



Edited by Gary M. Burge and Andrew E. Hill

THE BAKER ILLUSTRATED BIBLE COMMENTARY

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ILLUSTRATED
BIBLE
COMMENTARY

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Preface

Evangelicals believe that the Bible is the Word of God. This means that when the Bible is read with care and joined to the work of the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:16–18), it can become an unparalleled source of strength, wisdom, and instruction in the ways of God (Ps. 19:7–8; 2 Tim. 3:16). Each generation needs to reexamine God’s Word and ask how it can be effectively applied to the specific needs that exist. To assist in this task, commentaries are written. They are designed not to replace Scripture but to aid the understanding of it. That is the purpose of this commentary. It was written to help the average reader understand what the biblical text says.

All of the writers for this commentary are evangelical Christians who are technical scholars in their field. They all have a knowledge of the original language of the text and have studied it extensively; many have already written elsewhere on the same material that they address in this volume.

The commentators have also written so that persons without technical training can understand the Bible. Many excellent books have been written by scholars for scholars, but that was not the design of this work. Certainly, if scholars read this commentary, they will see the academic scaffolding behind it. But this commentary was written primarily to assist the pastor, student, church school teacher, or interested layperson in grasping the meaning of Scripture and applying it to his or her life.

This commentary tackles problematic questions but also calls attention to the spiritual and personal aspects of the biblical message.

The authors have certainly attempted to clarify existing difficulties, but that, in itself, was not deemed a sufficient goal. That the Word be allowed to speak to our needs was also considered an important purpose.

Although this commentary is not a textbook on systematic theology, important points of biblical theology are brought out. The great doctrines of the faith, relating to matters such as creation, redemption, sanctification, and resurrection, are discussed in the appropriate places.

The writers were encouraged to include material from their latest research when this would be helpful, so fresh material and ideas can be found here for the reader’s interest and benefit.

The writers were chosen for their knowledge of the biblical text, not for their denominational point of view. Hence, writers representing a variety of theological perspectives are included in this volume. It could well be that at certain points differences might exist, but no attempt was made to impose an artificial unity on what is here. Charitable disagreement is common to our life as Christians and you may find such disagreements within these pages. The one thing that binds all the writers together is a common fidelity to the Bible as the Word of God. The sincere desire of the writers of this commentary is that its use will make the Scriptures more intelligible and that by knowing God’s Word believers will come to a more penetrating, meaningful, and life-changing understanding of God and his purposes.

The present volume is a complete revision of the *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), edited by Dr.

Preface

Walter Elwell and published almost twenty-five years ago. Every commentary section that was retained has been revised and updated. But in addition we have made way for new scholars whose expertise in the Scriptures and vibrant faith in Christ are well known. This edition is generously supplemented with maps, charts, photos, and illustrations intended to further enrich and inform personal study by complementing the analysis of the biblical text with visual perspectives.

Our prayer is that these efforts will strengthen the church and its mission in the world. We believe that an enduring faith is established by a devout and sincere knowledge of the Scriptures through which we understand our God and may follow him rightly.

Andrew E. Hill, PhD
Old Testament Editor

Gary M. Burge, PhD
New Testament Editor

Abbreviations

<i>ANET</i>	<i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament.</i> Edited by J. B. Pritchard. 3rd ed. Princeton, 1969	KJV	King James Version
BDAG	Bauer, W., F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich. <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature.</i> 3rd ed. Chicago, 1999	NASB	New American Standard Bible
ca.	circa (about, approximately)	NEB	New English Bible
cf.	compare	NET	New English Translation
chap(s).	chapter(s)	NIV	New International Version (2011 edition)
<i>COS</i>	<i>The Context of Scripture.</i> Edited by W. W. Hallo. 3 vols. Leiden, 1997–	NIV 1984	New International Version (1984 edition)
e.g.	for example	NJB	New Jerusalem Bible
ESV	English Standard Version	NJPS	<i>The Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures: The New JPS Translation according to the Traditional Hebrew Text</i>
<i>HALOT</i>	Koehler, L., W. Baumgartner, and J. J. Stamm. <i>The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament.</i> Translated and edited under the supervision of M. E. J. Richardson. 5 vols. Leiden, 1994–2000	NKJV	New King James Version
HCSB	Holman Christian Standard Bible	NLT	New Living Translation
i.e.	that is	NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
		RSV	Revised Standard Version
		<i>TDOT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament.</i> Edited by G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren. Translated by J. T. Willis, G. W. Bromiley, and D. E. Green. 8 vols. Grand Rapids, 1974–
		TNIV	Today's New International Version

Old Testament Introduction

The Old Testament consists of thirty-nine books, written and collected over a period exceeding a thousand years. Sacred to both Jews and Christians, this collection was the Bible used by Jesus, Paul, and the early church. It was the Old Testament from which the first Christians drew their doctrine, upon which they grounded their lives, in which they found prophetic references to Jesus and themselves, and from which they derived comfort, strength, encouragement, and vision for the future.

The books are of unequal length (Obadiah being barely a page long, Psalms having 150 chapters), written mostly in Hebrew. (Small portions of Ezra, Jeremiah, and Daniel are written in Aramaic, a language similar to Hebrew.) These books exhibit great diversity of literary style, including narrative, poetry, sermons, dialogue, prayers, hymns, songs, letters, and prophecies. They also show great linguistic diversity.

While there were many other books written in antiquity, some of which are mentioned in the Old Testament (the book of Jashar in Josh. 10:13, for example), these were not preserved and used as sacred literature by the Israelites. But under the guidance of God, those books that he had inspired were gathered together, until, at last, the collection of writings was complete. There the Word of God to his people was to be found.

The books, as found in the Protestant Bible (the Roman Catholic Bible adds another small collection called the Apocrypha), are arranged in the order of law–history–poetry–prophecy.

The legal and historical material (Genesis–Esther) begins with the creation of the world, continues through Israel’s waxing and waning

The Desert of Zin, one location where the Israelites journeyed during the exodus (e.g., Num. 20:1). This key period in Israel’s history is a recurring theme throughout the Old Testament.

fortunes, and ends with Israel's return to its homeland after seventy years of exile in Babylon. Some overlap occurs in the accounts, and the material does not run in strict chronological order, but it is history in the fullest sense of the word. Here are events of life, often broadly conceived on a national scale, where nations rise and fall, but also seen on a personal level, where the faith and courage or pride and deceit of individuals is the focus of attention.

The poetic books (Job–Song of Solomon) were grouped together mainly because they are almost entirely in poetic form. These books deal with very personal issues, from devotion to God, to the trials of faith, to human love and the inevitability of death.

The prophetic books contain the complex message of Israel's prophets. These messages are urgent, direct, contemporary, morally informed, and filled with warning, promise, or judgment. There is also a universality about them that reaches out to the nations surrounding Israel; indeed, they speak to any nation at any time.

In spite of the great diversity of the Old Testament books, a profound unity remains as well. What gives the Old Testament its focus is the doctrine of a personal God who created the world and, in spite of the world's defection from him because of sin, has not given up on it. God's fatherly concern was expressed in his selection of a nation to represent him to humankind, and through which he would offer

salvation to anyone willing to accept it. The many theological themes to be found in the Old Testament are all part of this presentation of God as the Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer of the world.

The writers of the New Testament look back upon the Old Testament as foreshadowing, indeed prophesying, their own day. God was preparing the world for a full and final revelation of himself in his Son, Jesus Christ, in the types and shadows that he used in earlier times. "In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son" is how the writer of Hebrews puts it (Heb. 1:1–2). Jesus is seen as the fulfillment of all that went before and as the summation of all God's dealings with humankind. His life, death, and resurrection marked the end of the old and the beginning of the new. Because the Old Testament pointed directly to Jesus, the early Christians used it as their own Bible and structured their lives according to its spiritual teachings. These two testaments, the Old and the New, comprise one Bible and tell the story of God's redemptive work to reclaim, restore, and reinhabit his creation marred by human sin. Marvelously and mysteriously, God chose to do this work of re-creation as an "insider," through the incarnation of Jesus the Messiah—who is "making all things new" (Rev. 21:5 NASB).

The Pentateuch

The “Pentateuch,” literally the “five books,” is the Greek name for what the ancient Hebrews called the “Torah” (or “Law”). The Hebrew word, however, more properly means “instruction,” because the Pentateuch contains the legal, doctrinal, and ritual basis upon which Hebrew covenantal life was established. The five-book division of the Pentateuch is somewhat artificial, since the work is better understood as a unified, literary whole. The Pentateuch is a five-volume book, a five-part miniseries that tells a story. It narrates the story of creation, the fall of humanity, and God’s response to the human predicament in the form of both judgment and deliverance. The unifying theme of God’s story is his promise to restore humanity by means of covenant relationship. He makes a series of covenants or treaties, first with Noah, then with Abraham and his descendants, and ultimately with the people of Israel at Mount Sinai after their exodus from Egypt under Moses’s leadership. The Pentateuch artfully blends historical reporting and theological interpretation, using a diversity of literary genres, including prose narrative, lofty poetry, and legal treatise.

Genesis (“origin”) deals with creation,

primeval human history, and the patriarchal period of Israelite life, ending with the twelve tribes living in Egypt. Exodus tells how, by God’s power, these tribes were delivered from enslavement and welded into a covenant nation during a four-decade wilderness experience. Leviticus contains the detailed prescriptions for sacrificial worship, along with regulations for community living. Numbers deals with events at the beginning and end of the wilderness period to provide a representative description of the entire desert sojourn. Deuteronomy is a covenant-renewal document that furnishes a detailed description of what the Sinai covenant meant for the Israelites.

Together, the five books show God as the sole Creator and Sustainer of the universe. The Torah teaches that humanity was created to worship God and have fellowship with him.

In particular it describes how the Hebrews were chosen from all the nations to witness to God’s existence and power in the world. Their way of life was to reflect his high moral and spiritual qualities, and they were commanded specifically to



Handwritten Torah scroll from the 1740s on display at the Ramhal Synagogue, Acre, Israel

behave as a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. In a superstitious pagan world they were to be examples of obedience and faithfulness to the one true God's revealed will for humankind. If they behaved in this way they would be blessed richly, but if not they would experience divine judgment.

