

The background of the cover is a night sky filled with stars. In the lower portion, a person's silhouette is visible, looking out over a city with lights. A vertical teal bar is on the left side, with white lines extending from it across the cover.

MICHAEL W. GOHEEN
AND CRAIG G. BARTHOLOMEW

THE
TRUE STORY
OF THE
WHOLE WORLD

FINDING YOUR PLACE IN THE
BIBLICAL DRAMA

REVISED EDITION

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BrazosPress

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan



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Preface

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

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

Our passion in this book is the same: that people learn to read the Bible as it was meant to be read—as the true story of the whole world.

The True Story of the Whole World tells the biblical story as a unified, coherent narrative of God’s ongoing redemptive work in history to restore the entire creation from sin. After God created the world and human rebellion corrupted it, God set out to restore the whole world: “While justly angry, God did not turn away from a world bent on destruction but turned his face to it in love. With patience and tender care the Lord set out on the long road of redemption to reclaim the lost as his people and the world as his kingdom.”² The Bible narrates the story of God’s journey on that long road of redemption. It is an unfolding drama of God’s action in history for the healing of the whole world. The Bible is not a mere jumble of history, poetry, lessons in morality and theology, comforting promises, guiding principles, and commands; it is fundamentally a unified and coherent narrative that records the unfolding of God’s purpose. Every part of the Bible—each event, book, character, command, prophecy, promise, and poem—must be understood as part of *one* story line. We invite readers to make it their story, to find their place in it, and to indwell it as the true story of the world.

There are three important emphases in this book. First, we stress the comprehensive scope and restorative nature of God’s redemptive work. The biblical story does not move toward the destruction of the world and our individual “rescue” to heaven. It culminates in the restoration of the entire creation and all of human life to its original goodness.

Second, we emphasize our place within the biblical story—that is, the era of biblical history in which we live. Where do we belong in this story? How does it shape our lives in the present?

Third, we highlight the centrality of *mission* within the biblical story. The Bible narrates God’s mission to restore the creation. God chooses Israel as a people to embody his creational purpose and design for humanity for the sake of the whole world. They are blessed to be a blessing. The Old Testament narrates the history of Israel’s response to their divine calling. Israel fails, and the Father sends Jesus, who takes upon himself the missionary vocation that had been given to Israel. Jesus embodies God’s purpose for humanity and accomplishes victory over sin at the cross, inaugurating the new creation in his resurrection.

He sends his church with the mandate to continue that same mission. And so, mission defines the life of God's people today. In our own time, standing as we do between Pentecost and the return of Jesus, we as the people of God are to witness in life, deed, and word to the rule of Jesus Christ over all life.

In this book, we have borrowed N. T. Wright's helpful metaphor of the Bible as a drama.³ But whereas Wright speaks of *five* acts (creation, sin, Israel, Christ, and church), we tell the story in terms of *six* acts. We add the coming of the new creation as the final act of the biblical drama. We have also added a prologue, which addresses in a preliminary way what it means to say that human life is shaped by a story.

This is an updated, revised edition of a shorter version of *The Drama of Scripture* (Baker Academic, 2004) that was previously published by SPCK (2006) and then by Faith Alive (2009). The title remains the same as the Faith Alive version: *The True Story of the Whole World: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story*.

This shorter edition is suitable as a study version for individuals and small groups. Three things distinguish *True Story of the Whole World* from the longer *Drama of Scripture*. First, it is significantly shorter—about two-thirds the length of *Drama*. Second, the majority of the explanatory footnotes, some of the diagrams, and all of the maps have been dropped. Third, each act explores the contemporary significance of that part of the story for our lives today and ends with questions for discussion.

An accompanying website provides a growing number of resources that may help you use this book: a course syllabus, adult Bible study class schedules of various lengths, PowerPoint slides, more study questions, articles, links, a reading schedule for a thirteen-week course, supplementary reading, video suggestions, and more (www.missionworldview.com).

