

CRAIG G. BARTHOLOMEW AND MICHAEL W. GOHEEN



# THE **TRUE STORY** OF THE WHOLE WORLD

finding your place  
in the biblical drama

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Grand Rapids, Michigan

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To Mike's parents Ross and Rilyne Goheen for  
their faithfulness in passing on this story in life,  
deed, and word.

To Craig's father Leonard Bartholomew for his  
lifelong support.

TRUE STORY

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# Preface

A few years ago Bob Webber and Phil Kenyon issued a passionate and clarion call to the evangelical community. It was a summons to growing faithfulness to the gospel in the midst of huge threats. After affirming the authority of Scripture and noting the myriad of global challenges facing the evangelical church at the beginning of the twenty-first century they say, “Today, as in the ancient era, the Church is confronted by a host of master narratives that contradict and compete with the gospel. The pressing question is: Who gets to narrate the world?”<sup>1</sup>

They believe, and rightly so, that if the Christian Church is to be faithful in the midst of competing stories, this question must be answered unequivocally in terms of the biblical narrative: *The Bible tells the true story of the world*. Thus their first section is called “On the Primacy of Biblical Narrative.” Getting this straight is the crucial starting point. The following sections on the Church, theology, worship, spiritual formation, and the believer’s life in the world are all tied to the biblical story. The Church finds its identity in the role it plays in the biblical story; theology deepens our understanding of this story; worship enacts and tells this story; spiritual formation equips the Church to embody this story; and the believer’s life in the world, including all of public life, is a witness to the truth of this story.

Our passion is similar: that people learn to read the Bible as it was meant to be read—as the true story of the world. *The True Story of the Whole World* has been written to tell the biblical story of redemption as a unified, coherent narrative of God’s ongoing redemptive work in the world. After God had created

the world, and after human rebellion had corrupted it, God set out to restore the whole world: “While justly angry, God did not turn away from a world bent on destruction but turned to face it in love. With patience and tender care the Lord set out on the long road of redemption to reclaim the lost as his people and the world as his kingdom.”<sup>2</sup> The Bible narrates the story of God’s journey on that long road of restoration. 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; it is fundamentally coherent. Every part of the Bible—each event, book, character, command, prophecy, promise, and poem—must be understood in the context of the *one* story line.

This book is our *telling* of that story. We invite the reader 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: the biblical story does not move toward the destruction of the world and our individual “rescue” to heaven. It culminates in the restoration of the entire creation and all of human life to its original goodness.

Second, we emphasize our place within the biblical story, that is, the era of biblical history in which we live. 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>—that is, “Where do *we* belong in this story? How does it shape *our* lives in the present?” We will explore the biblical answers to these five questions as part of our telling of the grand story of the Bible.

Third, we highlight the centrality of *mission* within the biblical story. 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’ mission* unfolds when he comes on the scene, taking on himself the missionary vocation that had been Israel’s. Jesus 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. And

so the *Church's mission* is our central task: in our own time, standing as we do between Pentecost and the return of Jesus, we as the people of God are to witness to the rule of Jesus Christ over all of life.

We have also borrowed from N. T. Wright his very helpful metaphor of the Bible as a drama.<sup>4</sup> But whereas Wright speaks of *five* acts—creation, sin, Israel, Christ, church—we tell the story in terms of *six* acts. Following Brian Walsh and Richard Middleton we add the coming of the new creation as the final act of the biblical drama.<sup>5</sup> 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.

This is the third version of our book first published by Baker Academic Press (Grand Rapids, Mich., 2004) and SPCK (London, 2006). This Faith Alive version is slightly revised from the SPCK edition. The main title has been changed from *The Drama of Scripture* to *The True Story of the Whole World*, but the subtitle, *Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story* has remained the same. This new title reflects what Michael Goheen would often tell his first year biblical theology students at the beginning of the semester: “This course is about the true story of the world.”

This edition is suitable as a study version for individuals and churches. Three things distinguish both the SPCK and Faith Alive editions from the original Baker publication. First the book has been significantly shortened. Many of the details in the earlier book have been eliminated. Second, almost all of the explanatory footnotes have been dropped. Third, each “Act” is followed by a section on the contemporary significance of that part of the story. These sections are intentionally brief and by no means exhaustive; rather they are meant to suggest how the acts may be read with integrity in terms of their significance for today. These sections are followed by some questions that can be used as discussion starters to reflect on the meaning of the story for our lives today.