The Pentateuch forms the historical, religious, and theological basis for the entire course of Hebrew history. Its legal and moral

implications undergirded the instruction of the Hebrew wisdom tradition and laid the foundation for all prophetic teachings, which included the promise of a redeeming Messiah. In his ministry Jesus fulfilled all that the Law and the Prophets had spoken concerning him, and the new covenant that he instituted in his death, burial, and resurrection became the basis of all Christian faith.



Genesis

VICTOR P. HAMILTON

Introduction

Authorship

Moses's name does not appear in the book of Genesis as it does in the other four books of the Pentateuch, nor is another author identified. For that reason, strictly speaking, Genesis is an anonymous book. There is no real problem with acknowledging this, for the majority of the books in the Old Testament are anonymous. Who wrote Kings? Who wrote Judges? We do not know. The presence of so many anonymous books in the Old Testament invites the reader to focus exclusively on what is said rather than on who said it. Content trumps source.

Jewish and Christian tradition alike have attributed Genesis to Moses. This position is based more on inference, or the lack of a more appealing alternative, than on clear textual data in Genesis. When the New Testament uses phrases such as “Moses and all the Prophets” (Luke 24:27) or “Moses and the Prophets” (Luke 16:29), we know that Jesus is speaking of the first two sections of the three-sectioned Hebrew Bible (Law, Prophets, Writings). As “Prophets” stands for Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the twelve Minor Prophets, “Moses” stands for the Torah, Genesis through Deuteronomy. Jesus thus marks Genesis as Mosaic.

Most critical biblical scholars outside evangelical circles find the above conclusion both unconvincing and unacceptable. In its place

they offer the Documentary Hypothesis, or the JEDP theory, which rejects both the Mosaic authorship of Genesis (and the rest of the Pentateuch) and its literary unity. It is alleged that multiple authors are indicated by (1) the presence of doublets (two creation accounts, two flood stories, two banishments of Hagar and Ishmael) that contain contradictory and mutually exclusive information, (2) several distinctly different writing styles and theological perceptions, and (3) the use of multiple names for deity (Elohim, Yahweh, Yahweh-Elohim), often in a single story.

Specifically, four documents are posited. The first is J (for in it the name for deity is Yahweh/Jehovah), which was written in the time of David and Solomon in Jerusalem. The second is E (Elohim is the name for deity here), written about a century later somewhere in northern Israel. After these two documents were spliced, D (for Deuteronomy, or parts of Deuteronomy) was produced in the late eighth or seventh century BC. Finally, around the time of the exile or shortly thereafter (550–450 BC), the P (for priestly) materials were added. Subsequently someone edited all of the documents to give us our Pentateuch. There are currently multiple reconfigurations of the JEDP sequence; for example, one would place J last, and another reverses D and P (i.e., from Deuteronomy: Priestly to Priestly: Deuteronomy).

There are two possible (evangelical) explanations for the origin of Genesis. First, Genesis

1–50 could have originally existed as tablets. Moses then arranged these tablets in chronological order and added the material about Joseph. This makes Moses the compiler (not author) of Genesis. Second, Genesis may have been composed around the time of the exodus from Egypt. Emphasizing as it does the promise of God to Israel’s forefathers and the origins of the patriarchs, Genesis would be an appropriate composition to read to the tribes before they departed for Sinai. The most likely author of such a composition would be the person designated to lead them to Sinai—Moses.

Structure and Content

One structure found within Genesis is an introduction (1:1–2:3) followed by ten sections (2:4–50:26), each of which is introduced by the formula “these are the generations of” (2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10; 11:27; 25:12; 25:19; 36:1+9; 37:2). Five times the formula is followed by narrative (2:4; 6:9; 11:27; 25:19; 37:2). In these verses the NIV understandably translates “generations” as “account of.” Five times the formula is followed by a genealogy: either a vertical genealogy (a genealogy that focuses on one line of descendants; 5:1; 11:10) or a horizontal genealogy (a genealogy that highlights subgroups; 10:1; 25:12; 36:1). Through both narrative and genealogy Genesis traces a specific line of descendants from Adam to Jacob as a reflection of God’s will for one people. All ten uses of this phrase, except for the first one (2:4), end with the name of a person (Adam, Noah, etc.). The first of these ten ends, by contrast, with “the heavens and the earth.” Together human beings join with the heavens and the earth to form God’s creational family.

It is debatable whether the phrase “these are the generations of” introduces what follows (a superscription) or whether it concludes what has just preceded (a subscription or colophon). In favor of the first interpretation is the fact that the phrase is always followed by the genitive of the progenitor (e.g., “This is the account of *Shem*,” 11:10), never of the progeny. In favor of the second interpretation is the fact that often

(e.g., 5:1; 37:2) the preponderance of information given about the person named in the phrase comes before the phrase, not after it.

Additionally we may note that Genesis covers multiple generations in chapters 1–11 but only four generations in chapters 12–50. Patriarchal history is the more crucial segment and hence receives a more extensive treatment. Similarly, note that while only two chapters are given to a rehearsal of creation (chaps. 1–2), thirteen and a half are devoted to Abraham (12:1–25:11). Why six times as much space for Abraham as for Adam and Eve? Or why consign the narration of the fall to one chapter (3), while there are twelve chapters for Joseph (37; 39–48; 50), a marginal character not in the Abraham–Isaac–Jacob–Judah chain?

This does not mean that the creation story is less important than the Abraham story, or that the fall narrative is less significant than the Joseph narrative. Longer does not mean more crucial any more than shorter means less important. But it does say something about focus and emphasis. Presumably the creation story, confined to Genesis 1–2, could have been stretched over a dozen chapters or so, but it was not. Genesis does not address itself exhaustively to questions such as, What is humankind? or, What is humankind’s origin? Rather, it addresses questions like, What does it mean for a person to follow God in faith? (hence the Abraham story) or, How does God use the life of the one who will honor him? (hence the Joseph story).

Genesis, as the title suggests, is a book about beginnings, specifically the beginning of humankind (chaps. 1–11) and the beginning of a single family (chaps. 12–50). Genesis 1–11 begins with a world untouched by sin. That pristine situation will not reoccur until Revelation 21. The untarnished world of Genesis 1–2 is shattered by Adam and Eve’s dissatisfaction with their creaturely status, and their coveting of a godlike stature. Sin puts a wedge within relationships established by God. There is alienation between humankind and God, between humankind and



A scene from the sarcophagus of Junius Bassus (fourth century AD) showing Adam and Eve covering their nakedness

the animals, between man and woman, between man and land, between man and himself.

In chapters 4–11 sin snowballs. Genesis 3 may be read as the cause and 4–11 as the effects of sin. Cain, Lamech, the sons of God, the contemporaries of Noah, and the tower builders all follow in Adam and Eve's footsteps. Fratricide, polygamy, lust, violence, and self-aggrandizement are the fruits of disobeying God.

Paul says that where sin increased, grace increased all the more (Rom. 5:20). Clearly we have abounding sin in Genesis 3–11. Do we also have abounding grace? May Paul's dictum be applied to Genesis 3–11 and beyond? True, God banishes Adam and Eve from the garden, and he makes Cain a refugee, but note that *before* God banishes Adam and Eve he clothes them; *before* he exiles Cain he places a protecting mark on him; *before* God sends the flood he announces to Noah a covenant that will come on the heels of that flood. The God of 3–11 is a God of judgment *and* a God of grace.

Even the whole patriarchal section (chaps. 12–50) may be read as God's plan of redemption through one family (and eventually one person

out of the family) for the sin-infested world of Genesis 3–11. Thus Genesis 3–11 may be read as the problem, and Genesis 12–50 as the solution.

To that end, running throughout the patriarchal narratives is the theme of promise: (1) the promise of a son, (2) the promise of descendants, (3) the promise of land, (4) the promise of God's own presence, and (5) the promise of spiritual influence among the nations. At every major point the patriarchs are buoyed by the "I will" of God. God's covenant with the patriarchs is primarily unilateral rather than reciprocal. He is the one who commits himself through self-imposed oath to the fulfillment of this covenant and these promises. Only secondarily is human behavior introduced as a contingency factor. "You will" is subordinated to "I will" in Genesis 12–50.

Genesis makes it clear that the greatest threats to the promises of God are seldom external ones. Generally, the most potentially damaging threat to the divine promises is the bearers of those promises. Note, for example, how frequent are deception scenes in 12–50: Abraham and Pharaoh; Abraham and Abimelek; Isaac and Abimelek; Jacob and Esau; Jacob and Isaac; Jacob and Laban; Laban and Jacob; Joseph's brothers and their father; Judah and Tamar; Joseph and his brothers. All of these produce strife and alienation, and many an anxious moment. Yet an Abraham or a Jacob is never exiled from Canaan along the lines of the punishment meted out to Adam and Eve or to Cain. Nor are they reprimanded by God for their highly questionable behavior and tactics. Silence does not exonerate them. Silence does indicate, however, the primary focus of Genesis 12–50—God's election of and commitment to one family as the means for world redemption. God will no more lay aside the family of Abraham as his chosen vessel than he will scuttle the church and establish a surrogate institution.