We are deeply grateful and humbled that so many have found the various versions of this book to be helpful; it has been used beyond our wildest expectations in many settings and in many countries. We are thankful it has made a small contribution to a recovery of the Christian faith as it really is in Scripture—the true story of the whole world.

Preface

We remain indebted to our friend Doug Loney, who has given to these manuscripts much time as a skilled writer and editor to help make it a lively and coherent text.

Michael W. Goheen, Surrey, BC, Canada

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Prologue

The Bible as a Grand Story

Alasdair MacIntyre offers the following imaginary and humorous encounter to show how particular events can be understood only in the context of a story.¹ He imagines himself at a bus stop when a man standing next to him says, “The Latin name of the common wild duck is *histrionicus, histrionicus, histrionicus.*” The meaning of the sentence is clear enough. But why on earth is he saying it in the first place?

This particular action can be understood only if it is placed in a broader framework of meaning. Three stories, for example, could give meaning to this particular incident. Perhaps the young man has mistaken the man standing next to him for another person he saw yesterday in the library who asked, “Do you by any chance know the Latin name of the common duck?” Or he has just come from a session with his therapist, who is helping him deal with his painful shyness. The therapist has been urging him to talk to strangers. When the young man asked, “What shall I say?” the psychotherapist said, “Oh, anything at all.” Or possibly the young man is a Soviet spy who has arranged to meet his contact at this bus stop. The code that will reveal his identity is the statement about the Latin name of the duck. The point is this: the meaning of the encounter at the bus stop depends on which story shapes it. In fact, each story will give the event a different meaning.

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This is also true of human life. In order to make sense of our lives, we depend on a story to provide the broader framework of meaning. Again MacIntyre says it well: “I can only answer the question, ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question, ‘Of what story do I find myself a part?’”² Every part of our lives will always take its meaning from some larger story.

The story in which I find significance and purpose may begin with the story of my life, my private biographical journey. But it must become broader than this. In fact, the more deeply I probe for meaning, the larger the context that I seek—the story of my family, my city, my country, or even my civilization. And this leads to a very important question: Is there a true story of the *whole world* that provides the true context for all people, including me? Lesslie Newbigin puts it like this: “The way we understand human life depends on what conception we have of the human story. What is the real story of which my life story is part?”³ Is there a “real story” that provides a framework of meaning for *all* people in *all* times and *all* places, and therefore for my own life in the world?

Many people today have abandoned the hope of discovering such a “real story.” They argue that there is no true account of the world, or that if there is, it can’t be found. People and communities must be content with the separate meanings to be discovered in their own more modest and limited stories. A commitment to pluralism often implies that we should not even look for any such overarching story, one that could be true for all people, all communities, all nations—for to find such a thing would imply that not all stories are equally valid.

Yet there are many others who claim that there is one true and real story that gives meaning to all people and all communities. Muslims, for example, believe that their story (told in the Qur’an) is the true story of Allah, his creation of the world, his rule over history, and his final triumph. “One day,” a Muslim might say, “all people will see that this is the one true story.” Similarly, the modernist who is still committed to the Enlightenment humanist story believes that account of reality to be true: that humankind will ultimately conquer nature and build a better world for all through science, technology, and the rational organization

of economics, politics, and society. This story is still believed—often implicitly—by many people, especially in North America, and it is spreading around the world through the process of globalization.

Christians also believe that there is *one* true story: the story told in the Bible. It begins with God’s creation and human rebellion and runs through the history of Israel to Jesus and on through the church, moving to the final coming of the kingdom of God. At the very center of this story is the man Jesus of Nazareth, in whom God has fully revealed and accomplished his purpose for the entire world. This story alone gives true meaning to all of human history and to every culture—and thus meaning to your life and mine.

This kind of story provides us with an understanding of the whole world and of our own place within it. It’s a big story that encompasses and explains all the smaller stories of our lives. Implicit in this claim is the belief that “a story . . . is . . . the best way of talking about *the way the world actually is*.”⁴ This is how God created the world.

