

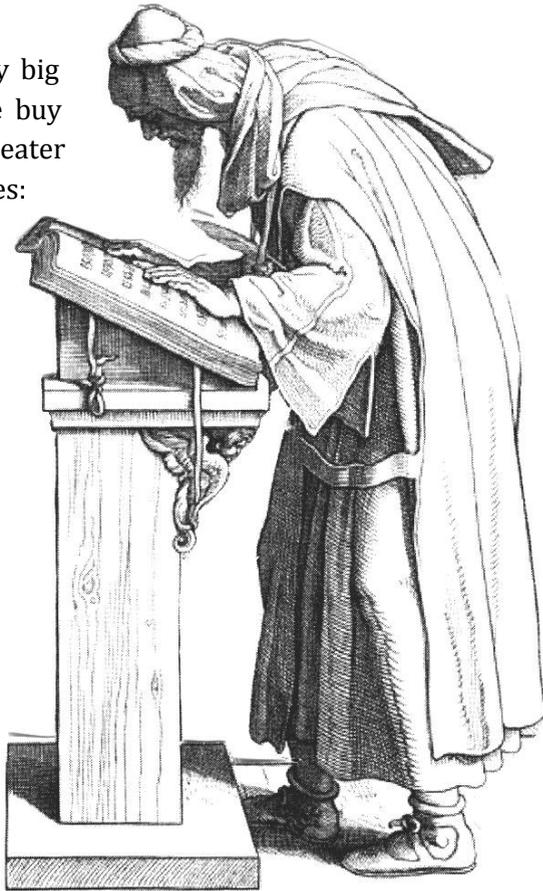
Preface

WE ARE STORY-telling creatures, and will pay big money to those who can tell a good tale. We buy their books, watch their movies, pay for their theater tickets and reward the best of them with prizes: Man Bookers, Nobels, Pulitzers, Oscars, Emmys, Golden Globes....

As much as we like a good tale, all of us are also characters in the various interlocking and overlapping stories of our families, communities, nations, and religion. In fact, much of our identity is derived from the narratives with which we identify ourselves. Sadly, many peoples' stories are flawed and confused, or they make themselves the main character. That leads to all kinds of problems.

For many years I was a Bible teacher—a teller of the Biblical story—in a Middle Eastern country. Most of the Christians in this country are converts from Islam. They have grown to love God as He revealed Himself in Jesus Christ, and often make great sacrifices for their new-found faith. They often find it difficult, however, to re-forge their identity in line with the all-important story of God's dealings with man in the course of history. Often their grasp of God's unfolding revelation and its relevance is almost non-existent. I have also taught at theological institutions in North America and Europe where my students also love Jesus Christ, but who can be as Biblically illiterate as ex-Muslims. This volume seeks to deal with this problem with respect to the Old Testament narrative. It attempts to retell that story in chronological order and in its historical context, thus allowing its teachings and doctrines to unfold as they did in the course of history.

It is, of course, impossible to write a book like this without betraying one's own theological convictions, so let me state those up-front: I believe that the Bible is the divinely inspired story of God's progressive revelation of Himself, a story which culminates in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Hence I have tried to be clear when I have incorporated extra-biblical historical data into the narrative.



With respect to salvation from the holy God's eternal revulsion of sin I hold that without His antecedent grace people will not accept the redemption He made available through Jesus Christ's substitutionary atonement.

I believe that true faith is life-transforming, that it creates a desire to glorify God, and is evidence that one has—to use the Bible's own terminology—been “born again to newness of life” (John 3:3-8; Rom. 6:3-4) by God's Spirit.

With respect to the end of history I am a historical premillennialist. This means that I believe that after a period of great tribulation Christ will return bodily to this earth to inaugurate the ideal kingdom that both the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament apostles foresaw.

Having said all of that, however, I would like to think that this retelling of the Bible story would have resonated with sincere Christians from the 2nd century onward. Thankfully our Biblical theologies are usually more alike than our systematic theologies!

The work is pitched at the level of an inquisitive young adult and written in an easy-to-translate style—something I am sensitive to as a missionary. Any profit this book generates will go towards its translation into other languages. Hopefully the illustrations by Julius von Carolsfeld will help stimulate the readers' imagination.

I have many people to thank, but none more than my wife Anna. Her editing skills combined with her rigorous focus on keeping the narrative flowing kept the story from getting mired in the historical details I love. I also thank Jeremy Johnson and William Kennedy for proof-reading the manuscript before it went to press.

By retelling the Biblical narrative and its implications as it unfolds in its historical and cultural context my hope and prayer is that its inherent power will touch your heart and mind, and that you will be more firmly established in your Christian identity.

Peter Pikkert

Introduction

THE BIBLE is a large volume of 66 books written over a period of about 1500 years. The twists and turns of the story are sometimes confusing but its basic message is clear: people are sinners who stand condemned before a holy God. In His mercy God made a series of covenants¹ in which He revealed the essence of His character, and promised a Saviour to redeem mankind from the devastating results of their sin and bring them back into a right relationship with Himself.

The Bible breaks this story into two parts: the Old Testament and the New Testament. “Testament” is the Latin word for “covenant”. Most of the Old Testament relates how God’s covenants with Abraham and his descendants, the people of Israel, were played out in the course of their history. When they submitted to its stipulations He blessed them, but when they were disobedient He punished them according to the terms agreed upon. In the course of that history He progressively revealed more and more of His plan of salvation for humanity through their prophets. Around the year 250 B.C., 39 of their books were compiled into a single volume that came to be known as the TANAKH by the Jews and, later, as the Old Testament by Christians.

The series of remarkable promises God gave the Jewish people in the course of time were eventually fulfilled in Jesus Christ. His sinless life, atoning death, and resurrection from the dead reconciled the perfectly righteous, holy God with flawed, sinful humanity. The story of Jesus Christ’s unique conception, birth, life, death and resurrection in the first half of the first century, and the implications of all of that for the world, are described in the New Testament. This volume retells the preparatory part of the divine narrative, the Old Testament.

¹ In the Bible the word “covenant” refers to a binding arrangement—either conditional or unconditional—between God and people.