Outline

1. Primitive History (1:1-11:32)
 - A. The Creation of the World (1:1-2:3)
 - B. Adam and Eve (2:4-25)
 - C. The Fall (3:1-24)
 - D. Cain and Abel (4:1-26)
 - E. From Adam to Noah (5:1-32)
 - F. The Flood (6:1-8:22)
 - G. Noah after the Flood (9:1-29)
 - H. The Table of Nations (10:1-32)
 - I. The Tower of Babel (11:1-9)
 - J. The Shemites (11:10-32)
2. Abraham (12:1-25:18)
 - A. The Call of Abram (12:1-9)
 - B. Abram in Egypt (12:10-20)
 - C. Abram and Lot Separate (13:1-18)
 - D. Abram Rescues Lot (14:1-24)
 - E. God's Covenant with Abram (15:1-21)
 - F. Hagar and Ishmael (16:1-15)
 - G. The Covenant of Circumcision (17:1-27)
 - H. The Lord of Birth and Death (18:1-33)
 - I. The Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (19:1-38)
 - J. Abraham and Abimelek (20:1-18)
 - K. Friction inside and outside the Family (21:1-34)
 - L. Abraham's Test (22:1-24)
 - M. The Death of Sarah (23:1-20)
 - N. Isaac and Rebekah (24:1-67)
 - O. Abraham and Ishmael (25:1-18)
3. Jacob (25:19-36:43)
 - A. Esau and Jacob (25:19-34)
 - B. Isaac and Abimelek (26:1-35)
 - C. Jacob's Deceit (27:1-40)
 - D. Jacob Flees to Harran (27:41-29:14)
 - E. Jacob, Leah, and Rachel (29:15-30:24)
 - F. Jacob and Laban (30:25-31:55)
 - G. Jacob and Esau (32:1-33:20)
 - H. The Rape of Dinah (34:1-31)
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4. Joseph (37:1-50:26)
 - A. Joseph and His Brothers (37:1-36)
 - B. Judah and Tamar (38:1-30)
 - C. Joseph and Potiphar's Wife (39:1-23)
 - D. Joseph's Interpretation of Dreams (40:1-41:57)
 - E. Joseph's Brothers in Egypt (42:1-38)

- F. The Second Journey to Egypt (43:1-34)
- G. Judah's Plea (44:1-34)
- H. Joseph Makes Himself Known (45:1-28)
 - I. Jacob in Egypt (46:1-50:14)
 - J. Joseph's Reassurance (50:15-21)
 - K. Joseph's Death (50:22-26)

Commentary

1. Primitive History (1:1-11:32)

A. The creation of the world (1:1-2:3). The Bible does not begin by attempting to prove the existence of God. It simply assumes this fact. But it does begin by describing God's creation of the heavens and the earth (1:1-2). This phrase may be an illustration of what is known as merism, the expression of totality through the use of opposites. Thus verse 1 is simply saying that God created everything. This he did in the beginning, which is the Hebrew way of saying, "a long time ago," without stipulating how long ago it was. John begins his Gospel with the same prepositional phrase (John 1:1), but surely means something different by it. The whole verse may be interpreted as a statement of the fact of an action that is described in detail in 1:2-2:3. The NIV renders the Hebrew word for "heavens" as "sky" elsewhere in Genesis 1 (1:8-9, 14-15, 17), and "earth" as "land" (1:10-12, 24), leading to the possible translation of Genesis 1:1 as "In the beginning God created the sky and the land."

The earth is described as formless and empty. This pair of words occurs again only in Jeremiah 4:23 and Isaiah 34:11, both in the context of divine judgment. One may not conclude, however, that Genesis 1:2 refers to something that is the result of God's fury. The two words designate a state of material devoid of order, a peopleless wilderness, prior to God's meticulous work on it.

Some have connected the Hebrew word for "deep" with the Akkadian goddess of chaos, Tiamat. Not only is this linguistically suspicious, but Genesis 1 itself rules it out, for here the deep is the impersonal watery mass

This Assyrian tablet describes the celebration of the god Marduk's defeat of Tiamat, goddess of chaos.



that covered the world before God brought about the created order. Over this deep hovers the Spirit of God. The verb here is employed elsewhere of birds (Deut. 32:11). The translation “Spirit of God” is preferable to “wind of God.” The traditional interpretation makes better sense of the “us” in verse 26. It is the Spirit who holds things together.

There are a number of elements common to the creation day units: (1) introduction—“and God said”; (2) the creative word—“let there be”; (3) fulfillment of the word—“and it was so”; (4) a name-giving/blessing—“God called”; (5) the divine commendation—“and God saw that it was good”; (6) the concluding formula—“and there was evening, and there was morning—the _____ day.”

Actually light is the only item created by fiat alone (1:3–5). Everything else in Genesis 1 is created by fiat plus some divinely instigated type of activity. Note that the darkness is not called “good,” and that there are sources of light in the universe (day one) besides sunlight (day four). It is appropriate that the one who is light (1 John 1:5) should as his first creative act call forth the light to penetrate and push back the darkness.

One Hebrew word designates heaven both as the place where God dwells and the place where birds fly (1:6–8). The second sense is used here. The Hebrew word may be translated “expanse, firmament, vault” and is that element that divides heavenly waters from terrestrial waters.

In a second work of separation, land is separated from seas, just as in verse 6 waters

were separated from waters (1:9–13). Vegetation is created immediately—“Let the land produce vegetation.” The productive power of the earth is a God-given gift.

For a specific reason the moon is called (only here) the lesser light, and the sun is called (also only here) the greater light (1:14–19). Among Israel’s neighbors sun and moon were designations for deities. Not so in God’s world! In fact, they are not light proper, but carriers of the light. They are lamps, and their duties are spelled out to show their status as servants. They are not arbiters of humanity’s destiny.

Day five parallels day two. On the second day the habitat was created (sky separating waters), and on the parallel day the creatures that live in that habitat (birds and fish) are created (1:20–23). The land can “produce” vegetation (1:11) and animals (1:24), but the sea does not “produce” fish and the sky does not “produce” birds. Only the earth/land (a feminine word in Hebrew) is life-producing.

Here, however, for the first time we see the Hebrew verb for “create” applied to a specific creature. The choice of this verb is to emphasize a uniquely divine act. It never has a human subject. By contrast, Genesis 1 also uses “make/made” with God (1:7, 16, 25–26, 31), a verb that frequently has a human subject. One verb (“create”) underscores the uniqueness of God as Creator. The other verb (“make”) draws attention to the parallel between divine and human productivity.

Day three brings about the environment (land and vegetation); day six brings about those beings (animals/humankind) that inhabit that environment (1:24–31). Unlike the other days the sixth day is alone designated by the article: “*the* sixth day.” And when it is completed God evaluates only this day’s work as *very good*. These two facts indicate the climactic nature of the sixth day.

Humanity’s creation is preceded by the phrase “let us make mankind” (1:26). While

we should hesitate to read this as a clear-cut statement about the Trinity, a matter about which the Old Testament is essentially silent, neither should we interpret it mythologically (“God said to the other gods”) or angelically (“God said to the angels”). It does suggest that there is a distinction of personalities in the divine being. God, so to speak, can step outside of himself and speak to himself. May it be that God is addressing his Spirit (1:2)? Quite possibly the divine plurality of 1:26a anticipates the human plurality of man and woman of 1:26b.

God creates humankind in *his image, his likeness*. Humans are animals, but they are more than animals. Humans are godlike, but they are less than God. “Image” emphasizes humanity’s close similarity to God, while “likeness” stresses that this similarity is not exact. God and humanity are not indistinguishable. Verse 27 clearly states that the distinction of the sexes (male and female) is also of divine origin. One’s sexuality is far from a biological accident.

A sacred tree, possibly symbolizing life (Nimrud, Assyria, 865 BC), similar to the Tree of Life in Genesis 2:9

As the divine image bearer, humanity is to subdue and rule over the remainder of God’s created order. This is not a license to rape and destroy everything in the environment. Even here he who would be lord of all must be servant of all. This is indicated, among other ways, by the fact that God created his image bearers as vegetarians (1:29–30).

Everything God created thus far is called “good” or “very good.” The seventh day alone is called “holy” (2:1–3). It is significant that the word “holy” is applied in Scripture first to the concept of time, not to space. Pagan mentality would place a premium on space and holy places; time and history are viewed as cyclical.

The absence of the phrase “and there was evening, and there was morning—the _____ day,” after the seventh day indicates that God is not resting because he is exhausted but is desisting from his work of creation. It is not so much a date as it is an atmosphere. The seventh day, like man and woman (1:28), is blessed. If “blessed” in 1:28 is meant to confer the power to beget new life, might “blessed” in 2:3 mean the same?

B. Adam and Eve (2:4–25). Genesis 1 says little about how God created humankind. It simply notes that God created male and female,



adding a few remarks about their relationship to the rest of creation. Genesis 1 emphasizes humankind as *created with* authority; Genesis 2 emphasizes humankind as *under* authority.

This section (2:4–7) is introduced as “the account of the heavens and the earth”; this is the first of ten units in Genesis introduced with “account of” (or, “story of, descendants of”). In a sense man is viewed as the offspring of the heavens and the earth. But it is an earth without vegetation and water (2:5), except for subterranean streams (2:6).

God is pictured as a potter. He forms man from the dust. Perhaps we should translate dust as “mud” or “clay,” for potters do not work with dust. The idea of God creating man from the earth is mentioned elsewhere in the Old Testament (Job 4:19; 10:8; Ps. 90:3; 103:14; 104:29; 146:4). Not only is God potter, he is animator as well. God breathes the breath of life into man.

The Garden of Eden (2:8–14) is located in the east, but an explicit location is not given. The word “Eden” may be connected with Sumerian-Akkadian *edinu* (“wilderness, flatland”). Three times (2:8, 10; 4:16) the word refers to the geographical location of the garden. That the garden is planted after man’s creation indicates that the Lord God did not live there.

The trees in this garden produce edible fruit. But two trees are given special significance: the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. There are only a few references to the Tree of Life in the Old Testament (Prov. 3:18; 11:30; 13:12; 15:4) and a few in the New Testament (Rev. 2:7; 22:2, 14, 19). Humans are not dependent on this tree for life, for they already have life (man was “a living being” [2:7] before the Tree of Life [2:9]). What they are dependent on is a proper relationship with God. Accordingly there seems to be no need for this living, primal human pair to eat of the Tree of Life immediately, although later that might change.

Work is not a result of the fall; manual labor is prefall. Adam is put into the garden to work it and to take care of it (2:15–17). God has been

doing the work thus far, and now he shares that responsibility with his image bearer. Even before Genesis 3, then, a biblical work ethic is sounded.

With this assignment comes an additional word from God. In Genesis 2 God creates two institutions. The first is law, the purpose of which is to teach people to live under authority. The second is marriage, the purpose of which is to teach people to live for someone other than themselves.

God reminds Adam of his ample provision for humankind: “You are free to eat from any tree.” The Lord is not stingy. Then he follows that with a single prohibition: “You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (2:17). There is much debate about the meaning of the phrase “knowledge of good and evil.” One popular suggestion is that this knowledge is sexual knowledge, for when the couple eat from this tree they immediately realize they are naked (3:7). But why would God want to withhold sexual knowledge from those he just created male and female? A second popular interpretation of the phrase is that “good and evil” means everything (a merism), and what was forbidden was the acquisition of omniscience. But then 3:22 would teach that Adam and Eve, when they disobeyed, actually became omniscient. The serpent would be proved correct that disobedience to God brings only gains and advantages.

