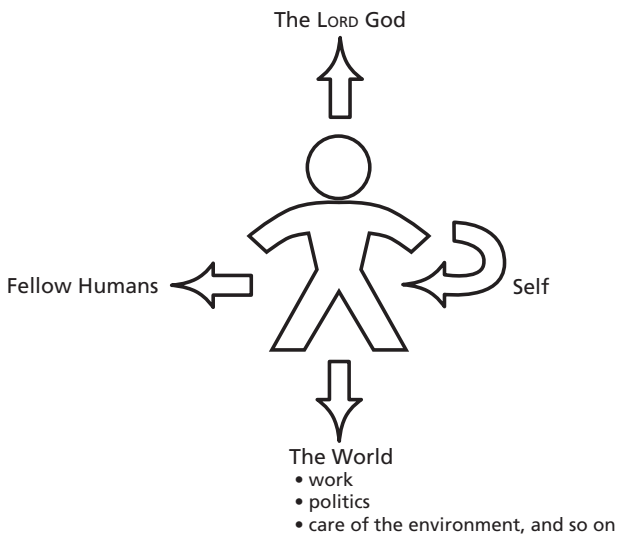


Figure 4 A Biblical Understanding of Humanity

## The World as God’s Kingdom

Though Christianity has often been accused of being otherworldly, it should be clear by now that the beginning of the biblical story does *not* encourage anyone to feel detached from, or somehow superior to, this world of space and time and matter.<sup>21</sup> The Bible depicts this created, material world as

the very theater of God's glory, the kingdom over which he reigns. These early chapters of Genesis are very positive about the world. Though it is created (and therefore must never be put on the same level as the uncreated God), it is always described as good. Through Genesis 1 the repetition of the word *good* is a reminder that the whole creation comes from God and that in its initial state it beautifully reflects his own design and plan for it. Creation has great diversity: light and darkness, land and sea, rivers and minerals, plants, animals, birds and fish, human beings both male and female. This bounty is part of God's intention, suggesting a marvelous harmony of created things. Like an orchestra, it produces a symphony of praise to the Creator. There is an order to this diversity; God's creative word gives it structure.

Genesis also reveals our world as existing within time. God is the one who creates the day and the night, and he names them. In these early chapters little is said about how God intends his creation to develop through time, but clearly he intends for development within what he has made. The man and the woman are to produce children from their one-flesh union, and these future generations will spread out to subdue the earth. The story of Genesis 2:4 begins with the phrase, "This is the account of the heavens and earth . . .," suggesting that history is an integral part of creation.<sup>22</sup> The work of Adam and Eve in the marvelous park made by God marks the beginning of a long process by which their children and their descendants are to develop the riches of the creation. Adam and Eve's royal stewardship of Eden is to be a small version of what God intends to happen to the whole creation as history unfolds.