There is a website that accompanies this book ([www.biblicaltheology.ca](http://www.biblicaltheology.ca)). It provides various resources that may help you to use this book: course syllabus, adult Bible study class schedules of various lengths, PowerPoint slides, more study questions, articles, links, and more.

We are deeply grateful that so many have found the Baker and SPCK versions of this book to be helpful; it has been used beyond our wildest expectations in many settings and in many countries. And it makes us even more grateful



to those who contributed to the original project. They include Fred Hughes and Alan Dyer from Britain, Dawn Berkelaar, Gene Haas, and Al Wolters from Canada, Wayne Kobes from the United States, and Wayne Barkhuizen from South Africa. Jim Kinney from Baker Academic Publishing and Alison Barr from SPCK were very helpful and encouraging on the first two editions. And now we are grateful to Len Vander Zee from Faith Alive Christian Resources who has made this shorter study edition available in North America. Undoubtedly, the one to whom we are most indebted is our friend Doug Loney, Dean of Arts and Humanities and Professor of English at Redeemer University College. Doug has given to the original manuscript and then to the SPCK volume much time and skill as a writer, helping make it a lively and coherent text. His sterling work continues to be reflected in this new Faith Alive version.

Craig G. Bartholomew, Hamilton, Ontario

Michael W. Goheen, Burnaby, British Columbia

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# Prologue

**A**lasdair MacIntyre offers the following example to show how particular events can only be understood in the context of a story.<sup>1</sup> He imagines himself at a bus stop when a young man standing next to him says, “The name of the common wild duck is *histrionicus*, *histrionicus*, *histrionicus*.” We understand the meaning of the sentence. But why on earth is he saying it in the first place? This particular action can only be understood if it is placed in a broader framework of meaning. Three stories could make this particular incident meaningful. The young man has mistaken the man standing next to 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 again, he is a foreign 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 meaning of the encounter at the bus stop depends on which story shapes it: in fact, each story will give the event a different meaning.

This is also true of human life. In order to make sense of our lives and to make our most important decisions, we depend on the story that provides the broader framework of meaning for our lives. Again MacIntyre says it well: “I can only answer the question, ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior ques-

tion, ‘Of what story do I find myself a part?’”<sup>2</sup> Our lives, and the questions and events that fill them, take their meaning from within some larger story.

The story in which I find significance and purpose might be simply the story of my life, my private biographical journey. But it’s likely to 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 argue that a true account of the world cannot be found, that individuals and communities must be content with the meanings to be discovered in the more modest and limited stories of their personal lives. In addition, a commitment to pluralism in our culture often implies that we should not even look for any such overarching story, one that 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 do 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 Quran) is the true story of Allah, his creation of the world, his rule over history, and his final triumph. One day, says the Muslim, all people will see that this is the one true story. Similarly, the modernist committed to the story that emerged in the Enlightenment believes 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 shapes the lives and outlook of many people in Western Europe and North America.

Christians too believe that there is one true story: the story told in the Bible. It begins with God’s creation of the universe 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 of Nazareth, in whom God has revealed his fullest purpose and meaning for the world. Only this one story unlocks meaning of human history—and thus the meaning of your life and mine.

This kind of grand story provides us with an understanding of the whole world and of our own place within it. It's a big story that encompasses and explains all the smaller stories of our lives. Implicit in this claim is the idea that “a story . . . is . . . the best way of talking about the way the world actually is.”<sup>4</sup>

Such a comprehensive story gives us the meaning of not merely personal or national history, but of universal history. The Muslim, the modernist, and the Christian each believes that his or her story alone is the true story of the world, that either the Quran, or the Enlightenment story of human progress, or the Bible will ultimately be acknowledged by all to be true. But these stories cannot all be 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 urges 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 pretend that the Bible is 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 finds its meaning and purpose in the person of Jesus. We may either embrace that story as true or reject it as false, but we must not simply reshape the Bible to suit our own preferences. The Bible's claim to tell the one true story of our world is central to its meaning.

Sadly, many Christians have not recognized this essential character of the Bible. A Hindu scholar of world religions once said to Newbigin,

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 for what it is. Instead, they reduced it to the status of just one more book of religion. This Hindu scholar recognized that there is nothing quite like the Bible in the whole religious literature of the world.