**"The Lord said to him, "Take your sandals off of your feet
for the place where you stand is holy ground."**

▪ 1 ▪ Creation

Genesis 1-2

Date: prehistory

GOD EXISTS, He is the creator of all things, He is eternal and He is separate from His creation. These are the basic presuppositions of the creation story.

Initially God's creation was formless, empty and dark, but with God's Spirit present over it. No one knows how long creation remained in that state. At a certain point in time, however, God chose to impose His will on the raw matter He had created.

"Let there be light," He said, and light came into being. The separation of light from the primordial darkness for a specific period of time was the first day². When the light returned the next day God spoke the sky, the atmosphere—the air we breathe—into existence.

On the third day God willed the separation of land from sea. He also created the countless species of vegetation which covers much of the world's landmass: colorful flowers, towering hardwoods, luscious fruit trees and vegetable bearing plants—everything needed to sustain animal life.

On the fourth day God spoke the heavenly bodies into being: the sun, the moon, and the countless stars that dot the night sky. From that day the sun has warmed the earth and sustained life while the gentle lights of the moon and myriads of other heavenly bodies soften the utter darkness of the original night.

On the fifth day God created the various species of fish and fowl, and on the sixth day he spoke the rest of the animal world into existence.

Although not specifically mentioned in the creation story, at some stage God also created the hosts of heavenly beings, including the angels who inhabit heaven, the place He created to most fully reveal himself. After each creative act God looked at His handiwork and declared it to be good. As originally created, the world was without blemish, wholly in harmony with God's perfect will.

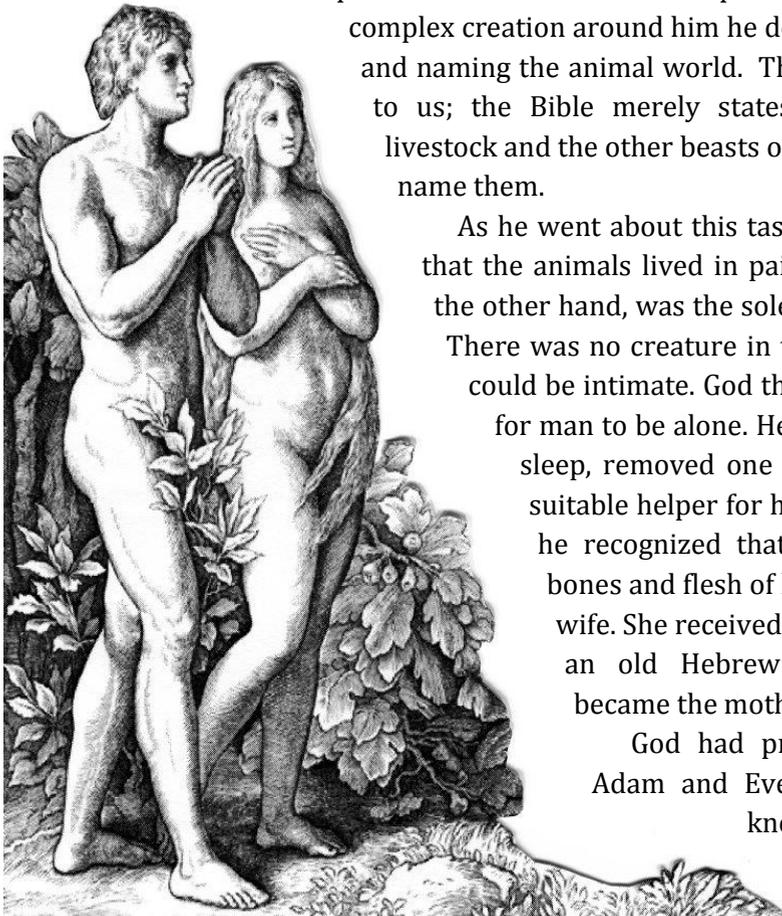
² People have wondered if the days of Genesis 1 were really 24 hours long. After all, they argue, the 24 hour day wasn't created until day four when the heavenly bodies were created, and Genesis uses the word "day" in different ways: as a 12 hour period, a 24 hour period, and with respect to the whole period of creation (Gen. 2:4). By arguing for long periods of time they try to harmonize the biblical narrative with geological evidence suggesting that the earth has been around for billions of years. Others maintain that the earth is quite young, pointing out that God created a fully developed universe, thus making it impossible to trace its age. Others have noted how the story beautifully balances the 1st and 4th, the 2nd and 5th, and the 3rd and 6th days: the separation of light and darkness of day 1 corresponds with the creation of the sun, moon and stars on day 4, the separation of the sky from the water on day 2 is balanced with the creation of birds and fish on day 5, and the separation of dry land from the sea along with the creation of vegetation on day 3 is balanced with the creation of animals and man on day 6. The Genesis story, they hold, is a revelation of essential truths we need to know to relate rightly to God. Although they may differ in their interpretation of certain aspects of the narrative, all Bible-believing Christians accept that God created a universe which is distinct from yet dependent on Himself, that He did so to show His glory, and that He declared it to be good.

God rested on the seventh day, not because He was tired but to derive pleasure from all He had accomplished and to set a pattern for people to follow ever after: six days of work followed by one of rest.

The Bible records the creation of man two times. Genesis 1 focuses on the creation of the material, physical world, and summarizes the fact that God created man on the sixth day, along with the rest of the animal world. It also reveals that He blessed man and gave him authority over the rest of creation. Genesis 2 expands this story, giving us important details about both the creation and the first era in the lives of the first man and woman. In this chapter God refers to Himself as Jehovah (YHWH in the Hebrew text), which was to become God's covenant name with Israel.

Unlike the rest of creation, which God simply spoke into being, God personally crafted man's body from the dust of the earth before breathing life into it. Man was the apex of God's creation, fundamentally different from, and vastly superior to, the animal world—so much so that the Bible states that man was created “in God's image”.

The Bible calls the first man “Adam”, the Hebrew word for “man”. God gave Adam a mandate over the rest of creation: he was to care for it but could also use it to meet his personal needs. As Adam explored the stunningly beautiful and complex creation around him he developed a system for classifying and naming the animal world. The system he devised is now lost to us; the Bible merely states that God brought the birds, livestock and the other beasts of the field to him so that he could name them.