Such a comprehensive story gives us the meaning of not merely personal or national history but of *universal* or *cosmic* history. Muslims, modernists, and Christians all believe that their story alone is the *true* story of the world, that either the Qur’an, or the humanist story of progress, or the Bible will one day be acknowledged by all to be true. But these stories differ and cannot all be uniquely true. We must choose.

We realize how difficult this is to do in the midst of a society that has tacitly adopted a pluralist vision. Pressure for harmony among cultures and nations seems to urge us to regard the Bible as just another volume in the world’s library of private religious stories. But to do so would be to treat the Bible as something other than what it claims to be: the one true story of the world. It would be to change the very nature of the Christian faith. According to the biblical narrative, the meaning of our whole world’s history has been most fully shown to us in the person of Jesus. We may either embrace Jesus and believe that story as true or reject Jesus and spurn it as false. But what we may not do is reshape the Bible to suit our own private religious preferences. The Bible’s claim to tell the one true story of our world is central to its very nature.

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

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

His complaint was that even Christian missionaries to India had not recognized the Bible for what it clearly is. Instead, they reduced it to the status of just one more book of religion. This Hindu scholar recognized that there is nothing quite like the Bible in the whole religious literature of the world. It makes a startling and rather audacious claim—to be the true story of the whole world that gives meaning to human life.

Why have Christians, who claim to believe the Bible, not seen what they have? Many Christians, including Christian scholars and pastors, break the Bible up into little bits: devotional bits, moral bits, theological bits, historical-critical bits, narrative bits, and sermon bits. But when we break the Bible into fragments, it will inevitably be absorbed by whatever other story is shaping our culture, and it will thus cease to shape our lives as it should. Idolatry has twisted the dominant cultural story of the secular and pluralist Western world. If as believers we allow this cultural story (rather than the Bible) to form our lives, then we will embody the lies of an idolatrous culture. Hence, *the narrative unity of Scripture is no minor matter: a fragmented Bible may actually produce theologically orthodox, morally upright, warmly pious idol worshipers!*

Australian sociologist John Carroll, who does not profess to be a Christian, suggests that the reason the church in the West is in decline is because it has forgotten its story. He claims the “waning of Christianity

as practised in the West is easy to explain. The Christian churches have comprehensively failed in their one central task—to retell their foundation story in a way that might speak to the times.”⁶

N. T. Wright rightly says, “The whole point of Christianity is that it offers a story which is the story of the whole world. It is public truth.” The very nature of the Christian faith is that it tells the true story of the whole world. And so, he goes on, an essential part of our theological and missional task today is to “tell this story as clearly as possible, and to allow it to subvert other ways of telling the story of the world.”⁷ We agree—and that’s why we’ve written this book. We seek to tell the story of the Bible as a coherent and true drama in order to subvert the powerful narrative that dominates our culture.

We employ the metaphor of the Bible as a drama and tell the story in six acts. We also adopt what we believe to be the most comprehensive image found in Scripture, that of the kingdom. The drama is outlined as follows:

- Act 1 God Establishes His Kingdom: *Creation*
- Act 2 Rebellion in the Kingdom: *Fall*
- Act 3 The King Chooses Israel: *Restoration Initiated*
 - Scene 1 *A People for the King*
 - Scene 2 *A Land for God’s People*
- Interlude A Kingdom Story Waiting for an Ending: *The Intertestamental Period*
- Act 4 The Coming of the King: *Restoration Accomplished*
- Act 5 Spreading the News of the King: *The Mission of the Church*
 - Scene 1 From Jerusalem to Rome
 - Scene 2 And into All the World
- Act 6 The Return of the King: *Restoration Completed*

We believe this to be the true story of the whole world. We invite you to come along with us on a journey in which *God is acting in history for the restoration of the world*, and to find your place in this story.