Why have Christians, who claim to believe the Bible, not seen what treasure they have? The problem is that Christians, even Christian scholars, break the Bible up into little bits: historical bits, devotional bits, moral bits, theological bits, narrative bits. In fact, it has been chopped into the kind of fragments that fit into the nooks and crannies of the Enlightenment story! When this is allowed to happen, the Bible forfeits its claim to be the one comprehensive, true story of our world. It is held captive within the other story—the humanist narrative. And that other story will shape our lives.

N. T. Wright has said, “The whole point of Christianity is that it offers a story which is the story of the whole world. It is public truth.”<sup>6</sup> We agree—and that’s why we have written this book, which seeks 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 your story better. Or you may have other reasons to be interested in understanding what this book, one that has had such a formative influence on Western culture, is all about. In any case, we invite you to come along with us on a journey in which we claim 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 image found in Scripture, that of the kingdom. The outline follows:

Act 1: God Establishes the 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 and a King for God’s People

Interlude: A Kingdom Story Waiting for an Ending—The Intertestamental Period

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. And we invite you to find your place in it.

## Finding Our Place in the Story<sup>7</sup>

1. In this Prologue we have tried to show how individual events have meaning only when they are understood in the context of a story. Here's an exercise to test that idea.

Imagine this scene: a florist delivers a beautiful bouquet to a woman at her doorstep. When she reads the card that comes with the flowers, she faints dead away.

What stories can you think of that would give this simple action several different meanings?

2. Most modern secular people assume that there is one basic story of the world. What would the outline of this story look like if it were expressed as the answers to these questions?

- *Who am I?* What does it mean to be human?
- *Where am I?* Where did our world come from?
- *What is wrong?* Why does the world seem to be so troubled?
- *What is the remedy?* Can humans alone fix the problems of the world?

3. How would a Christian begin to answer the same four questions?

4. What are the biggest differences between a secular and a Christian worldview?

5. Why do you think so many Christians have adopted some (or all) of a secular worldview? What can we do to ensure that our view of the world is consistent with what we say we believe?

6. What is the danger of “breaking the Bible into little bits”? Have you seen examples in devotionals, Bible studies, sermons or elsewhere? How can we prevent this from happening?

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## Act 1

# God Establishes the Kingdom—Creation



### Who Is the “LORD God”?

**T**he biblical story opens with the words “In the beginning God . . .” That certainly signals immediately who the main actor is here. But who is this God? The names used for God in the opening chapters of Genesis tell us a lot about who he is. 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.” Although names are important in our culture, we do not often attach special meaning to them. But in the Old Testament world we are preparing to visit, the meaning of names bears great significance—and none more so than the names for God in Genesis and other Old Testament books.

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

God reveals himself to Moses as *Yahweh* (Ex. 3; 6:1-12) when he calls Moses to lead the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. God chooses the name *Yahweh* to identify himself as the divine Redeemer, the God who rescues people from slavery and meets with them at Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:4).

When the names *Yahweh* (LORD) and *Elohim* (God) are linked together, as they are in Genesis 2:4, it makes the powerful point that the same God who



rescues Israel from slavery has also made all things: this God is the Creator of heaven and earth. The Israelites first come to know God (through Moses) as their Redeemer; only afterward do they learn of God's role as the Creator.

It's not so different for us, even though we live so much further along in the biblical story. When we first come to know God through the saving work of his Son, Jesus, we meet him as our Savior and Redeemer. But soon we realize that God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) is also 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 (as the bigger story in which our personal story belongs), we inevitably begin at the start of it all: the Creation itself. "In the beginning, God . . ."

## **A Faith for Israel**

The first act of any drama is worth paying attention to, and the first act of the biblical drama is no exception. The early chapters of Genesis, telling the story of creation, were written long ago in a culture quite different from our own. 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 because the writer uses imagery and concepts familiar to the people of his day. When we read the first chapters of Genesis against the backdrop of the ancient world in which they were written, we begin to see powerful messages we didn't recognize before.