As he went about this task Adam couldn't help but notice that the animals lived in pairs of males and females. He, on the other hand, was the sole human on the face of the earth. There was no creature in the animal world with whom he could be intimate. God then declared that it was not good for man to be alone. He caused Adam to fall into a deep sleep, removed one of his ribs and formed it into a suitable helper for him: a woman. When Adam woke he recognized that the woman was “bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh” and accepted her as his wife. She received the name Eve, which is probably an old Hebrew word meaning “living”. She became the mother of all other human beings.

God had prepared a beautiful garden for Adam and Eve's enjoyment that came to be known as Paradise, or the Garden of Eden. No one knows exactly where the Garden of Eden

was located, but we do know that a river flowed through it. We also know that this river divided into four headwaters. Two of these, the Pishon and the Gihon, no longer exist but the other two, the Euphrates and the Tigris, still flow across the Middle East.

The Bible states that Adam and Eve were naked but not ashamed to be so. This was true in a physical sense, but also in a deeper, spiritual sense. There was nothing hidden or secret which they wanted to hide from each other or from God. They knew each other intimately, and both fully accepted and loved each other as God had created them. In Eden they stood before God as two complementary creatures who drew their sense of identity, security and purpose from their relationship with their Creator God.

When God created Adam and Eve he didn't create robot-like creatures programmed to behave a certain way. He gave them a free will. They could choose to either obey or disobey God and this obedience—or disobedience—would reveal the depth of their commitment to Him. As long as they remained obedient to God they, along with the rest of creation, would not experience the consequences of disobedience: alienation from God resulting in fear, pain, want, shame, and spiritual and physical death.

The test of obedience was unambiguous. God placed two trees next to each other in the middle of Paradise. The fruit of the first tree, the Tree of Life, gave them immortality; eating from it would prevent them from dying. The fruit of the second tree, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, would infect them with sin and lead, ultimately, to their death. Adam and Eve were free to eat of every fruit tree God had placed in paradise with the exception of that latter tree. "The day that you eat of it, you will die," God told them.

• 2 • The Fall

Genesis 3

Date: Prehistory

WHEN GOD completed His creative work He declared the result to be "very good". Angelic beings worshipped and served Him in heaven. In a middle-sized galaxy in a constantly expanding universe there existed a small but stunningly beautiful place called earth, home to two very special creatures, a man and a woman. Adam and Eve walked in voluntary fellowship with their creator and ruled as God's viceroys over the countless species of life that shared the planet with them.

We don't know how long this glorious state continued. One day, however, something went terribly wrong: Adam and Eve broke the one, simple command God had given them—and the results were catastrophic. Sin and evil entered the world, and everything changed. Nothing remained the same.

It happened as follows: Satan embodied a snake and addressed Eve through it. "Did God really say, 'you must not eat from any tree in the garden?'" he asked.

Eve must have been surprised and intrigued when she heard an animal talking. Drawn to the strange spectacle she found herself answering back. "We may eat the fruit of all the trees in

the garden except the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. If we touch it we will die,” she responded.

“No, you won’t die if you eat from that tree,” the serpent replied smoothly. “In fact, God knows that when you eat its fruit you will become like Him! Your eyes will be opened and, like Him, you will know good from evil!” Satan, who had Himself rebelled because he had wanted to be like God, now tempted Adam and Eve to do the same.

Instead of resolutely telling it that she would never disobey God, instead of running from this strange creature that tempted her to disobey her creator, she studied the forbidden fruit. The animal had piqued her curiosity, and it suddenly looked very appealing! She thought about the serpent’s promise: it would reveal to her a new, mysterious area of knowledge called “evil”. She stretched out her hand, plucked a piece of fruit and took a bite... She then offered Adam some of it as well.

The Bible tells us that Satan deceived Eve (1 Tim. 2:13-14). Adam, however, was not deceived. In fact, he faced a terrible dilemma. He must have realized that Eve’s disobedience would lead to her physical and spiritual death. Her act of disobedience would cause him to be separated from the sole creature with whom he enjoyed human fellowship and intimacy. He was forced to choose between God and his human companion. It must have been an agonizing decision but, in the end, he chose for Eve. He took the fruit from her hand and bit into it.

The results were instantaneous and calamitous. They suddenly realized they were naked and, feeling shame for the first time, struggled to sew some fig leaves together to cover themselves. That evening, when they heard the Lord approaching, fear filled their hearts. They used to stand before him confidently, with nothing to hide. They used to love His companionship! Now, suddenly, they were alienated from Him, from each other, from their own selves and from nature. Terrified, they tried to hide from their Creator.

“Where are you?” God’s voice rang out.

Realizing the futility of hiding, Adam answered: “I heard you coming into the garden. I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid from you.”

“Who told you that you were naked? Did you eat from the tree that I forbade you to eat from?” God asked.

“The woman you gave me gave offered me some of its fruit and I ate it,” Adam replied, blaming both Eve and God. “The woman *you* gave me...” he said. Sin was already affecting all he did and said, even how he addressed God.

God turned to Eve. “What have you done?” He asked. She too sought to shift the blame. “The snake deceived me, so I ate,” she responded.

God then cursed the snake. Most of that curse, however, was really addressed to Satan. “You are cursed more than all the livestock and animals in the world! You will crawl on your belly and eat dust all your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your descendants and hers. He will crush your head and you will bite his heel.” In the ancient Middle East the phrase “to make someone crawl on their belly” was a way of saying that their downfall was certain (see, for instance, Micah 7:17). In other words, God was saying to Satan