A third possibility, and the one accepted here, is that the knowledge of good and evil means the ability and power to determine what is good and what is evil. Of course, this is God’s prerogative alone. He has never delegated moral autonomy to any of his creatures. This suggestion is lent credibility by the fact that the phrase “good and evil” is most often used in the Old Testament where some kind of a decision or discernment is demanded (Deut. 1:39; 1 Kings 3:9).

Interestingly it is God who determines that it is not good for man to be alone (2:18–25). There is no indication that Adam himself was dissatisfied with his circumstances. After

making his evaluation, God proposes a solution (2:18). God will provide a helper for Adam. God already is Adam's helper (but a superior helper). The animals are also Adam's helpers (but inferior helpers). This helper, then, must be one that will be equal to him. Furthermore she is to be suitable for him. The Hebrew word for "suitable" suggests something that completes a polarity, as the North Pole is "suitable" to the South Pole. One without the other is incomplete.

To that end God parades the animals before Adam (2:19–20). The force of this stresses that Adam himself chooses who his partner will be. Rather than force a decision on Adam, God allows the man to make a free decision. Man is not free to choose what is right and wrong, but he is free to choose his life partner.

After the scene with the animals is over, God administers anesthesia to Adam; and while the man is in a deep sleep, God makes woman from one of his ribs (a Hebrew word, incidentally, that is translated "side" everywhere else it appears in the Old Testament). Actually the text says that the Lord "built" woman.

When Adam says that the woman is "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (2:23) he is giving the ancient equivalent of our "in weakness and in strength." One of the meanings of the verb behind the Hebrew noun "bone" is "to be strong." Flesh, on the other hand, represents weakness in a person.

The man is to leave his father and mother (neither of which Adam has!) and cleave to his wife. Elsewhere in the Old Testament these are covenant terms. When Israel forsakes God's covenant she "leaves" him. And when Israel is obedient to God's covenant she "cleaves" to him. Already Genesis 2:24 is saying that marriage is a covenant simply through the use of covenant terminology.

The climax of creation is this: the man and his wife are both naked. How appropriate! Physical nudity? Yes. But there are other kinds of nakedness. The verse is claiming a total transparency between this primal couple.

C. *The fall (3:1–24)*. There are only four chapters in the Bible where Satan is not implicitly present in the world, the first two and the last two. The Bible begins and ends with him out of existence. But between Genesis 3 and Revelation 20 he is a factor to be reckoned with. The Hebrew word for "serpent" may be connected either with an adjective/noun meaning "bronze" (suggesting something that is shiny), or with a verb meaning "to practice divination." Two things are said about the serpent (3:1–7). First, a word about his character—he is crafty, subtle. These terms translate a neutral word that in the Old Testament may describe either a commendable ("a prudent man" in Prov. 12:16, 23) or a reprehensible (the "crafty" in Job 5:12 and 15:5) trait. Second, there is a word about the serpent's origin—he was made by God. This point is stressed to make it plain that the serpent is not a divine being, not a coequal with God.

The serpent's first tack is to suggest to Eve that God is sinister, that in fact God is abusing her. This is the force of his question in verse 1. "Would God let you see and touch these trees (i.e., raise the desire), but not let you eat *any* of them? A God who would do something like that certainly does not love you." Eve responds with a little hyperbole of her own ("you must not touch it," 3:2) in her defense of God.

The serpent's second tack is to deny the truthfulness of God's word (3:4) and to suggest that disobedience, far from bringing any disadvantages, will in fact bring an advantage—"you will be like God" (3:5). That God has already made the couple in his likeness (1:26) is moot. The serpent is suggesting another kind of likeness, a self-aggrandizing kind of likeness.

No further conversation ensues between the two. Verse 6 tells us that the temptation appealed, in the following order, to (1) Eve's physical appetites, (2) what she could see, and (3) her imagination. Note the thrust in this temptation. The serpent does not ask homage from Eve. Rather he indirectly suggests that she shift her commitment from doing God's will to doing her own will.

God does not track down this wayward couple. He simply walks in the garden in the cool of the day (3:8–13). Hearing his sound, they hide from him. This is as foolish as Jonah, who thought he could actually run from the presence of the Lord. Neither trees nor distance can put one out of the reach of the “Hound of Heaven.” You can run, but you cannot hide.

The Lord begins with a question just as the serpent has—“Where are you?” (3:9). This question does not mean that God is ignorant of Adam’s whereabouts. Rather it is God’s way of drawing Adam out of hiding, to give Adam and Eve the opportunity to face God themselves. God does not just direct monologues toward us. He asks questions, and he listens carefully to the answers given. Maybe God at times appears to limit his knowledge in order to really listen. Individuals who know everything are seldom good listeners. They would rather talk than listen.

Adam does two wrong things. First, he hides rather than face the truth (3:10). His fear drives him from God rather than to God. Second, he blames his spouse and God. Adam refuses to admit that even complicity is a way of being involved in wrongdoing. Eve is not any better than her husband. She too looks for a scapegoat (the serpent, 3:13). What Adam and Eve have in common is their refusal to accept personal responsibility for their actions.

The consequences of sin are detailed in 3:14–19. Only the serpent is cursed. God does not curse those he created in his image. Phrases like “crawl on your belly” and “eat dust” may be understood as metaphorical expressions

denoting the serpent’s submission. (Compare the statement made of Israel’s messianic king in Ps. 72:9, “His enemies lick the dust.”) He is now himself a servant. True, snakes do “crawl on their belly” as a means of locomotion (possibly one reason why later biblical law prohibits the consumption of marine life that crawls on the ocean’s bottom; Lev. 11:10; Deut. 14:10), but they do not eat dust. Wherever God curses, it is in response to somebody’s behavior. Wherever God blesses, it is normally an act flowing out of his gracious will. For every time the Bible speaks of God cursing, it speaks multiple times of God blessing.

God also tells the serpent that he is to be on the losing side of a battle between the seed of the woman and himself. In this eventual showdown, his head will be crushed by the seed of the woman. Is the “seed” collective or singular? The Hebrew allows for either, but the Septuagint has “he.” (The Latin Vulgate even has “she”!) Not without good reason many have referred to Genesis 3:15 as the protoevangelium, “the first good news.” An as-yet-unidentified seed of the woman will engage the serpent in combat and emerge victorious. It is likely that Eve does not comprehend this word. But the snake is not left in the dark—he is to be cursed, a crawler, and crushed. The closest that the language from Genesis 3:15 comes to surfacing in the New Testament is in Paul’s word about Christ’s reigning “until he has put all his enemies under his feet” (1 Cor. 15:25), or even better, “The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet” (Rom. 16:20).

God speaks to Eve about her role as mother and as wife (3:16). Here are the two points where, in biblical thought, a woman experiences her highest fulfillment. And at these two points



Impression from a cylinder seal showing Bashmu, a serpentine creature with two front legs, being attacked by a deity

there will be pain and servitude. It may well be that we should read these words in verses 16–19 not as prescriptions but as descriptions by God himself of what it means to be separated from him. Note that in chapter 1 God created male and female to rule jointly. Now in chapter 3 male rules female (same Hebrew verb). The word for desire in verse 16 is used again in 4:7 (sin's desire to have Cain). Is Eve's desire for Adam normal desire or is it a desire for domination as in 4:7? Given the fact that later this woman's first son murdered her second son, maybe the pain is not the physical pain of birthing but the pain she will experience in seeing the violence in her family.

God speaks to Adam about his role as a worker. Here is where the male experiences his highest fulfillment. And for him too there will be pain. If we read these words as divine mandates, then we should not see these speeches of God as his way of "getting even" or "teaching a lesson" to Adam and Eve. They may in fact be love gifts from God, his way of wooing the couple back to himself. Why should a person who once walked in perfect fellowship with God and is now separated from the garden

want to get back to God if he sees no need for that, and his life is essentially problem free? For Adam that involves trying to till a cursed ground. It is not labor but the difficulty of that labor. Sin always puts a wedge between things or people. In Genesis 3 it puts a wedge between God and humans, between man and woman, between man and himself, and now between man and the soil.

It is interesting that on the heels of this divine word (3:20–24) Adam names his wife "Eve," which is connected with the word for "life, living." It is a name of dignity and reflects the eventual joy of motherhood she will experience. Here is hope in the midst of judgment.

Adam gives a name (as he did to the animals in 2:20), but the Lord clothes Adam and Eve with garments of skin. The important thing here is garments rather than skins. God provides a covering for this naked couple, but it is a divine covering, not a human covering (3:7). Throughout the Old Testament one of the meanings of "to atone" is "to cover." It is no wonder that God's righteousness is compared to clothing, as is unrighteousness ("filthy garments"). Think



The cherubim in Genesis 3:24 may have been like the winged composite creature shown here guarding the temple at Ain Dara, Syria.

of the father in Luke 15:22, who clothed his bedraggled, wayward son with the “best robe” upon the son’s return to the father’s house. It is important to note that God covers the couple *before* he expels them. Here is grace before law.

The Lord banishes Adam and Eve from Eden (not because of what they have done, but because of what they might do if allowed to remain in the garden) and restricts reentry to Eden via cherubim and a flaming sword. Adam has indeed become “like one of us” (3:22) but not in the sense the serpent said he would. Anytime a person believes he can decide for himself what is right and wrong, he becomes god. He has usurped the divine prerogative.

D. Cain and Abel (4:1–26). Cain and Abel, Adam’s sons, are born after the fall (4:1–16). Eve connects Cain’s birth with the verb “to bring forth.” In Hebrew this verb (*qanah*) sounds like “Cain” (*qayin*). Eve has been allowed to share in the creative work of God. Unlike Cain’s, Eve does not explain Abel’s name. “Abel” is the word “vanity” appearing in Ecclesiastes 1:2—“Abel of Abels, all is Abel”—unless “Abel” is to be connected with a cuneiform word meaning “son.” Traditionally understood, his name reflects the transitory nature of his existence.

Abel is a shepherd, and Cain is a farmer. Both brothers bring offerings voluntarily to the Lord suitable to their vocations. There is no indication in the text that one offering is inferior to the other.

The Lord looks favorably on the presentation of Abel’s fatty portions. We should not spend a lot of time trying to answer why God accepted Abel’s offering and rejected Cain’s. Genesis 4 does not supply an answer but rather shifts its concerns to another matter: how does one respond when God says no? Those who try to discern a reason for the acceptance/nonacceptance of the offering usually focus on the quality of the gifts or the motives of the givers. Perhaps a better clue is to be found in the fact that Cain offered a gift to God that came from the soil, or ground, which God cursed in 2:17–19.