Several scholars have pointed out a strong argumentative aspect to Genesis 1 and 2. Ancient Near Eastern people told many competing accounts of how the world came into existence. The Israelites undoubtedly heard these stories when they were captive in Egypt and also in Canaan when they began to settle there. It would have been all 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. 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 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 these stories. For example, look at how Genesis 1:16 describes the sun and the moon. The text does not refer to the sun by its normal Hebrew name but instead as “the greater light” 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 for a divinity to be worshiped; rather it is a created object placed in the heavens for the simple, practical purpose of providing light and heat. The Scripture places all the attention on the One who created this marvelous light, the One whose power is so great that by merely uttering a word, an entire universe springs into being. No mere “light” in the heavens is worthy of our worship. God alone is divine; God alone is to be worshiped. The whole of creation is pronounced “very good” (Gen. 1:31) because the One who has created it is good and infinitely superior to anything he has made.

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**The biblical story describes this world as a marvelous home prepared for humankind, a place in which men and women and children may live and thrive and enjoy the intimate presence and companionship of the Creator himself.**

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God alone is divine; God alone is to be worshiped. The whole of creation is pronounced “very good” (Gen. 1:31) because the One who has created it is good and infinitely superior to anything he has made.

This transcendent Creator is nothing like the fickle and selfish gods described in (for instance) the Babylonian creation story, who make humankind merely to serve as servants to wait on them and keep them happy. In Genesis, the God who creates the world places men and women within it as the crowning touch of all he has brought into being. The biblical story describes

this world as a marvelous home prepared for humankind, a place in which men and women and children 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 aren’t merely descriptive, they’re 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.

But the Genesis creation narrative is more than an argument against other ancient world-making stories. It also aims to positively shape how we think about the world God has made and how we should live in it. It does so by telling a story. And we need to be sensitive to this story form 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 a hard time describing this. But what they agree on is that the story told in the first chapters of Genesis has been very carefully crafted. So we need to focus as much on the way in which the story is told as on the details themselves. Some read these details as a modern historian or scientist would read them, as descriptions of actual events. Others read the stories more as polemical and poetic depictions of the mysterious inauguration of history itself. But however we read it, 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.
- God stands apart from all other things in the special relationship of Creator to creation.
- The creation of humankind is the high point of all God's work of making and forming.
- God intended a very special relationship between himself and human beings.

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. The Genesis story offers us something even more

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**The opening act of the Genesis drama proclaims the truth about God, about humankind, and about the world.**

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important—a true understanding of the world in which we live, its divine Creator, and our own place in it.

Over against the pagan religious notions dominant in Egypt and Canaan, the opening act of the Genesis drama proclaims the truth about God, about humankind, and about the world. It introduces us to the main actors in the play—God and humanity—and the world in which the historical drama will unfold.

## The God Who Brings All Things into Being

Reading the first chapter of Genesis is rather like visiting a really great art exhibition. Suppose you are sitting quietly, overwhelmed by the beauty and power of the magnificent paintings. Someone approaches you and says, “Would you like to meet the artist?” Who could resist such an invitation! 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 as follows: (1) “in the beginning”; (2) “[he] created”; (3) “God” (acting subject). These three short Hebrew words transport us back to the origin of everything, to the mysterious, personal source of all that is: the eternal, uncreated God. This God, who has no beginning and no end, merely speaks a word of command in order to bring into being everything else that exists.

The Genesis story emphasizes that creation was *spoken* into being. The idea of creation by the *word* of God preserves the radical distinction between Creator and creature. The story absolutely prevents us from considering creation as some kind of overflow of God’s divine nature. There is no room for the idea that God and creation are somehow one. Instead, creation is a product of God’s personal will. The only continuity between God and the creation is God’s word.

Genesis 1 introduces us to God as the infinite, eternal, uncreated person who brings the whole of creation into existence. The “heavens and the earth” (v. 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 God’s powerful and good activity of creation. As the renowned Old Testament scholar Gerhard von Rad says, “The idea of creation by the word expresses

the knowledge that the whole world belongs to God.<sup>1</sup> This is truly one of the points through which logic can barely wade, whereas faith can swim.

In Revelation 4:11, the throne room of God echoes with continual worship for God's 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.”

This hymn of praise in the last book of the Bible reiterates the profound 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 is the great King over all creation, without limits of any kind, and is therefore worthy to receive all glory, honor, and power.

Ancient Near Eastern people knew all about authority. Tribal or national rulers enjoyed nearly absolute power. In a variety of ways, Genesis 1 pictures God as the Monarch, the royal one whose sovereignty extends by right and by power over the whole of creation. The slightest word of a mortal king in the ancient world carried the weight of a command. But this immortal King speaks, and by the divine command and plan the whole of creation springs into existence.