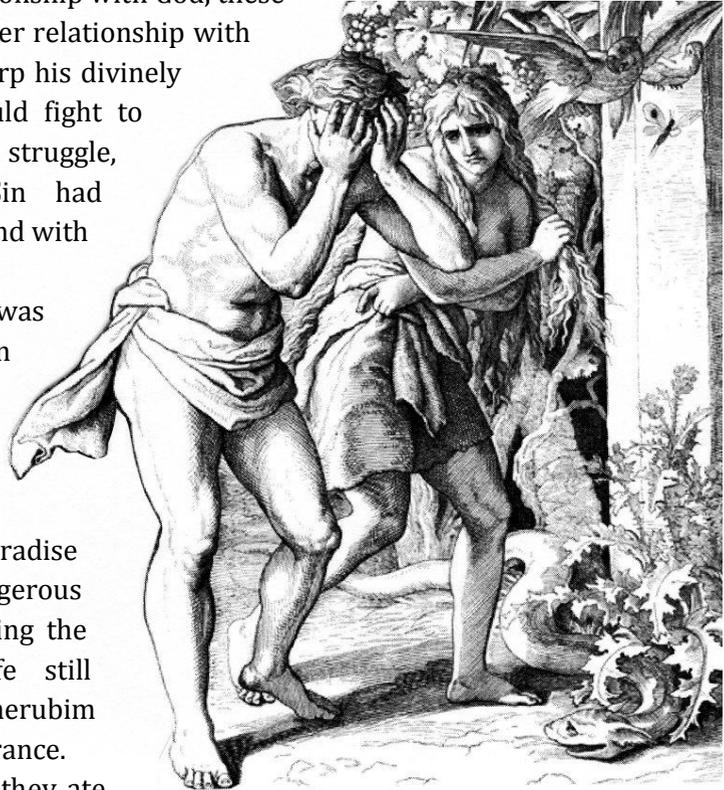
that his downfall was only a matter of time. God then promised that a descendant of Eve would, one day, crush Satan's head. This promise is the second of God's covenants with mankind. It went into effect the day they had broken the first covenant God had made with Adam and Eve about not eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

After cursing Satan, God turned back to Eve. He told her that she would bear children, but that giving birth and raising them in a world full of sorrow and sin would be painful. He also told her that her desire would be for her husband, but that he would rule over her. This enigmatic statement probably refers to the fact that instead of deriving her sense of identity, purpose and meaning from her relationship with God, these things would largely be defined by her relationship with her husband. She would seek to usurp his divinely appointed headship, which he would fight to retain. Love would give way to struggle, manipulation and domination. Sin had spoiled their relationship with God and with each other.

God told Adam that the world was now cursed. The beautiful creation would be marred by thorns and thistles and Adam would have to work hard to procure the food needed to sustain him and his family. He then drove them from Paradise into a suddenly ominous and dangerous world. To keep them from re-entering the garden, where the Tree of Life still beckoned, He placed angels called cherubim with a flaming sword to block its entrance.

God had told them that the day they ate from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil they would die. Their relationship with God was broken and so, on that fateful day, they died spiritually. Physically too their bodies began to break down until, many years later, they died physically as well.

But there was more to it than that. God regards humanity as an organic whole. Adam represented the human race, and his progeny was "made in his image" (Gen. 5:1-3). All of mankind, therefore, inherited Adam's fallen, spiritually dead sin-nature. From now on every person would be mortal and possess a corrupted nature that would alienate them from the holy God and, like Adam, become an object of His wrath (Rom. 5:12-21). The only person who would ever be born whose nature was unaffected by that of Adam's was Jesus Christ. He would be born of a virgin. With no earthly father he would not be created in Adam's image and therefore did not possess Adam's sin nature.



In spite of Adam and Eve's awful fall into sin God did not desert them. His promise of a Savior gave them hope. God also killed some animals and used their skins to make a suitable set of clothes for them. That act has often been interpreted as the first sacrifice. It would take the shedding of the blood of an atoning sacrifice³ to cover the guilt and shame mankind had brought on itself.

▪ 3 ▪ Cain and Abel

Genesis 4:1-16

Date: Prehistory

AFTER THEIR expulsion from the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve either found a cave to live in or built a shelter for themselves. They learned to plow, sow, weed and reap, even as their once perfect bodies began to break down. God had, however, promised that the "seed of the woman" would, one day, overcome the curse of sin and death. So God blessed them with children. Adam and Eve named their first son Cain and their second son Abel.

Adam and Eve would have told their children everything that had taken place: Satan's temptation of Eve, how Adam had decided to follow their mother's act of disobedience and how that had led to their expulsion from Paradise and brought misery and death into the world. They may have showed their sons the guarded entrance to the Garden of Eden. They also explained that God's curse had been tempered by the tremendous promise that, one day, a person would be born who would defeat the great deceiver, Satan.

In the course of time Cain learned to till the soil and became a farmer while Abel domesticated sheep and became a shepherd. They also married. At this early



In the course of time Cain learned to till the soil and became a farmer while Abel domesticated sheep and became a shepherd. They also married. At this early

³ To "atone" means to satisfy or appease someone you have offended. In the Bible the term "atoning sacrifice" refers to that which is offered to God in order to satisfy or appease His righteous anger at disobedience.

point in human history there were no other families. However, the Bible states that Adam and Eve had more sons and daughters (Genesis 5:4) so; odd as that seems today, Cain and Abel must have married their sisters.

One day the two brothers decided to offer a sacrifice to God. They each built a platform of large rocks on which they placed some of the results of their labor. Cain burned some fruits and vegetables from his fields while Abel brought the fat portions of a choice sheep from his flock. As the smoke rose heavenward, however, they both sensed that God was pleased with Abel's, but not with Cain's offering. This was because Abel's offering was an expression of his faith (Heb. 11:4). He evidently realized that he was a sinner who stood in need of God's promised savior. Cain's offering, on the other hand, was not a reflection of his faith in God's promise. He apparently thought that the ritual itself would improve his standing with God, and became angry when this was not acceptable.

"Why are you angry?" the Lord asked. "If you do the right thing your sacrifice will be accepted as well." The Lord then warned him: "Be careful: sin is lurking at your door! It wants to dominate you. You must overcome it!"

Instead of heeding the warning Cain let his jealousy master him. One day he invited his brother Abel to go out into the fields. There he attacked and killed him.

Once again the Lord spoke to Cain. "Where is your brother Abel?"

"I don't know," Cain lied. "Am I supposed to look after my brother?"

"Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground," God responded. "From now on you are cursed. The land, which absorbed your brother's blood, will not produce food for you anymore. You are going to be a restless wanderer." Cain learned the hard way that God is omniscient, that He knows everything. However, he still refused to repent.

"You are punishing me too harshly," he complained. "If anyone finds me, they will try to kill me..."

"No," the Lord replied. "I will severely punish whoever kills you." The Lord then put a protective mark on Cain, the nature of which is not described in the Bible.

Cain took his wife and fled eastward, towards the land of Nod. The word "Nod" is Hebrew for "wandering".