Cain is very angry and his face is downcast. Cain is the first angry and depressed man in the Bible. (For others in the Bible whose anger is directed at God and his actions see 1 Sam. 15:11; 2 Sam. 6:8; Jon. 4:1; Luke 15:28.) He should be able, however, to overcome these feelings before they overcome him (“if you do what is right,” 4:7). Cain still retains the power of decision. Sin is now crouching, demonlike, at Cain’s door. A serpent in a garden and now sin at the door. What is Cain to do? The last portion of verse 8 may be read as a command (“you *must* master it”), an invitation (“you *may* master it”), or a promise (“you *will* master it”).

Cain kills Abel in the field (Cain’s?). Tragically civilization’s first recorded crime of murder arises over a conflict involving the practice of one’s religion by two individuals who worship the same God. First, man fell out of relationship with God. Now he falls out of relationship with his brother. How can Cain love God, whom he cannot see, when he cannot love Abel, whom he can see? God’s question to Cain is followed by the famous question: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (4:9). The answer to that question, incidentally, is no. “To keep” means to be responsible for, to control, to exercise authority over. That is why God is repeatedly called Israel’s “keeper.” We are not called to be our brother’s keeper but our brother’s lover. Abel’s blood cries out because the earth will not receive and cover over innocent blood.

As a consequence, Cain is to be driven from the land and become a wanderer. The ultimate penalty for a Hebrew is not death, but exile, a loss of roots.

Unlike his father and mother, Cain complains about the harshness of his sentence (4:13). He will be forced to become a nomad; God will hide his face; Cain will become the object of blood revenge (4:14). This last phrase assumes a populated earth, indicating the existence of others besides Adam, Eve, and Cain. To that end God places a mark on Cain before he expels him. This will protect Cain from re-creation (and for other protecting marks see

Exod. 12:13; Ezek. 9:4–6; Rev. 7:3). Here again is mercy before judgment. What clothing is to Adam and Eve, the mark is to Cain. Note that in neither Genesis 3 nor 4 do the disobedient repent of their sin. Cain dwells in Nod, which sounds like the verb “to wander.”

In light of the reference to Adam and Eve’s “other sons and daughters” (5:4), does Cain marry an unnamed sister? Or are there women represented among “whoever finds me” (4:13)?

Now Cain the wanderer has become Cain the city builder (4:17–24). Does this indicate that the divine penalty has been mitigated? Or is this further proof of Cain’s self-determination? The city Cain builds might even be an early version of the later “cities of refuge” to which a manslayer might flee, and hence be the protecting mark for Cain.

Although out of fellowship with God, Cain is still able to multiply and fill the earth. Several of his descendants are worthy of note. Lamech (4:19) is both polygamous and given to titanic revenge (4:23). Lamech fathers four children: Jabal (“to lead flocks”), Jubal (“Trumpet”), Tubal-Cain (“Cain” = “forger”), and Naamah (close to Hebrew “pleasant,” as in “Naomi”). The skills of shepherding, music, and metallurgy are attributed to the fallen line of the Cainites. Many of history’s most significant cultural advances have come from people who stand outside the orbit of the God of Scripture.

Genesis 4:25–26 should not be understood as a sequel to verses 17–24. Cain’s genealogy does not extend six generations before Adam fathers a child again. Adam and Eve’s third child is called Seth, here connected with a verb meaning “he has granted.” Eve has lost Abel to death and Cain to exile. Seth is a replacement for Abel, not for Cain.

In a chapter given over so much to names, how appropriate it is to read that at this time men begin to call on the name of the Lord (Yahweh). Long before God revealed himself fully as Yahweh to one people called Israel (Exod. 3:6), or even to the patriarchs, there is at least a small group of people who grasp the

identity of the true God. Not until 12:8 will another individual (Abraham) “call on the name of the LORD.”

E. From Adam to Noah (5:1–32). A genealogy stretching over ten generations traces the lineage from Adam to Noah. Only in the last section does this vertical genealogy become a horizontal one (5:32).

In the description of each generation, the same literary structure is followed: (1) the age of the father at the birth of the firstborn, (2) the name of the firstborn, (3) how many years the father lived after the birth of this son, (4) a reference to the fathering of other children, and (5) the father’s total life span.

The names of Adam’s progeny are Seth, Enosh, Kenan, Mahalalel, Jared, Enoch, Methuselah, Lamech, and Noah. The genealogical data about Noah are only partially given in verse 32, and are not completed until 9:28–29.

Two things need to be said about these individuals. First, there is close or exact similarity between some of the names in the Sethite list (5:1–32) and some of the names in the Cainite list (4:17–24). There is, for example, a Cainite Lamech (4:18–24) and a Sethite Lamech (5:25–28), a Cainite Enoch (4:17) and a Sethite Enoch (5:21). Also, names like Irad (4:18) and Jared (5:15), Methushael (4:18) and Methuselah (5:21) are very close to each other. These similarities do not force us, however, to assume that the respective genealogies are imaginary, or that both chapters 4 and 5 are dependent on a stock genealogy. Two separate lines, with two names common to each, are traced.

The second item of interest in chapter 5 is the unusually long life spans. Methuselah’s is longest (969 years). Some would dismiss these figures as totally impossible. While they are indeed high, the numbers are quite ordinary when laid alongside another document from the ancient world known as the Sumerian King List (ca. 2000 BC; see photo). It begins with an introductory note about the origin of kingship. Then it gives a list of eight pre-flood kings who reigned a total of 241,200 years. One of these

Tablet containing the
Sumerian King List



kings, Enmenluanna, reigned 43,200 years. The shortest reign is 18,600 years. Furthermore it is difficult to distinguish whether some of the earlier entries in the king list are gods, mortal, or both. The farther one goes back, the less the distinction between deity and humanity is maintained. Not so in Genesis 5. Push humanity as far back as possible and one encounters only “earthling” (a literal translation of “Adam”). The chasm between the finite and the infinite is never blurred in the Bible. The long life spans may also be a reflection of God’s blessing on the Sethites. Longevity in Old Testament thought is a sign of divine blessing on the godly (see Deut. 4:25; 5:33; 30:20).

One of the names in this passage is well known—Enoch. It is not without significance that he is the seventh (the perfect position) in this genealogy. Unlike everyone else in the chapter, whose death is recorded, Enoch is “taken away.” (For other divine “takings” see 2 Kings 2:1 [Elijah]; Ps. 49:15; 73:24.) Perhaps long life is not the greatest blessing one can experience. To be elevated into God’s presence is better. It is ironic that the one man in Genesis who does not experience death (Enoch) fathers history’s oldest individual (Methuselah). That Enoch walked with God is a virtue and a privilege he shares with Noah (6:9) and is one we are all urged to emulate (Mic. 6:8).

F. The flood (6:1–8:22). 6:1–22. Few episodes in Scripture defy dogmatic interpretation as does Genesis 6:1–4. The sons of God marry the daughters of men; and Nephilim are said to be on the earth. Until this point Genesis

has dealt only with the sins of individuals—Cain, Lamech, Eve, Adam. Now the emphasis is on the sin of a group, the sons of God. Who are these sons of God? The term “sons of God” elsewhere in the Old Testament designates angels (see Job 1:6; 38:7; Ps. 29:1; 89:7). The New Testament, however, teaches that angels do not marry (Matt. 22:29–30; Mark 12:24–25; Luke 20:34–35).

Furthermore, if the angels are the villains, then why is God’s anger directed against *humans*? Recall, however, that in the following flood story all of God’s creation suffers for the sin of humanity.

The sons of God, if not angels, may be the Sethites (the godly line), while the daughters of men are the Cainites (the ungodly line). The trespass would be the unequal yoking together of believer and unbeliever. This interpretation is not without its problems, but it is quite entrenched in Christian tradition.

Whatever the correct interpretation, the union is illicit, for God is provoked. It is interesting that the reference to God’s displeasure (6:3) comes before the reference to the Nephilim (6:4). This shows that God’s annoyance is with the nuptial arrangement itself. More than likely, the 120 years does not refer to a shortened life span (for only Joseph lives less than 120 years in Genesis) but to a period of grace before the flood commences. As such it may be compared with Jonah 3:4, “forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.” The text does not say that the Nephilim (“those who were made to fall”) are the offspring of this alliance. Rather they are contemporaries of the other two parties (sons/daughters/Nephilim). According to Numbers 13:33, they form part of the pre-Israelite population of Palestine.

There is a clear-cut reason for the flood (6:5–22). The sons of God see how beautiful the daughters of men are. The Lord sees how terrible the earth has become (wickedness). The problem is not only what humankind *does*; even their *thoughts* are evil. Sin is both extensive and intensive. Verse 6 says God repents (KJV); the NIV reads that he “regretted” (NIV 1984 “was grieved,” 6:6). In the majority of cases when the Hebrew verb for “repent” is used, surprisingly the subject is God. It is important to observe that God is not on this occasion angry or vengeful, but grieved, hurt. That is, 6:6 emphasizes God’s “tender” emotions rather than his “raw” emotions.

Noah stands out among his peers. He is righteous and blameless and walks with God. Thus verse 9 supplies the answer to why Noah finds favor in the Lord’s eyes (6:8). Divine favor is not something Noah wins; it is something he finds. The essence of favor or grace is that it cannot be defined by the recipient’s worthiness. It always comes from another source. To say that Noah (or any of us) found grace is to say grace found Noah (or us).

God spoke to himself his first intention to destroy the earth (6:7). Now he shares that information with Noah (6:13), just as he later tells Abraham that he intends to destroy Sodom (18:17–21).

Noah is told to build an ark about 450 feet long, 75 feet wide, and 45 feet high. It is really a ship, but Genesis calls it an “ark.” The only other place this Hebrew word is used is in Exodus 2, to refer to “the ark” into which baby Moses is placed. In both instances an individual destined to be used by God is saved from drowning by being placed in an ark. Again, note the announcement of a covenant (6:18) before the flood starts. Here again is grace before judgment.