In the act of creating, God names what he creates, a further expression of 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>2</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>3</sup>

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

As King, however, God does not hold himself distant from the creation. God is not the sort of monarch who rules from afar and takes no interest in his territories or subjects. God reigns over the kingdom in a deeply personal way. God’s words do not merely command; they also express his own involvement in the making of the cosmos. This can be seen in the mysterious phrase “Let us make human beings . . .” (1:26), which we take to be God addressing the heavenly council of angels. At this climactic moment, the text highlights God’s own personhood and desire that there should be other entities distinct from (and yet related to) himself.

This desire finds dramatic expression as God blesses the humans he has made and speaks to them directly: “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it” (1:28). Here we see the personal relationship between the divine King and his human subjects. God invites these human creatures to participate in the great task of filling and ordering the world he has given them for their home. God’s personal relationship with humankind is pictured 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 and for their needs and responsibilities.

## Humankind as God’s Image

The creation of humankind brings to a climax the Genesis story of creation (1:26-28). In the biblical story by which we live, men and women are creatures designed and made by God. However we relate the creation to scientific theories, if we live by the biblical story we cannot think of ourselves merely as the random products of time and chance (as do advocates of atheistic evolution). Human beings are creatures of God, and according to Genesis (and the rest of the Bible), each human being is a special creature at that.

What makes humankind so special? God speaks personally with human beings—they enjoy a uniquely personal relationship with him. 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. Genesis 3:8 stunningly evokes this rela-

tionship between the creating God and human creatures. Men and women are made for intimate relationship with God, and our creatureliness and earthiness present no obstacle to that relationship. God walks regularly with Adam and Eve in the huge garden he has set aside for them. The Creator discusses with them how this great garden is developing and how its plants and animals are flourishing under their care.

Genesis 1 looks at humankind in its relationship to the world. Genesis 2 focuses on the man and the woman in their relationships to one another and to God. The two passages use different images and metaphors because they focus on different aspects of what it means to be human.

In Genesis 1:26-28 humankind is created in God's image, in God's likeness. Note that the words "image" and "likeness" make the same point. Though God is the infinite Creator, and humans are merely part of God's finite creation, there is something fundamentally similar between them. The "image" metaphor draws our attention to the striking similarity between humans and God without denying that we are radically different from God. If humankind is created "in God's image," then in some way we are like the One who created us. The following verses clarify that likeness.

In Genesis 1:26, God says, "Let us make human beings in our image . . . so that they may *rule* . . . over all the creatures." God then says to the human beings he has created, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule . . ." (1:28). This phrase clarifies the fundamental similarity between God and humanity: humankind's unique vocation to rule over the non-human parts of creation on land and in sea and air, under God as the supreme Ruler over all.

God has assigned humanity the special role of serving as "under-kings" or stewards in the kingdom. We are to rule over the creation in order to enhance God's reputation and glorify God's name within God's cosmic kingdom.

Genesis 1:26-28 has become notorious among some environmentalists who believe this teaching has been used to justify much of the environmental destruction in the modern world. But however it may have been misinterpreted in the

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past, this passage clearly identifies humankind's vocation of rule or dominion over creation not as tyrannical exploitation of nature but as careful stewardship. God acts for the good of the creation and not for selfish pleasure. God creates a perfect home for humankind, and at every point in God's work, Genesis describes the creation as "good" and "very good." Over this good creation, God calls the human "ruler" to serve as steward or under-sovereign, to embody God's own care for and protection of the 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, human caretakers are accountable to the divine Creator for the world entrusted to their care.

God gives humankind huge freedom and clear responsibility. Thus a better way of expressing the concept of humanity's "dominion" over creation may be to say that we are God's royal stewards, put here to develop the hidden potential in God's creation so that the whole of it may celebrate God's glory.

Imagine that you are a fifteenth-century sculptor and one day receive an e-mail from Michelangelo himself, asking if you would be willing to come to his studio to complete a piece of work he has begun. Your job is to continue the 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 creation entails this sort of confidence in what we are capable of achieving. It also brings a heavy responsibility for what results from that stewardship. If this is what being "in the image of God" involves, then clearly our service for God is as wide as the creation itself, and it includes taking good care of the environment.