• 4 • Early Civilization

Genesis 4:16-26; 5, 6

Date: Prehistory

CAIN BUILT a small "city" in the land of Nod. The word city at this early stage in history refers to a simple settlement, possibly with a palisade around it to protect its inhabitants from wild animals.

Cain had a descendant called Lamach, a strong, godless brute who killed a young man who had injured him, and then boasted about it. Adam and Eve's initial sin had triggered such a downward spiral that murderers now boasted about their feats. This Lamach had three

remarkable sons. Jabal became a Bedouin. Instead of slash and burn farming, he opted to live in a tent, roam around and raise livestock. Jabal's brother Tubal was musical. He invented the first instruments: a simple harp and some kind of flute. The third brother, Tubal-Cain, became a smith able to forge tools from metals.

After Cain and Abel the Lord blessed Adam and Eve with a third son, Seth. Seth grew up, married and had children. People back then lived to be around eight or nine hundred years old, so Adam and Eve were able to tell many generations of Seth's descendants about creation, paradise, and their fall into sin, subsequent expulsion from the garden, and God's promise of a Savior.

One man called Enoch, a descendent of Seth, only lived to be 365 years. This is less than half the average age of people in that era. Enoch had a very intimate relationship with God. God so loved him that, one day, He simply lifted him directly up to heaven so that he did not have to experience death (Heb. 11:5). Before that, however, the godly Enoch had a number of children. One of them, Methuselah, would become the world's oldest man, dying at the age of 969 years. Methuselah called his firstborn son Lamech and he in turn had a son called Noah. Noah had three sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth who were destined to play a very important role in world history.

During this early era at least two separate civilizations developed on earth: the descendants of Cain, a generation of godless people, and the descendants of Seth, a generation through which God's promise of a Saviour would be realized.

▪ 5 ▪ **Noah and the Great Flood**

Genesis 5-10

Date: Prehistory

GOD GRIEVED deeply over humanity's rapid descent into sin. One man, however, was an exception. Noah, a descendant of Adam's godly son Seth and grandson of the godly Enoch, sought to live righteously and in communion with God.

One day God told Noah that He would destroy the earth by means of a great flood. To save himself and his family Noah was to build a huge, three-decked boat, 450 feet long and 75 feet wide. It took Noah and his family 120 years to construct the massive vessel. It became known as the "ark".

The undertaking must have been a cause of mirth to onlookers. Imagine building a huge boat many miles from the nearest body of water! Nevertheless, Noah persevered. The Bible calls him a "preacher of righteousness" (2 Pet. 2:5) who tried to warn people of the judgment to come. His warnings were to no avail.

By the time Noah finished building the ark he was 600 years old. God then spoke to him a second time, saying, "Seven days from now I am going to send rain on the earth. It will rain for forty days and forty nights. I will wipe every living creature I have made from the earth." During the week prior to that judgment, however, something amazing happened. All kinds of

animals and birds made their way to Noah's ark and entered it: seven pairs of all the clean animals and one pair of all the unclean animals. Clean animals were those people were allowed to eat, such as sheep and cows, while unclean animals were those that they were to refrain from eating, such as dogs and lizards (Lev. 11). After these animals had entered the ark, Noah, his wife, his three sons Shem, Ham and Japheth and their wives—eight people in all—also climbed aboard. God himself closed the hatch after them.

Then it began to rain. A torrential deluge lashed the earth and underground springs of water burst to the surface. The cataclysmic storm lasted for 40 days and 40 nights. Eventually the highest mountains were submerged to a depth of more than 20 feet. All non-aquatic life drowned.

The dreadful catastrophe etched itself on the memories of the eight people inside the ark as they and the animals floated safely on the huge waves of judgement. It was a story they would tell their children and grandchildren again and again so that it became part of almost every culture's remembered past.

After 150 days God sent a wind over the earth causing the water to recede. It gathered into oceans or was reabsorbed into the earth. Those aboard the ark eventually saw mountain peaks emerging like islands from the sea. The ark floated between those peaks until it came to rest on a plateau on Mount Ararat while the water continued to recede.

One day Noah released a raven. Ravens are strong birds that feed off carrion, of which there must have been plenty floating around. The bird flew back and forth, feeding on the carrion without returning to the ark. A week later Noah released a dove. Doves don't have the stamina of ravens nor do they feed on carrion. It returned to the ark.

After seven days Noah released the dove again. When the bird returned that evening it carried a freshly plucked olive leaf in its beak! The earth had dried up and vegetation was sprouting again! After seven more days Noah let the dove loose a third time. This time it did not return. After that Noah opened the hatch and saw that the earth in his vicinity was dry. However, they still had to wait for more than a month before God finally gave them permission to leave the ark. Eventually, 371 days after they'd entered the ark, they were allowed to disembark.

The first thing Noah did was build an altar upon which he sacrificed some of the clean animals. The Lord was pleased with Noah's offering and responded with a third covenant, or divine promise: He promised to never again destroy humanity with a flood, and instituted the rainbow as a reminder of this promise. He also promised that the cycle of seasons would continue as long as the earth endured. He further commanded the death penalty for murder. That, as we saw with Cain and Lamach, was not the case before the flood. This stiffening of the law was designed to hold the human potential for evil in check. God then instructed Noah and his family to multiply and be fruitful.

After the flood Noah's family turned to farming. Noah himself planted a vineyard. When the harvest was in he turned some of the grape juice into wine and became drunk. When his son Ham discovered him lying naked in a drunken stupor he went and told his brothers about the

spectacle. Instead of mocking their father, however, Shem and Japheth took a garment and, walking backwards so that they would not see their father naked, covered him. When Noah learned what had happened he blessed Shem and Japheth and their descendants and cursed Ham's son Canaan and his descendants. Canaan, according to Noah's curse, would become his brothers' slave, while Japheth's territory would increase.

Why would Noah curse his grandson and not his son? He could not curse Ham, the actual offender, for in doing so he would have passed judgment on himself. Ancient society held the father responsible for the son's behaviour (Deut. 6:6-9, 20-25; Prov. 22:6, 15; Eph. 6:4). The Bible makes clear that children suffer because of their parents' misdeeds. This, in itself, is not surprising. Parents' actions are often reflected in their children's behavior, though this does not absolve those children of their own moral culpability (Ex. 20:5).