7:1–24. God now repeats his earlier word to Noah (6:18–20) to enter the ark (7:1–10). What the narrator earlier observed about Noah’s character (6:9), God confirms (7:1). This time Noah is told to take aboard, in addition to his family,

seven of every kind of clean animal and two of every kind of unclean animal. In 6:19–20 and 7:15–16 we read that Noah is to take *two* of all living creatures. Is this a discrepancy, and thus evidence for the blending in Genesis 6–9 of two flood stories? One pair or seven pairs? Not necessarily. Genesis 6:19–20 and 7:15–16 provide general information. Noah is to bring aboard pairs of animals. In 7:2, specific information is given about how many pairs—seven. It is not surprising that God desires salvation of the clean animals. But why spare the unclean animals? Does God’s compassion extend to them too?

Noah is given a week’s warning before the flood begins. The Hebrew word for “rain” in verse 4 is different than the word for “rain” in verse 12. That used in verse 12 designates a heavy downpour. Thus the rain of verse 4 is no shower—it is to last forty days and forty nights. Noah does what God says (7:7–9) and God fulfills his word (7:10).

As the flood starts (7:11–16), again we find the deliberate use of repetition and summarization. This is a characteristic of epic composition. Note: the flood (7:6), entry into the ark (7:7–9), the flood (7:10–12), entry into the ark (7:13–16). Actually there are two references to the flood’s beginning: verse 10 and verse 11. The additional data given in verse 11 are about the two sources of the rain: the springs of the great deep and the floodgates of heaven. But verse 12 refers only to the second of these.

Although Noah’s wife, sons, and daughters-in-law are also saved, there is no reference to their character. Their salvation is due to their husband/father/father-in-law. Interestingly it is “God” who commands the group to enter the ark (7:16a), but “the LORD” who shuts them in (16b). Perhaps this shift to God’s more personal name suggests that God is the protector of the ark.

As the waters rise (7:17–24), verses 13–16 focus on the action inside the ark, while verses 17–24 focus outside the ark. To be outside the ark is akin to being outside the garden. Salvation

inside the ark is total; destruction outside the ark is total.

The reference to 150 days (7:24) includes the forty days of rainfall, plus the length of time before the floodwaters begin to diminish ($40 + 110 = 150$; not $40 + 150 = 190$). This is confirmed by 8:4, which states that the ark rested on a mountain peak five months later (second month to seventh month). This period of time represents five months of thirty days.

8:1–22. Suddenly the story shifts; God remembers Noah (8:1–2). Not Noah’s righteousness or blamelessness or his walk with God. Just Noah. There are seventy-three instances in the Old Testament where God is said to “remember.” This remembrance moves God to send a wind over the earth. One Hebrew word (*ruah*) translates “wind” and “Spirit.” In 1:2 it is the Spirit who hovers over the waters. Twice the divine *ruah* encounters the waters, first restraining them, now evaporating them. The sun plays no role in the drying up of the waters. In pagan myths this is exactly what happens. The ark finally comes to rest on the mountains of Ararat (in modern Armenia and eastern Turkey).

Noah must now determine whether the waters have receded sufficiently for dry land to reappear (8:6–14). To find out, Noah sends out first a raven, then a dove (twice). God does not tell Noah when the ground has dried out even though he did tell him about when the flood would start and exactly how to build the ark. Here Noah moves from being the passive

recipient of revelation to being the active investigator of what and when the next move is.

The raven does not return because, as a carrion eater, it is able to feed on the animal corpses on the mountaintops. The dove, by contrast, is a valley bird that feeds off food in the lower areas, the last to dry out. This is why it returns to the ark.

In verses 13 and 14 we have two Hebrew words for “dry,” just as we had two words for “rain” in chapter 7. The first (8:13) means to be free of moisture. The second (8:14) refers to the complete absence of waters. Thus the choice of verb and the progression from verse 13 to verse 14 is logical.

Twice God speaks in 8:15–22, once to Noah (8:15–17), and once to himself (8:21–22). Between these two speeches is the departure of Noah from the ark (8:18–19) and his act of worship (8:20). Even though the dove does not return, Noah does not leave the ark until God tells him. God, and only God, can give the green light.

The divine soliloquy is composed of a negative statement (8:21) and a positive one (8:22). In spite of man’s congenital proclivity to sin, the God of mercy will not exterminate him (8:21). There will be predictability in the natural world (8:22). And all this will be a gracious gift from God. No rites associated with fertility cults will bring about this condition. Only grace will.

G. Noah after the flood (9:1–29). Genesis 9:1–17 spells out in more explicit detail what God revealed to Noah in 8:20–22 about the postflood stage. That God talks to Noah as he does in verse 1 (“Be fruitful and increase in

Mount Ararat, the area where Noah’s ark came to rest (Gen. 8:4)

number and fill the earth”) indicates that Noah is a second Adam. These are the same imperatives addressed to Adam in chapter 1. But the world of Genesis 9 is not exactly the same as the world of Genesis 1. For one thing, man is now allowed to kill animals for food and add meat to his diet (9:2–3). Just as Genesis 2 stated a permission followed by a prohibition, Genesis 9 provides the same sequence: permission (9:2–3)—prohibition (9:4). Interestingly even animals are now held accountable for crimes (9:5–6).

God now proceeds to establish his covenant with Noah (9:8–11) and with the animals. The covenant is unilateral. That is, it is one that lays all obligations on God and no obligations on man. It is a covenant in which the Almighty binds himself to a certain course of action—never again to destroy the earth by a deluge.

To cement that covenant God establishes a sign both with Noah and with unborn generations. He will put his rainbow in the clouds. The Hebrew language does not distinguish between a rainbow and a bow (weapon). One word covers both. In what is a radical reinterpretation of divine power, the bow ceases to function as a sign of God’s militancy and begins to function as a sign of God’s grace. A rainbow is a bow without an arrow.

We are perhaps surprised to read that the bow is in the sky for God’s benefit—“Whenever . . . the rainbow appears . . . I will remember.” Perhaps there is a play here on the verbs “see” and “remember.” The flood story began with God “seeing” (6:5, 12) the unrestrained evil in the world. It ends with God “seeing” the rainbow. The flood story reaches a turning point when God “remembers” Noah (8:1). It reaches a climactic point when he “remembers” his covenant.

The story of Noah in 9:18–27 focuses on Noah’s nakedness and not on his drunkenness. Why Noah is nude we do not know. Is he in a drunken stupor, or is he preparing to have intercourse with his wife? One of his sons—Ham—sees his father’s nakedness. To be sure, this phrase (see Leviticus 18) may mean to have sexual relations

with a relative (incest). More than likely, here it simply means that Ham sees Noah’s genitalia. Shem and Japheth, on the other hand, cover their father’s nakedness, much as God did with Adam and Eve’s in 3:21. (Note again the emphasis here on “seeing” and “not seeing.”)

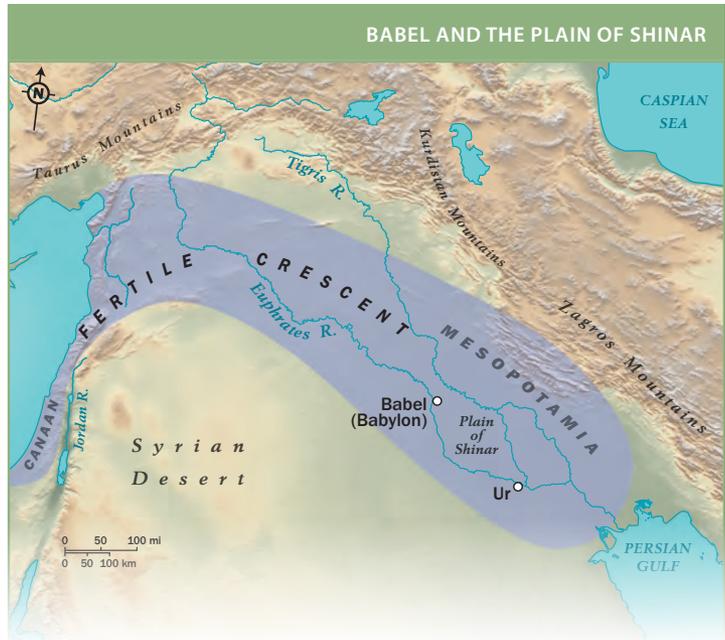
As a result of Ham’s involvement, Noah curses not Ham but his grandson Canaan. This may illustrate the “eye for an eye” principle of justice. The youngest son of Noah sins, and as a result, a curse is placed on Ham’s youngest son. Other interpretations are possible. This is the only instance of a humanly imposed curse in the five books of Moses; furthermore, they are the first recorded words in Scripture from Noah’s mouth. Throughout the flood he was active, but he never spoke, not even once.

Noah also blesses the Lord of Shem, and Canaan is to be slave to both Shem (9:26) and Japheth (9:27). God has talked about the future (9:8–17). Now Noah talks about the future (9:25–27).

H. *The table of nations (10:1–32).* The account of Noah’s descendants begins with a list of Noah’s sons in this order (10:1): Shem, Ham, Japheth; but in the verses that follow that order is reversed: Japheth, Ham, Shem. The Japhethites (10:1–5) are peoples (seven are identified) most remote from Palestine, and most of the nations/places mentioned here are in the Mediterranean islands and Asia Minor. We recognize names like Magog and Meshek from the book of Ezekiel. Javan represents early Greeks (Ionians) in the Aegean area. Madai represents the Medes. The Kittites are to be associated with Cyprus, and the Rodanites are from the island of Rhodes, by the southwest coast of Turkey.

Ham has four sons, the most surprising of them being Canaan. The fourth generation is traced only through Cush. Most of the peoples in this section (10:6–20) are Gentiles with whom Israel has had unpleasant relationships. For example, Cush represents Ethiopia; Mizraim (KJV), Egypt; and Put, modern Somaliland.

Most interesting here is Nimrod (10:8–12). So well known is he that he has established a reputation as a mighty hunter, and verse 9 provides the only time the Lord appears in this genealogy. Nimrod is not only the Bible’s first hunter (to be coupled with Esau [Gen. 25:27; 27:30]); he is the Bible’s first king (10:10). This refers probably to his martial prowess. The four cities he founds—Babylon, Uruk, Akkad, and Kalneh (?)—are all to the east of Canaan, not to the south-southwest,



as is Egypt. Does this indicate that Egyptian power extended at one point as far east as the Euphrates?