FINDING OUR PLACE IN THE STORY

1. Discuss the following statement: “The narrative unity of Scripture is no minor matter: a fragmented Bible may actually produce theologically orthodox, morally upright, warmly pious idol worshipers!”
2. What is the danger of breaking the Bible up into “little bits”? Have you seen examples in devotionals, Bible studies, sermons, or elsewhere? How can we prevent this from happening?
3. How does the biblical story shape our understanding of gender, politics, economics, technology, education, retirement, care for creation, or concern for the poor differently than our cultural story?
4. Why do you think so many Christians have so easily accommodated themselves to the humanist story? What can we do in our churches to become more consistent and faithful to the biblical story?



ACT

1

God Establishes His Kingdom

Creation

Who Is the “LORD God”?

The biblical story opens with the words “In the beginning God . . .” That certainly signals immediately who the main actor is here. But who is God? The names used for God in the opening chapters of Genesis tell us a lot about who he is. It probably doesn’t matter too much to you that “Michael” is a Hebrew name meaning “(He) who is like God” or that “Craig” is a Gaelic word that means “a rocky outcrop.” Though names are important in our culture, we do not often attach special meaning to them. But in the Old Testament world we are preparing to visit, the meaning of a name bears great significance—and none more so than the names for God.

In Genesis 1, the Hebrew word *Elohim* (translated simply as “God” in English Bibles) is the general word for God used throughout the ancient Near East. The Bible says that “God” brings the whole creation into existence out of nothing. But in Genesis 2:4, the biblical writers introduce another name for God. “God” is now called “the LORD God”

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(*Yahweh Elohim*).¹ This highly unusual way of referring to God reveals important things about who he is.

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

When the names *Yahweh* (LORD) and *Elohim* (God) are joined as in Genesis 2:4, the powerful point is made that the same God who rescues Israel from slavery is the God who has made all things: this God is the Creator of heaven and earth. The Israelites first come to know God (through Moses) as their Redeemer; only afterward do they learn of God as the Creator.

It's not so different for us, even though we live much further along in the biblical story. When we first come to know God through the saving work of his Son, Jesus, we meet him as our Savior and Redeemer. But soon we realize that God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) is also the Creator of all that was, is, and shall be: he is the one eternal LORD God, *Yahweh Elohim*. Thus, the minute we start to witness to our faith and to tell *the Christian story* (as the bigger story in which our own personal story belongs), we inevitably begin at the start of it all: the creation of all things. "In the beginning God . . ."

A Faith for Israel

The first act of the biblical story is of supreme importance because creation is the backdrop and foundation of the rest of the story. This is the creation that God is restoring!

The early chapters of Genesis, which tell the story of creation, were written long ago in a culture quite different from ours. Though some aspects of the creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2 may seem strange to us, we need to remember that they made perfect sense to the people of Israel when they first heard them. This is because the writer uses imagery familiar to the people of his day. When we read the first chapters of Genesis against the backdrop of the ancient world

in which they were written, we begin to see powerful messages we didn't recognize before.

Several scholars have pointed out that there is a strong argumentative aspect to Genesis 1 and 2. Ancient Near Eastern people told many competing accounts of the origin of the world. The Israelites undoubtedly heard these stories when they were captive in Egypt and also in Canaan when they began to settle there. It would have been all too easy for the Israelites to adopt the stories of those who lived in the land before them or alongside them and who (after all) supposedly knew the land much better than they did. Many of the gods worshiped by the Canaanites were closely associated with the fertility of the land. The newcomers struggling to learn how to farm there would have been tempted to call out to these gods rather than to the LORD God.

We know quite a bit about the sort of creation stories circulating in the ancient world. It is fascinating to see how the story told in Genesis 1 and 2 deliberately contradicts the central elements of these stories. For example, look at how Genesis 1:16 describes the sun and moon. The text does not refer to the sun by its normal Hebrew name but instead as “the greater light” God made for the day. Similarly, it calls the moon “the lesser light.” Why? The sun and moon were worshiped as gods by the people among whom the Israelites were living. But in the Genesis story, readers cannot mistake the sun as a divinity to be worshiped; it is a created object placed in the heavens for the simple purpose of providing light and heat. Scripture places all the attention on the one who created this marvelous light, the one whose power is so great that by merely uttering a word an entire universe springs into being. No mere light in the heavens is worthy of our worship. God alone is divine; God alone is to be worshiped. The whole of creation is “very good” (Gen. 1:31) because the one who has created it is infinitely superior to anything he has made.