Noah's curse was fulfilled when the Jews enslaved the Gibeonites, a Canaanite people, and killed many of the remaining Canaanites during their conquest of Canaan. Archeological artifacts show the Canaanites to have been exceedingly sexually immoral. The sins of parents had, indeed, a very negative downward effect on their children.

Noah lived for 350 years after the flood, to die at the ripe old age of 950 years. Although genealogies in the Bible sometimes skip generations, Abraham, the father of the Jews, is listed as only nine generations removed from Noah's son Shem.

• 6 • The Tower of Babel

Genesis 11:1-8

Date: Prehistory

NOAH'S SON Shem's great-grandson was named Peleg. The word "Peleg" means "division". The Bible tells us that the boy was given this name "because in his time the earth was divided" (Genesis 10:25). This is apparently a reference to the confusion of languages that took place early in the history of the world.

Noah's descendants settled the Plain of Shinar in ancient Mesopotamia, between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Obviously, they all spoke the same language. As the population increased and social organization developed they sought ways to maintain their unity to better control their destiny. To accomplish this they decided to build a city with an imposing tower as its centerpiece. Since stone was scarce on the sandy Mesopotamian plain they used mud bricks and tar. The tower was probably an early ziggurat, a type of square-based, stepped, temple-tower with a shrine and zodiac at the top. The zodiac probably explains the reference that the tower "reached to the heavens". Instead of worshipping God, mankind started looking to the stars for guidance.

God intervened. His solution for early mankind's attempt at "one-world" government was simple: he confused their language. Suddenly people were unable to communicate with each other, and in the ensuing chaos and frustration were forced to give up their lofty ambitions. They divided into mutually intelligible groups and broke away from those with whom they

could not communicate. As a result mankind scattered all over the earth. The half-built city and its tower came to be known as “Babel”, which in Akkadian, one of the world’s oldest languages, means “Gateway to God”, but which also sounds like the Hebrew word for “confused”.

Some people continued living on the site after the confusion of languages. In time the place would develop into the city of Babylon, which continued to feature as a symbol of false religion.

• 7 • **God’s Covenant with Abram**

Genesis 12

Date: circa 2000 B.C.⁴

LIFE MUST HAVE been sad for Noah’s family. Even with the memory of God’s judgment fresh in their minds, people once again forsook the worship of their creator. If the Biblical genealogy is complete then Noah’s son Shem would have witnessed the building of the tower of Babel and the dispersion of the nations. He would have recognized that in spite of the flood man’s essential nature had not changed. It remained at enmity with God. How would God henceforth relate to His creation? When would His patience run out again? Would He then destroy the people and nations of the world once and for all?

When Adam and Eve fell into sin God made a promise about the seed of the woman one day crushing Satan. A milestone in the realization of this promise was a special covenant God made with a man named Abram. This was such a major turning point that from now on the story focuses primarily on the realization of this divine promise to Abram and his descendants, the people of Israel.

Abram lived about 2000 years before Christ. He was a descendant of Eber, the father of Peleg—whom we met in conjunction with the scattering of human languages. Since people did not have last names back then they were often identified by the name of one of their ancestors.

⁴ Based on non-biblical references in ancient king lists the dates of Solomon’s reign can be established with reasonably certainty as 971-931 B.C. According to 1 Kings 6:1 the construction of the temple began in the 480th year after the Exodus, in the 4th year of Solomon’s reign. In other words, if the construction of the temple began around 966 B.C. then the exodus took place in 1445 or 1446 B.C., a date which harmonizes with other biblical evidence (i.e. Judges 11:26). If that were the case the Pharaoh of the Exodus would be Thutmose III. Other scholars believe the exodus took place later, around 1280 B.C. during the reign of Ramses II when, they hold, the historical conditions in Egypt as described in the narrative were more similar. They suggest that “480 years” is really a stylized way of stating 12 generations, each of which could range anywhere from, say, 20 up to 40 years. The dating followed in this book is the former, not the latter.

A complicating factor with respect to later dating is that the kingdoms of Judah and Israel calculated the beginnings of their respective kings’ reigns differently: Judah began counting a particular king’s reign at the beginning of the calendar year while Israel began counting from the day his reign began (with the exception of one period during which both kingdoms applied the same system). Furthermore, the two kingdoms began their calendar year six months apart. Another complicating feature was that at times there were co-regencies, when the reign of two kings (father and son) overlapped. All this to say that establishing dates for most biblical events is complex but not impossible.

Abram became known as “Abram the Hebrew”; the word “Hebrew” comes from the name “Eber”.

Abram’s family lived in a Sumerian city called Ur. Terah, Abram’s father, was a pagan (Joshua 24:2), probably a moon-worshipper. Terah had three sons: Haran, Nahor and Abram. One of these sons, Haran, died quite young, though not before he had married and had a son called Lot.

Terah decided to leave Ur and move northward, to settle in a place called Haran. (Although the name of this place sounds like the name of Terah’s son Haran, the two words are spelled differently in Hebrew). The reason for this move was probably because Terah was not a true settled Sumerian farmer but a sheep-herding Semite (descendant of Noah’s son Shem). Haran was a thriving caravan town on the northern reaches of the Mesopotamian plateau. It was surrounded by grassy plains and was ideal for raising sheep.

Although Terah was an idolater, his son Abram became restless for a relationship with the Creator himself. He must have heard the stories passed on by Shem and the other ancients about creation, the fall into sin, and of God’s judgments, stories that would be passed orally from one generation to the next until Abram’s great-great-great grandson Moses finally wrote them down.

One day God spoke directly to Abram, telling him to leave Haran for an undisclosed location, a land He would show him in due course. God then promised that if Abram did so He would make him into a great nation, bless him, bless those who blessed him and curse those who cursed him. Last but not least God promised to make Abram a blessing to all people on earth! This amazing set of promises came to be known as the Abrahamic covenant. It also came to be called God’s promise, His pledge, His declaration, His blessing and His oath to the people of Israel, as it was clarified in the course of the centuries and as its consequences were played out in the ups-and-downs of their history. It found its final fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

▪ 8 ▪ Abram’s Travels

Genesis 12:4-20

Date: circa 2000 B.C.