Shem fathers four sons. This section (10:21–32) is last in this list because it is the most crucial of the three. In this section we discover the name Eber, the connection of which with “Hebrew” should be obvious. “The earth was divided” in Peleg’s time (10:25). This may mean that the Semitic groups were divided into two branches. Or, because Peleg is related to an Akkadian word meaning “canal,” it may mean that Peleg was involved in the construction of irrigation canals. Or it may contain a hint of the tower of Babel story in which people were divided from each other.

Geographically Genesis 10 ranges as far east as Persia (Elam), as far south as Ethiopia (Cush), as far north as the Aegean Sea (Caphthorites), and as far west as Egypt and Libya. Theologically the list affirms God’s blessing on Noah’s progeny. Israel, or Eber-ites, have no monopoly on attributing their existence to God. It is not incidental that Jesus sends out seventy (or seventy-two) disciples (Luke 10:1). Jesus

is reflecting the Genesis 10 list of the seventy nations in the then-known world, sending his disciples into every part of that world.

I. The tower of Babel (11:1–9). The whole world with which verse 1 begins has just been described at length in chapter 10. Further, we read, this world has one language and a common speech. This is puzzling, for already in Genesis 10 we have read, three times, about the descendants of Noah, who were divided on the basis of their respective languages (11:5, 20, 31). There are four possible ways of handling this. One is to maintain that the two chapters contradict each other. A second way is to suggest that chapter 10 refers to local languages and dialects, while chapter 11 refers to an international language, a lingua franca. A third approach is to suggest that chapter 10, although actually falling after 11:1–9, is placed ahead of chapter 11, lest chapter 10 be read as a manifestation of God’s judgment on the Noahites. Finally, this could be an instance of a general description of an event (chap. 10) followed by one that provides more details about the event (11:1–9). We have already seen this



Partially reconstructed ziggurat at Ur

pattern with Genesis 1 as a general overview and Genesis 2 as a sequel that adds greater detail.

Shinar is the land of Babylonia. The tower the people want to build is probably a ziggurat, a seven-staged tower (see photo). In addition they want to build a city, and thus join Cain (4:17) in such an enterprise. In itself this is not sinful. Nor is it sinful to wish to build a tower that reaches to the heavens. The sin comes in the purpose: “so that we may make a name for ourselves” (11:4). “Name” means reputation. They want to erect an edifice that will memorialize them.

It is difficult to miss the irony or humor in verse 5. The people want to build a skyscraper, but the Lord still comes down to see the city and the tower. Once again there is an emphasis on somebody seeing something. This is the first of several times in the Bible that God “comes down” (e.g., Gen. 18:21; Exod. 3:8). He did not need, by contrast, to come down to speak with Adam or with Noah.

Note that God does not halt the project while it is under construction. Nor does he destroy it once it is completed. What God does is judge the language, not the tower or the city. The people’s tongues, and not their hands, feel the wrath of God. This gives rise to the name Babel, which means in Hebrew “to confound, confuse.” The Babylonians themselves call their city *bab-ili* or *bab-ilani*, “gate of the god(s),” which is reflected in the Greek *Babylōn*.

J. The Shemites (11:10–32). Here is another ten-generation genealogy stretching from Shem to Terah/Abraham. A possible connection between 11:1–9 and 11:10–32 is that in

the former section some people wanted to make a name (Hebrew *shem*) for themselves, and 11:10–32 is the family tree of Shem. The list is much like that in 10:21,

24–25. Four of the names are repeated—Arphaxad, Shelah, Eber, and Peleg. Additionally some of the names are to be identified with place names in northwest Mesopotamia (e.g., Serug/Sarugi; Nahor/Nakhur). This lends historical credibility to the genealogy.

Abraham, however, comes from Ur of the Chaldeans (11:28), which is in southern Mesopotamia. There is a great deal of evidence to support a movement of Terahites from Ur north to Harran, which provides support for linking Abraham with lower Mesopotamia and the patriarchs with northern Mesopotamia. There is no indication that Abraham ever regretted leaving Ur or Harran. This is different from his offspring, who frequently regretted leaving Egypt and wanted to return there (Exod. 16:3; 17:3; Num. 14:3).

2. Abraham (12:1–25:18)

A. The call of Abram (12:1–9). God’s first word to Abram is an imperative: *leave!* The three things he is to leave behind are arranged in ascending order: country, people, father’s household. The imperative is followed by a series of promises relating to progeny, reputation, and blessing. There is quite a contrast between 11:4 (“we may make a name for ourselves”) and 12:2 (“I will make your name great”). The climax of the divine “I wills” is that all peoples on earth (Genesis 10) will be blessed through Abram. Abram is to be not only a recipient of the blessing but also a channel through which this blessing may flow to others.

This all happens when Abram is seventy-five years old. God gets involved for the first time in the life of this septuagenarian.

Abram's response is prompt: "So Abram went" (12:4). First the Lord speaks to Abram (12:1). Then God appears to him (12:7). Now that Abram has moved into Canaan (Shechem, Bethel), God makes a further promise to him: "To your offspring I will give this land." Abram does not yet have even one child, and here is God talking about offspring. First God speaks (12:1–3), then Abram journeys (12:4–6). Next God appears, then Abram worships (12:7). The paragraph begins with the promise to make for Abram a great "name" and concludes with Abram calling on the Lord's "name."

B. Abram in Egypt (12:10–20). A famine sends Abram to Egypt. He is certain that, once there, the Egyptians will abduct Sarai and murder him. Why he thinks that or how he knows this is not clear. Since God is certain about Abram's future (12:1–9), why cannot Abram himself be as certain?

Abram asks Sarai to identify herself to Pharaoh as Abram's sister (which is partially the truth). The logic of Abram's move is clear enough. As brother to the woman involved he can be ignored; as husband to the woman he would have to be eliminated. Think of David, who orchestrated Uriah's death to get Bathsheba.

There are two flaws in Abram's ruse. First, it is laced with deception (not the first time we have met this in Genesis; it is as old as chap. 3). Second, it is a plan in which Sarai has to make herself vulnerable. Indeed, Genesis 12:10–20 describes actual adultery rather than potential adultery, for Sarai is taken into Pharaoh's palace. Conspicuous throughout this event is Sarai's silence. Does she approve? Does she oppose? Does she submit silently? Will she sacrifice her life for Abram's?

As a result Pharaoh falls under God's wrath, albeit he has sinned in ignorance. This is an immediate fulfillment of 12:3, "Whoever curses you I will curse." Perhaps Abram did this for a good purpose, so he thought. If he is slain what will happen to God's promises? They will be aborted. Abram must do anything to prevent

this. One of the great foibles of this man of God is in believing that now and then the Almighty is in need of a helping hand. If this is his thinking, then it suggests that Abram believes he is indispensable to God's plan and promises but Sarai is not. God can always give him, he may think, another Sarai, a more fertile Sarai.

C. Abram and Lot separate (13:1–18). The Negev is the desert region south of Palestine. It is through this region that Abram, his wife, and Lot (he also goes to Egypt) travel on their way back to Canaan. Abram is a wealthy man (13:2), but his wealth is not necessarily an evidence of divine blessing for obedience. Back in his own backyard, Abram's first priority is to renew his life of worship (13:4).

There is a problem, however. Not a problem with outsiders, but inside the family. Abram and Lot each have so much that the land cannot support them both. This leads to quarreling among their respective employees (13:7). This incident demonstrates that the blessings of God can create either possibilities or problems. How we handle these blessings determines whether they remain blessings or become sources of friction.

Abram moves quickly to settle the strife. He foments strife in 12:10–20. Here he settles it. As the elder person, Abram would have been fully within his rights to decide who gets what portion of land. As the younger, Lot would have to accept passively what was left over or assigned to him.

It is not always propitious to exercise one's prerogatives. Abram believes that. Voluntarily he gives priority of choice to his nephew. Note the change between the Abram of 12:10–20 and the Abram of 13:1–12. In the first instance he is obsessed with himself, his safety, his future. He must become deceitful. In the second instance Abram assigns himself position number two. He empties himself of patriarchal authority.

All of this action takes place north of Jerusalem in the area of Benjamin. From here the lush Jordan Valley can be seen (13:10). Lot chooses the plain of the Jordan, which is

comparable to Eden and Egypt. A person is known by his choices. Lot's choice puts him in contact with Sodomites, people whose lives are contrary to God's way (13:13).

Only after the difference is settled does God get involved. He has been watching two of his children hammering out their differences, allowing each to live with the consequences of his choice. God speaks to Abram now that Lot has departed. For a second time God gives Abram a series of promises. The first is land (13:15) and the second is innumerable offspring (13:16). Abram is to lift up his eyes (13:14) and lift up his feet (13:17). Twice in this chapter Abram builds an altar. He settles in Mamre, which is approximately twenty miles south of Jerusalem. Hebron is two miles south of Mamre.

D. Abram rescues Lot (14:1–24). Four powerful kings from the east head an assault against five minor Palestinian kings (14:1–13). It is impossible to identify the four kings with certainty. Amraphel means “the mouth of god has spoken,” and he is the king of Shinar (i.e., Babylonia). Arioch matches the name Arriyuk and is a good Hurrian name. Kedorlaomer means “servant of Lagamar” (an Elamite god). Tidal is the Hebrew equivalent of the Hittite regnal name Tudhalia, borne by several Hittite kings.

These four kings engage the five petty kings in battle near the Valley of Siddim, where the Dead Sea now is. Verse 4 suggests that the battle is instigated by an attempt of the minor kings to establish independence. To quell the revolt, these kings march, according to place names in verses 5–7, from Syria to the Gulf of Aqaba, then north again to Kadesh.

In the midst of these hostilities Lot is captured (14:12). He is now suffering one of the consequences of his choice. Abram is informed of this, and it is here that we find the interesting phrase “Abram the Hebrew” (14:13). In the one chapter where Abram engages in military activity he is spoken of as a “Hebrew.” Some have suggested a possible relationship between “Hebrew” and “Habiru,”

the latter being those who in times of war hired themselves out as mercenaries. In light of Lot's selfish behavior in chapter 13, one might excuse Abram for being indifferent when news of Lot's abduction reaches him. But no, his heart is bigger than that. Furthermore, it is not only his nephew that Abram rescues but the prisoners of war taken from cities like Sodom and Gomorrah. So before Abram prays for these cities (chap. 18), he puts his life on the line for them.