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

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

What Kind of Literature Is Genesis 1?

The creation stories of Genesis are argumentative. They claim to tell the truth about the world, flatly contradicting other pagan stories common in the ancient world. Israel was constantly tempted to adopt these other idolatrous stories as the basis of its worldview, in place of faith in the LORD God, who created the heavens and the earth.

But the Genesis creation narrative is more than an argument against other ancient stories. It also aims to positively shape how we view the world God has made and how we should live in it. It does so by telling a story. And we need to be sensitive to this story if we are to avoid misinterpreting it.

In order to understand the Genesis account of creation, we must understand something about the kind of writing it is. Scholars themselves have a hard time describing this, but they agree that the story told in the first chapters of Genesis has been very carefully crafted. So we also need to focus on the *way* the story is told. Further, we must ask whether the narrative is meant to be read as a modern historian or scientist would read it.

The story told in Genesis is of the mysterious inauguration of history itself. The broad outlines of the Genesis story are certainly as clear to us as they were to those who first heard them: God is the divine source of all that is. God stands apart from all other things in the special relationship of Creator to creation. God orders the creation in his wisdom and goodness. The creation of humankind in the image of God as male and female is the high point of all God's work of making and forming. God intends a very special relationship between himself and human beings.

In these chapters we are told the story of creation—but not to satisfy our twenty-first-century curiosity concerning the details of *how* and

when God made the world. The Genesis story offers us something much more important: a true understanding of the world in which we live, its divine Creator, and our own place within it.

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

The God Who Brings All Things into Being

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

The Genesis story emphasizes that creation was spoken into being. The idea of creation by the word of God preserves the radical distinction between Creator and creature. Creation is a product of God’s personal will. The only continuity between God and the creation is his word.

Genesis 1 introduces us to God as the eternal person who brings the whole of creation into existence. “The heavens and the earth” (1:1) refers to the whole of creation. Light and darkness, day and night, sea and sky, land and plants, animals and humankind all come from this God—from his powerful and good activity of creation. And since he has called it into being, the whole world belongs to him. This is truly one of the points through which logic can barely wade, whereas faith can swim.

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In Revelation 4:11, the throne room of God echoes with continual worship for his work in creation:

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

This hymn of praise in the last book of the Bible reiterates the profound truth about God implied from the beginning of the creation account. By causing the creation to come into being by his word of power, God establishes it as his own vast kingdom. He is the great King over all creation who is worthy to receive all glory, honor, and power.

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

In the act of creating, God names what he creates, a further expression of his sovereignty. The act of giving a name, in antiquity, was the exercise of a sovereign king. Thus, naming graphically expresses God's claim of lordship over all creatures.

In Genesis 1 God's word of command, the repeated phrase "Let there be . . . ," brings into existence a creation characterized by order and harmony. God's creation is "good," and this created goodness merely highlights the Creator's own incomparable goodness, wisdom, and justice. He alone is the wise King who rules over the great kingdom of all that is.

As King, however, God does not hold himself distant from his creation. God is not the sort of monarch who rules from afar and takes no interest in his territories or subjects. God reigns over creation in a deeply loving and personal way. God's words do not merely command; they also express his own involvement in the making of the cosmos.

This can be seen in the mysterious phrase “Let us make human beings” (Gen. 1:26, author’s paraphrase). At this climactic moment, the text highlights God’s desire that there be other persons distinct from (and yet related to) himself.

This desire finds dramatic expression as God blesses the humans he has made and speaks to them directly: “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen. 1:28). Here we see the personal relationship between the divine King and his human subjects. God invites these human creatures to participate in the great task of filling and forming the world he has given them for their home. God’s personal relationship with humankind is pictured even more clearly in Genesis 2 and 3. The LORD God (*Yahweh Elohim*) walks in the garden with Adam and Eve and shows the most intimate, personal concern for them and for their needs and responsibilities.