ABRAM WAS 75 years old when God first spoke to him. Although he owned herds, servants and slaves, he packed his possessions, said farewell to his brother Nahor and other relatives and friends and set off for... well, he had no idea! His nephew Lot, the son of his deceased brother Haran, decided to join his uncle on the new adventure. Lot too owned flocks, which he probably inherited from his father.

After the final farewells Abram directed his caravan westward, in the opposite direction of Ur, the pagan city they had originally come from. Week after week they plodded along slowly, steadily, until they reached northern Syria, and then they headed south, following the curve of the Fertile Crescent. Traveling parallel to the eastern Mediterranean Sea they entered territory inhabited by descendants of Shem’s son Aram. They passed the Aramaic city of Damascus and

headed further south-west, past Sidon, a Canaanite city named after the cursed Canaan's firstborn son. They skirted Mount Hermon and entered Palestine's rolling hills and fertile valleys.

Abram reached Palestine, then known as Canaan, around the year 2000 B.C. At that time the region was inhabited by lots of little tribes of Canaanite descent such as the Jebusites, Amorites, and Girgashites who lived in culturally backward little city-states under chieftains they called kings. They survived by farming, raiding each other and trading honey and sheep with Egypt.

The Egyptians were descendants of Ham's son Mizraim. Mizraim means "two Egypts", referring to Upper and Lower Egypt. They had developed a sophisticated civilization on the banks of the Nile River ruled over by a "Pharaoh", which was the title they gave to their rulers. The highly cultured Egyptians despised the immoral, uncouth Canaanite tribes and avoided interacting with them as much as possible.

Abram continued traveling until he came to a place called Shechem, a town right in the middle of Canaan. The place boasted a huge oak tree associated with a Canaanite shrine. Right there, in the middle of Canaanite territory, next to a pagan shrine, God ordered Abram to stop traveling and told him that this was the land He would give to him and his descendants! Abram's heart must have sunk. Who would want to raise a family among these uncultured, ungodly people in this cultural backwater? Also, Abram wasn't getting any younger—and he still had no children. The whole undertaking began to look like a fool's enterprise. Nevertheless Abram built his own altar to reaffirm his faith in God's covenant promise. Soon afterwards, however, he moved to the hill country. He would live in Canaan as God commanded him, but not among the ungodly tribes inhabiting the valleys. His little tribe was less likely to be tainted by the Canaanites' idolatrous ways in the less densely populated, agriculturally less desirable hills.

After Abram had been in Canaan for some time a severe famine plagued the land. Abram struck his tents and moved his caravan southward, to Egypt. There his faith failed him...

Abram was married to a strikingly beautiful woman named Sarai. Abram worried that the Egyptians might kill him in order to get her, so he told Sarai to say that she was his sister, not his wife. This was a half-truth. They were both children of Terah, but from different mothers. In that culture it was acceptable to marry a relative; it ensured that the clan would not be weakened by the loss of a member.

Pharaoh's officials laid eyes on Sarai and sang her praises to him. He then had her brought into his harem as one of his concubines, paying Abram a huge bride price for her in the form of slaves and livestock. God, however, would not allow anything to thwart His promise to Abram that through a descendant of a child to be born to his legitimate wife Sarai all nations would be blessed—not even Abram's sinful, callow act of surrendering her to save his own skin. God inflicted a series of serious diseases on Pharaoh and his household. Pharaoh soon realized that the unfortunate events striking his household were related to the beautiful woman he had

accepted into his harem. When he discovered her true identity he summoned Abram, chided him, gave Sarai back to him, and let them go—even letting them keep the bride price.

Abram left Egypt and wandered aimlessly in the Negev Desert. His faith had failed him, and now it seemed that he didn't know what to do. Eventually, however, he travelled back to Canaan, the place God had promised him, and recommitted himself to his Creator.

▪ 9 ▪ **Abram, Lot and Melchizedek**

Genesis 13 and 14; Hebrews 7

Date: circa 2000 B.C.

PROGRESS BRINGS its own problems. Abram became very wealthy in Canaan, both in terms of livestock and in silver and gold, in part because of the bride price Pharaoh had paid for Sarai. His nephew Lot's flocks also increased steadily so that he too became very wealthy. Their joint herds became so large that the hill-country where they had settled couldn't support them both. That, in turn, led to infighting and quarreling between their herdsmen over choice pastures and access to water.

One day Abram led Lot to the top of a high hill. "Instead of quarreling," he said to his nephew, "let's part company. If you decide to go left, I'll go to the right; if you go right, I'll go to the left." Lot's eyes lingered on the lush, well-watered fertile plain of the Jordan River valley. He could see the Canaanite towns of Zoar, Sodom and Gomorrah where he could market his cattle. He knew his business would flourish much more on the Canaanite plain than in the shrubby hills. It didn't take him long to make up his mind; soon he was leading his caravan down to the fertile plain while Abram remained in the hills.

God comforted Abram by reaffirming His promise. "Look in every direction," God said. "Eventually your descendants will receive all this land forever. You are going to have so many children they will be like the dust of the earth—you won't be able to count them! Go ahead, walk the length and breadth of the land, for I'm giving it to you!"

Abram traveled westward, to a stand of large trees known as "The Great Trees of Mamre", named after their owner, Mamre the Ammorite. There Abram built another altar to reaffirm his commitment to God. In time Abram and Mamre became friends.

Back on the plains of the Jordan River things didn't turn out the way Lot had hoped. Soon after his split with Abram he decided to give up his nomadic life-style and moved with his family into the town of Sodom.

Sodom and the surrounding Canaanite towns were subject to the king of Elam. After 13 years of subjugation to this distant despot the towns rebelled. Their hopes for independence were short-lived, however, because the following year the king of Elam defeated the rebelling cities. He seized the entire population and goods of Sodom and Gomorrah to carry them off to his distant homeland on the Arabian Gulf. Lot and his people and possessions were also seized.

Fortunately one of Lot's men managed to escape. He hurried to Abram's encampment and reported on the catastrophe that had befallen his nephew. Abram, his bodyguard of 318

personal armed retainers along with his ally Mamre and his militia set off in pursuit. They caught the Elamite king by surprise and managed to recover all the loot, including Lot, his family and possessions.