Abram does not have to rescue Lot single-handedly (14:14–16). He has 318 trained men. This indicates that Abram is anything but a nomadic shepherd who passes time counting sheep and stars. He is a powerful individual with a substantial number of troops on call.

How does one man with an army of 318 men go against four major kings and their armies? Certainly not head-to-head. It is a nocturnal battle (14:15). Perhaps this story about the retrieval of Lot and the success of Abram anticipates the degree of success God pictures for his people Israel, even though they too will be a minority.

On his way home Abram meets the king of Sodom in the Valley of Shaveh (14:17–24). Melchizedek is identified as king of Salem. This is most certainly an abbreviation for Jerusalem. Melchizedek means “my king is righteous/justice.” Further, he is described as priest of God Most High (14:18). It was common in pagan cultures for the king to be head of both state and church. Not so in Israel, except for one who properly bears the function of prophet, priest, and king.

He blesses Abram (14:19) and God (14:20a), and Abram responds with a tithe from the war booty (14:20b). It is to Melchizedek's credit that he knows the real reason why Abram was victorious. It is God, and not Abram's military sagacity, who has won the battle. It is no wonder that Hebrews 7 relates Melchizedek and Christ typologically. The story concludes with Abram conversing with the king of Sodom (14:22–24). He insists that the king take the war spoils. One

king already enriched him (12:10–20). He does not want that to happen again.

E. God's covenant with Abram (15:1–21). “After this” (15:1) must refer to the harrowing experiences Abram encountered in chapter 14. He has reason to be afraid of the possible repercussions of his rescue mission. God's word to him, then, is most appropriate (15:1–6): “Do not be afraid, Abram.” God is Abram's shield, not his 318 servants. And God himself is Abram's reward.

Abram has a major concern. He is still childless, and apparently resigned to that fact. For he is prepared to designate his servant Eliezer as the heir to his estate (15:2). This procedure reflects a law from Nuzi in ancient Mesopotamia that says a childless father might adopt a servant and name him as heir.

God's first word to Abram is about himself. His second word (15:4–6) is about Abram. First, there is the promise of a natural heir (15:4), and then there is the promise of legions of descendants (15:5). This is the third time Abram receives promises (12:1–7; 13:14–17), and it is sufficient evidence for Abram. He believes the Lord. He is willing now to stake his life on the reliability of the promises of his Lord. The Hebrew verb “to believe” is the source of “amen.” Whenever one believes, he is saying “amen.” God's response to Abram's amen is to credit it to him as righteousness. This is, of course, the great text on which Paul builds the truth about justification by faith (Rom. 4:1–3; Gal. 3:7–9). Yet, even though Abram has just “believed the Lord,” that does not end his questions directed at God (15:8). And God does not seem annoyed by his questions.

God's covenant with Abram is confirmed by a ritual (15:7–21). Abram is to bring a heifer, a goat, a ram, a dove, and a young pigeon. The heifer and the ram he is to cut in two and arrange in parallel rows. The most frequent way in Hebrew to say “make a covenant” is “cut a covenant.” The only other reference in the Old Testament to this kind of covenant ritual is Jeremiah 34:18. Abram cuts the animals and



God cuts the covenant, all of which leads to the cutting of circumcision in chapter 17. The penalty for failing to be circumcised, in turn, is to be “cut off” (17:14).

In a deep sleep Abram observes a smoking firepot and a blazing torch pass between the portions of animal flesh. These fiery elements can only be symbols of God himself, for in the Bible fire represents the presence of God. The ritual here is dramatic. It is as if God is placing himself under a potential curse: “Abram, if I do not prove faithful to my word, let the same thing happen to me as to this heifer and ram.” Abram thus believes the Lord.

Abram will not himself possess this land (15:13–16). Only when the sin of the Amorites (i.e., Canaanites) has reached its final stage of decay will the land pass to Israel. Although this is generations away, God already knows exactly the boundaries of the promised land (15:18–21).

F. Hagar and Ishmael (16:1–15). How does one handle the problem of childlessness, especially in a society that places a premium on having children? To the contemporary reader

Abram and Sarai's method appears quite strange and highly suspect. Sarai offers her maidservant Hagar to Abram. He cohabits with her, and he fathers a child—Ishmael. This child then becomes Sarai's child. Such a procedure, however illicit it may sound to us, is well documented in ancient literary sources such as the Code of Hammurabi and in the texts from Nuzi.

Still one wonders to what degree Abram's belief in the Lord (15:6) informs his action in 16:1–4. If there is a vivid contrast between the Abram of the first half of chapter 12 and the second half of chapter 12, then we observe an equally vivid contrast between the Abram of chapter 15 and that of chapter 16.

Hagar does not help the situation. She despises (the Hebrew word rendered “curse” in 12:3) her mistress, for she can bear a child while Sarai cannot. Sarai is understandably incensed (16:5). Abram is of little help. He refuses active involvement with his lame “do with her whatever you think best” (16:6). As a result Hagar is banished from the premises.

God finds her at a spring on the road to Shur (a word meaning “wall”), which runs from Egypt to Beersheba. He engages her in conversation by asking her questions (16:8), to which he knows the answers.

It is the angel of the Lord who meets Hagar in the wilderness; this is the first time he appears in the Bible. But in verse 13 the text says that it is God who speaks with her. The angel of the Lord and the Lord—distinct, yet the same. All sorts of explanations, usually along the lines of form-critical concerns (what was the original form of the story?), have been offered to explain this “incongruity.” Might we see here, as we saw in the “us” of 1:26 and 11:7, a hint of God's trinitarian nature?

The child born of this union between Hebrew patriarch and Egyptian servant girl is Ishmael. The name means “El [God] has heard,” but the explanation given for the name is that the Lord has heard. This shows there is no real difference between El(ohim) and Yahweh as names of deity.

Ishmael is to be “a wild donkey of a man” (16:12). He will live the life of a Bedouin, a nomad, and at the same time he will be warlike. For all this emphasis on Ishmael's involvement with hostility, his descendants, the Ishmaelites, never are in conflict with Israel, nor are they the objects of God's judgment. David had an Ishmaelite brother-in-law (1 Chron. 2:17), and an Ishmaelite was one of the key overseers in his administration (1 Chron. 27:30).

Now it is Hagar's turn to name somebody. And she names God—she is the only one to do this in all the Bible. She calls him “You are the God who sees me” (and, again, note the emphasis on seeing, as in previous chapters), or in Hebrew, *El Roi*. She names the well where this all takes place Beer Lahai Roi, “well of the Living One who sees me.” Hagar ran away from Sarai and ran into God. These names stress not the gift she has received (a child) but the Giver of that gift. A distraught, frightened, pregnant, non-Israelite slave girl encounters God in a desert and is never the same again.

G. The covenant of circumcision (17:1–27).

Nothing of real significance happens in Abram's life between the ages of eighty-six (16:16) and ninety-nine (17:1), indicating that Abram at times lived for over a decade with no recorded revelation from God. God now appears to him as *El-Shaddai* (see NIV note for 17:1), meaning either “God Almighty” or “God of the Mountain.” God's self-identification is followed by a moral imperative: “walk before me faithfully and be blameless” (17:1). We observed in chapter 15 that all of the obligations of the covenant fell on God. Chapter 17 lends a bit of balance to that. Abram does not have license to live as he pleases. His behavior is to reflect the character of the one who called him.

In the course of conversation God tells Abram that his name will be changed from “Abram” (“father is exalted”) to “Abraham.” The only difference between the two is the syllable *ha* in the new name. The explanation “father of many nations” is arrived at on the basis of “Abraham” being assonant with Hebrew *ab-hamon*,

“father of a multitude.” Every one of the major characters in Genesis 11–50 undergoes a name change, except Isaac. A new name indicates a new destiny.

The name change is followed by another series of promises about progeny (17:6–7) and land (17:8), and here the point is made that Abraham is to keep the covenant. He is not to play fast and loose with the word of the Lord.

There are four great imperatives addressed to Abraham: walk, be blameless, keep, and circumcise. Verses 9–14 focus on the last of these. This is not something presented to Abraham as an option. It is mandatory. It is to be administered to every male after his eighth day of birth. It extends even to servants (17:12) and thus is not an elitist ritual. Circumcision functions as a sign of the covenant. Earlier the rainbow was a sign of God’s covenant with Noah. The sign here must be for the benefit of the recipient. By an ineradicable mark cut into his flesh, the believer is constantly reminded that he is God’s special child. The sign speaks of God’s mercies and his expectations. Obviously the sign of the covenant, circumcision, applies only to Abraham’s male descendants, that is, half of his family. The sign relates to male sexual activity and procreation, which is a key to the fulfillment of God’s covenant; accordingly male sexual activity needs to be disciplined and dedicated to God.

Sarai is to become Sarah, not a significant name change; thus her new name is not

explained as is Abraham’s, but she is the only woman in the Bible to have her name changed. Something more important than her name is to change. The condition of her womb is to change (17:16). She is to give birth not only to children but to kings (17:15–17).

Abraham laughs (17:17). Here we have the first of three instances linking laughter with the name Isaac (see also 18:12; 21:6). It is unclear whether it is the laughter of joy or of unbelief. Verse 18 (Abraham’s concern for Ishmael) and verse 17 (Abraham’s realism) favor the latter interpretation. Both he and his wife are beyond child-producing and child-bearing years. Often God seems to insist on the impossible to increase dependence on him.

True, God will bless Ishmael (17:20), but his covenant is with Isaac (17:21). Ishmael is not lost, damned, or condemned, but he is clearly placed outside the covenant family, although a recipient of divine promises.

Abraham’s implementation of the divine directive (17:11–14) is not carried out until verses 23–27. Sandwiched between is the promised birth of Isaac. One wonders if Abraham ever questioned circumcising Ishmael since he was not to be a link in the covenant chain.

H. The Lord of birth and death (18:1–33).

This chapter highlights the forthcoming birth of Isaac and the forthcoming death of Sodom. In this contrast between the beginning of life and the end of life, Abraham has opportunity first to be host, then to be intercessor. As host he entertains three men by his home at Mamre (18:1–15). One of these is obviously the Lord (18:1). The other two must be angelic companions, both of whom essentially drop out of the story after verse 9. The number three should not be pressed for any trinitarian significance.



← Circumcision was practiced in other cultures throughout the ancient Near East, such as Egypt. This relief depicting a circumcision was found in the Temple of Khonspekhrod at Luxor.