Humankind as God’s Image

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

What makes humankind so special? God speaks personally with human beings—they enjoy a uniquely personal relationship with him. As Augustine observed long ago, we are made for God, and our hearts are restless until we find our rest in him. Men and women are made for intimate relationship with God, and their earthiness is no obstacle to that relationship. God walks regularly with Adam and Eve in the huge garden he has set aside for them. The Creator discusses with them how this great garden is developing and how its plants and animals are flourishing under their care.

Genesis 1 looks at humankind in its relationship to the whole world. Genesis 2 focuses on the man and the woman in their relationships

to each other and God. The two passages use different images and metaphors because they focus on different aspects of what it means to be human.

In Genesis 1:26–28 God creates humankind in his image, in his likeness. Note that the words *image* and *likeness* make the same point. Though God is the infinite Creator and humans are merely part of God’s finite creation, there is something fundamentally similar between them. The *image* metaphor draws our attention to the striking similarity between humans and God without denying that we are radically different from God. If humankind is created “in God’s image,” then in some way we are like the one who created us. The following verses begin to clarify that likeness: In Genesis 1:26 God says, “Let us make [human beings] in our image, . . . so that they may rule . . . over all the creatures.” God then says to the human beings he has created, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule . . . over every living creature” (1:28). This phrase clarifies the fundamental similarity between God and humanity: humankind’s unique vocation is to rule over the nonhuman creation under God as the supreme Ruler over all.

God has assigned to humanity the special role of serving as “underkings,” stewarding God’s rule in his kingdom. We are to rule over the creation in order to enhance God’s reputation and glorify his name within his cosmic kingdom.

Genesis 1:26–28 has become notorious among some environmentalists who believe this teaching has been used to justify much of the environmental destruction characterizing the modern world. This passage, however, clearly identifies humankind’s vocation of dominion not as tyrannical exploitation of nature but as caring stewardship. God acts for the good of creation and not for selfish pleasure. God creates a perfect home for humankind, and at every point in God’s work, Genesis describes this creation as “good”—and then at the end as “very good.” Over this good creation, God calls the human “ruler” to serve as steward or undersovereign, to embody God’s own care for and protection of the creation in his own sovereign rule over the earth. Psalm 8:6 expresses this wonderfully: the glory of human

beings is that God has made them “rulers over the works of [his] hands.” It is impossible to read this as suggesting that humans are free to do what they like with God’s workmanship. Above all things, the human caretakers are accountable to the divine Creator of the world entrusted to their care.

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

Imagine that you are a fifteenth-century sculptor and one day receive a message from Michelangelo himself, asking if you would be willing to come to his studio to complete a piece of work he has begun. Your job is to continue the work so that the finished product enhances Michelangelo’s reputation. God’s call for us to have dominion over his creation entails this sort of confidence in what we are capable of achieving. It also brings a heavy responsibility for what results from that stewardship. If this is what being “in the image of God” involves, then clearly our service for God is to be as wide as the creation itself. Our task involves developing creation’s potential but also includes taking good care of it. Cultivation *and* care: both define the human vocation (Gen. 2:15).

It is common to use the term *cultural mandate* to refer to Genesis 1:28 and 2:15. *Culture* is making something of the world, developing the rich potential of the garden (Gen. 1–2) into a flourishing city (Rev. 21–22). The biblical story of human beginnings calls us to bring every kind of cultural activity within the service of God. Indeed, there is a dynamic element to the image of God. We “image” God in his creation as we develop its potential and cultivate its possibilities in agriculture, art, music, commerce, politics, scholarship, family life, sports, leisure, and so on, in ways that honor God. We “image” God as we fill the earth, developing a rich variety of human relationships. As we develop the potential of God’s creative command to “let there be . . . ,” we continue to spread the goodness of God’s creating work throughout the world.