After Abram returned from this battle two local kings came to offer their respects. The first was the king of Sodom, who tried to strike a deal. He suggested Abram keep the plunder and cattle but give him back his captured people. Abram gave him both the people and their possessions. He didn't want this evil man to be able to boast that he was responsible for Abram's wealth. When the King of Sodom took his stuff and returned to his city, Lot, who still hadn't learned his lesson, went back with him.

The second king who came to meet Abram was called Melchizedek. He was the king of Salem. Salem is short form for Jerusalem, the name by which the city would later become known. Melchizedek, though not involved in the recent war, realized that Abram and his men would be hungry and thirsty, and kindly supplied them with bread and wine.

Melchizedek was more than a king. He was also a priest of the one, true Lord God. Abram and Melchizedek were kindred spirits; both had rejected idols to worship the Creator God of Adam, Enoch and Noah. In fact, Abram recognized Melchizedek as his spiritual superior and gave him a tenth of all his goods.

▪ 10 ▪ God Renews His Covenant with Abram

Genesis 15

Date: circa 2000 B.C.

IT HAD BEEN 15 years since, at God's command, Abram left Haran for Canaan. 15 eventful years during which he had grown richer... and older. The one great grief in Abram and Sarai's life was the fact that they did not have a child, and this increasingly worried them. In spite of the divine promises on which he had staked his life he had neither a son nor any land to call his own. He was now 85 and his wife Sarai was 75—long past child-bearing age. What if he'd been wrong? What if he'd merely imagined his encounters with God? His whole life would be a sham and, worse, the God he'd dedicated his life to would turn out to be a liar, no better than a Canaanite idol. If that were the case there was no hope for mankind: no promised savior, no forgiveness of sin.

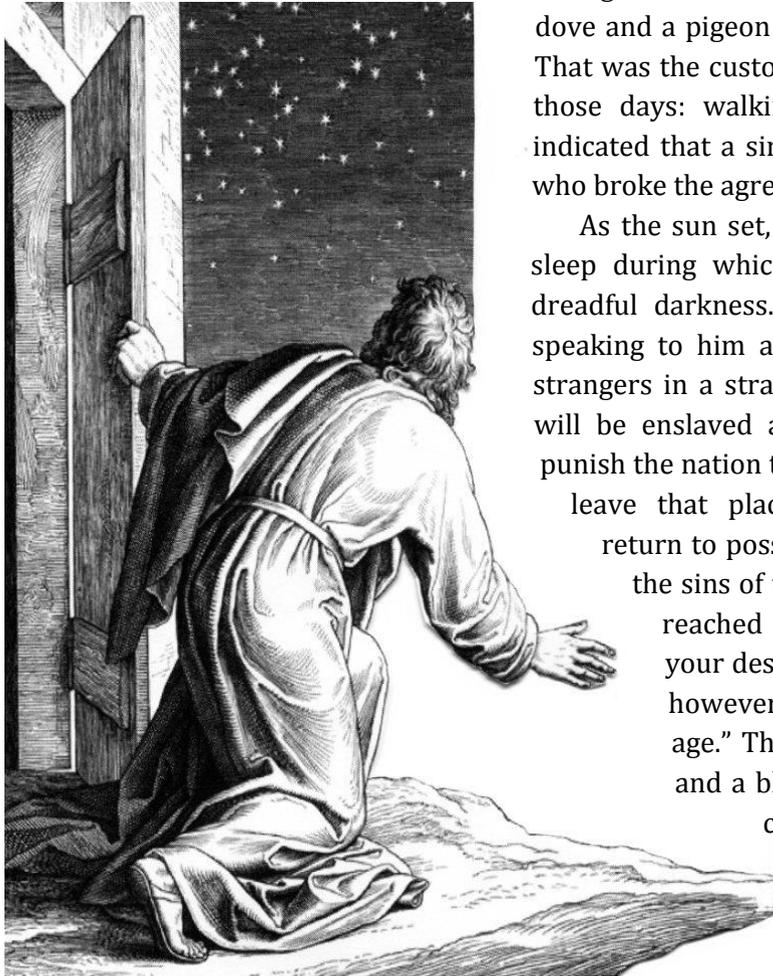
One evening as Abram was mulling over these things the word of the Lord came to him again saying, "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield and your great reward."

"O Sovereign Lord You have given me no children. What good is everything else? I had hoped that a son would inherit my estate. Instead, it will go to my servant Eliezer of Damascus," Abram responded dejectedly.

"Your own son, not Eliezer, is going to be your heir," the Lord said. He then invited Abram outside, into the clear, cloudless night dotted with myriads of stars. "Look at the heavens and see if you can count the stars. That's how numerous your descendants will be," He said. Once again, Abram believed God, and because he did so God was pleased with him. In fact, Abram

would become known as the “father of all who believe” (Rom. 4:11) because he believed that God would honor His promises even when the situation was impossible. God also repeated his promise about the gift of the land of Canaan.

“O Sovereign Lord,” Abram replied, “how can I be sure of that?” The Lord responded by telling Abram to slaughter a heifer, a goat, a ram, a dove and a pigeon and cut their carcasses into half. That was the customary way of cementing a vow in those days: walking between the split carcasses indicated that a similar fate would befall any party who broke the agreement.



As the sun set, tired old Abram fell into a deep sleep during which he had a nightmare about a dreadful darkness. Then he then heard the Lord speaking to him again: “Your descendants will be strangers in a strange country. For 400 years they will be enslaved and mistreated. However, I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and they will leave that place with great possessions and return to possess this land. For now, however, the sins of the local inhabitants have not yet reached their full measure. When it does your descendants will displace them. You, however, will die in peace at a good old age.” Then Abram saw a smoking firepot and a blazing torch passing between the carcasses. The fire symbolized God’s presence and assured Abram that the divine promise would, in time, become a reality.

▪ 11 ▪ The Birth of Ishmael and the Confirmation of the Covenant

Genesis 16-17

Date: circa 2000 B.C.

ONE DAY Sarai came to Abram with a plan that she thought would solve their problem of childlessness, an idea that would “help” God realize his plan for them. She suggested he sleep with her Egyptian servant-girl Hagar. If Hagar conceived and gave birth to a son then she, Sarai, would adopt the child and build her own family through him.