Theologians have often used the term "cultural mandate" or "creation mandate" when referring to these verses. Culture isn't just what appears on the walls of hushed museums or plays or music from the stages of concert halls. Culture is making something of the world. The biblical story of human beginnings calls us to bring every kind of cultural activity within the service of God. Indeed, there is a dynamic element to "the image of God." We "image" God in creation precisely as we develop its potential and cultivate its possibilities in agriculture, art, music, commerce, politics, scholarship, family life, church, leisure, and so on, in ways that honor God. As we develop the potential of God's creative com-



mand “Let there be . . .” we continue to spread the goodness of God’s creating work throughout the world.

Genesis 1 describes humankind as stewards ruling *coram deo*, that is, before the presence of God. The nature of our relationship finds expression in how we look after God’s good creation. And we do this not merely as individuals, but as partners.

In Genesis 1, God makes humans “male and female.” So God’s imagebearers are always male or female, man or woman. This created gender distinction means that 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 brings this and the other relationships in which humans live out their lives into sharper focus.

One of the ways Genesis expresses Adam’s rule is in his naming of the animals. Just as God named the creation (in Genesis 1) as he formed it, here God invites Adam to name the animals God has made. Adam thus has one relationship to God and another to the animal world. But Adam needs more companionship than the animals provide. Genesis 2:18-25 tells us that God created Eve as a suitable helper and companion for Adam. Adam’s exultant cry “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” captures the joy of human companionship, and Adam and Eve’s “one flesh” union (2:24) illuminates their physical and emotional intimacy. God demonstrates deep love for the human couple by providing what is best for them.

Adam and Eve’s call to rule the creation manifests itself in their responsibility to work in the garden and care for it (2:15). As described in Genesis 2:8-14, this “garden” is more like a national park than one of our household gardens. It’s criss-crossed by large rivers and swarming with all kinds of flora and fauna. Think of Adam and Eve as the first farmers and conservation officers. Once more it’s clear that to be human involves a deep involvement with the earth by exploring its potential and caring for it. We are made for God. We are also made for one another. And we are made to care for the creation and to work within it.

## **The World as God’s Kingdom**

Though Christianity has often been accused of being otherworldly, it should be clear by now that the biblical story does not encourage anyone to feel detached

from or superior to this world of space and time and matter. The Bible depicts the created, material world as the very theater of God’s glory. It is the kingdom over which God reigns. These early chapters of Genesis call us to a very positive attitude toward 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.” The repetition of the word “good” throughout Genesis 1 reminds us that the whole creation comes from God and that in its initial state it beautifully reflects God’s own design and plan for it. Creation’s bountiful diversity—light and darkness; land and sea; rivers and minerals; plants, animals, birds, and fish; human beings both male and female—all suggest the marvelous harmony of created things. Like an orchestra, it produces a symphony of praise to the Creator.

Genesis also reveals that our world exists within time. God creates the day and the night, and he names them. Because creation exists in time, God clearly intends for humans to develop 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 care for and to rule over the earth. The work of Adam and Eve in the glorious garden God made marks the beginning of a long process by which their descendants are to develop the riches of creation. Adam and Eve’s royal stewardship of Eden forms a microcosm of what God intends to happen to the whole creation as history unfolds.

## Reflections for Today

The first few chapters of the Bible spotlight three great themes that will unfold as the story continues. First, the Maker; second, what God makes; and third, God’s masterpiece—that’s us!

### *The Maker*

Though the word “unique” is almost a cliché in our advertising-saturated world, it’s the only word that fits when it comes to the Creator in Genesis. There is only one God, and this God is unimaginably different from everything else there is. God is powerful, good, kind, wise, faithful, and holy. God is sovereign above all things. Yet the Creator bends to connect himself to everything else there is. And this Creator invites you and me into a relationship with himself. What a privilege it is to read God’s story, realizing he is writing us into it!

### ***What God Makes***

The first chapters of Genesis picture a cosmos of exquisite beauty, harmony, joy, and pleasure. There is none of the pain, the evil, the death that are such normal elements of the world we know. But perhaps we should pause here to think about what we mean by that word “normal.” It often means average, common, usual. In this sense, it may be “normal” to experience suffering and disappointment: “Stuff happens; that’s just the way it is.” But we can and do use the same word to describe not the way things are but the way things should be: for example, we say that a “normal” human temperature is 98.6° Fahrenheit or 36.8° Celsius.

It’s in this latter sense of the word that Genesis offers an unforgettable snapshot of what a “normal” world looks like. Though you and I have never seen it just like this, we somehow know that this is the way our world was meant to be. The relationship sketched in Genesis between humankind and the rest of this remarkable world has often been misunderstood. Humankind is given the task to “rule” and “subdue” the earth—and to our shame we recognize that this has often been done in an oppressive and irresponsible way.

Just as we paid attention to what a “normal” creation was meant to look like, so we must see what it normally means to “rule” and “subdue” in the way God intended. It means to “develop and care for” the world God made good (Gen. 2:15). So, for example, careful stewards of God’s creation might develop orchards and care for the trees so that they could eventually enjoy their fruit. This was the kind of developing and caring that God had in mind. But no obedient steward would carelessly pollute the land and make the trees unfruitful. Other stewards might tend trees and then cut them down for the sake of their wood. But no good steward would simply clear-cut those trees without caring for the continuing health of the forest and the other creatures that share it.

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The same is true for all the other aspects of creation God gives us to be developed. Humans create culture in all its richness and diversity: marriage and friendship, art and scholarship, economic and political structures, games and sports, making things with our minds and hands, among a thousand other good gifts. God calls us as stewards to discover and to develop the potential built into creation, and to do so in a way that cares for and safeguards these good gifts, honors God as their Maker and Giver, and recognizes our own creaturely responsibility. And that brings us to the third spotlight: us!

### *The Masterpiece*

If we were to hand you a photograph of, say, your graduating class from school, whose face would you seek out first? Right—your own! And so, of course, would we. We humans can be extraordinarily self-centered creatures! A reading of the early parts of Genesis may seem at first to flatter that kind of human vanity, since the fashioning of humankind, in all our male and female glory, is quite clearly the pinnacle of the Creator’s work. But it should soon begin to sink in that the most glorious of all the qualities of the man and the woman who tend the garden is not their physical beauty, or their gifts of language and self-consciousness, or their intellect. Being made in the Creator’s own image, our most glorious quality is that we reflect in miniature God’s inexpressible glory. Of all God’s creatures, only we can truly know what it means for God to love us, to speak to us, to listen to us—because only we have been made to do these things too. No other creature reflects God in this way.

God’s image, stamped indelibly on our being, can never be fully eradicated. Yet the image of God in us has become horribly defaced by sin until it is sometimes hardly recognizable. No living human being fully reflects God’s image in the way that Genesis suggests should be normal—except one. For that one, we must look ahead in the drama of Scripture to see God’s image in humanity restored at last in Jesus. Paul calls Jesus the second Adam (Rom. 5:14; 1 Cor. 15:45). In Jesus we see the perfect image of God restored. By being like Jesus, we can become more and more what God the great Creator always intended us to be: living in fellowship with God, in harmony with the creation, fulfilled and happy in our calling to understand and enjoy and develop this good earth. Normal, at last.

## Finding Our Place in the Story

1. We have seen that the first chapters of Genesis show a Creator who is intimately connected with the Creation. What are the dangers of losing sight of this, of thinking of God as vaguely “up there” in heaven?<sup>4</sup>
2. How do the Psalms (e.g. 8, 19, 33, 65, 104) show God as present and active in the world? How could this understanding help to reshape our view of the world?
3. The name Yahweh Elohim makes the point that the same God who redeems us is the one who created all things. Why is this so important? How do Christians sometimes separate salvation from creation, grace from material existence?
4. Why is it so important for Christians to remember that God made all things good (see Gen. 1:4, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31)? What does the apostle Paul mean when he says that to deny the goodness of creation is something “taught by demons” (1 Tim. 4:1-5)?
5. The Bible’s account of Creation was written in part to argue against pagan myths. How does knowing this help us to understand and apply the first chapters of Genesis? What myths might the Creation story in Genesis battle against today?
6. What might be the relationship between the Genesis story and modern scientific ideas about the origins of the earth and of human life?
7. In Moses’ time, only the Pharaoh was thought of as being in the image of a god. What does it mean for us that we are all made in God the Creator’s own image?
8. Genesis shows the universe coming into being at a word from God, and in the New Testament that same Word is shown to give order to all things (see Heb. 1:3 and John 1:3). Why is this so important to the way we think about our world?