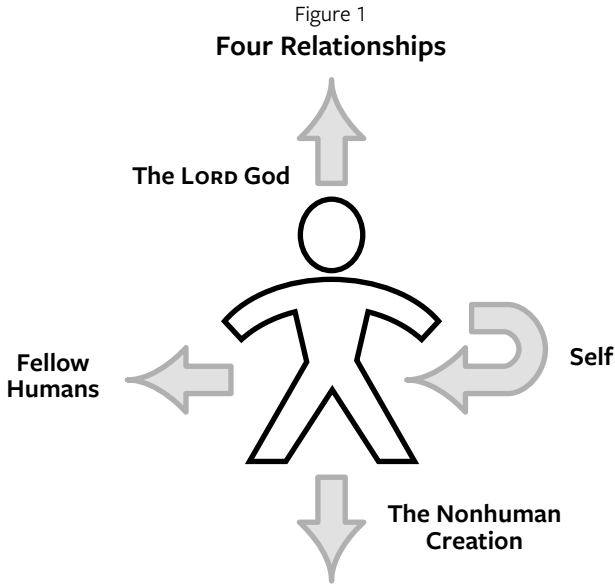
Genesis 1 describes humankind as stewards ruling *coram deo*—that is, before the presence of God. The nature of our relationship finds expression in how we cultivate the potential of and look after God’s good creation. And we do this not merely as individuals but as partners.

We are made for God and for each other. In Genesis 1 humans are made “male and female.” A gender distinction is built into the very structure of creation; we are always male or female, man or woman. This means that we always stand in relationship to one another as well as in relationship to God. None of us can be fully human on our own; we are always in a variety of relationships.

One of the ways Genesis expresses Adam’s rule is in his naming of the animals. Just as God named the creation (in Gen. 1) as he formed it, here God invites Adam to name the animals God has made. But Adam needs more companionship than the animals provide. Genesis 2:18–25 tells us that God created Eve as a suitable companion for Adam. Adam’s exultant cry, “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (2:23), captures the joy of human companionship, here in the most intimate of all relationships: marriage, in which Adam and Eve become “one flesh” (2:24). God demonstrates his deep love for the human couple by providing what will enrich their lives.

Adam and Eve’s call to rule the creation manifests itself in Genesis 2, in their responsibility to work in the garden and care for it (2:15). As described in Genesis 2:8–14, the “garden” is more like a national park than one of our backyards. It’s crisscrossed by large rivers and swarming with all kinds of flora and fauna. Think of Adam and Eve as the first farmers and conservation officers. Once more it’s clear that to be human requires a deep involvement with the earth by exploring its potential and caring for it.

Humankind is made to live in four relationships: (1) we are made for God; (2) we are made for one another in a variety of relationships; (3) we are made to cultivate and care for the nonhuman creation; and (4) we are made to experience harmony as each aspect of our lives is rightly ordered by God (see fig. 1). When all these relationships and each aspect of our lives is rightly ordered, we experience harmony within ourselves.



The World as God’s Very Good Kingdom

Though Christianity has often been accused of being otherworldly, it should be clear by now that the beginning of the biblical story does *not* allow such a view. The Bible depicts this created, material world as the very theater of God’s glory. It is the kingdom over which God reigns. All the creatures are his subjects. These early chapters of Genesis call us to a very positive attitude toward the world. Though it is created (and therefore must never be put on the same level as the uncreated God), it is always described as good. The repetition of the word *good* throughout Genesis 1 reminds us that the whole creation comes from God and that in its initial state it beautifully reflects his design and plan for it. Creation’s bountiful diversity and potential reflect the marvelous harmony of created things. Like an orchestra, creation produces a symphony of praise to the Creator.

The Genesis account stands at the outset of a long historical story. Genesis 2:4 begins, “This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created.” God clearly intends his creation to develop through time as humanity multiplies and spreads throughout the earth,

The True Story of the Whole World

as they rule and care for the creation, as they develop its potential, and as they form cultures. History is an integral part of the good creation. The work of Adam and Eve in the glorious garden God made marks the beginning of this long historical process by which their children and their descendants are to develop the riches of the creation. In the beginning it was “very good.” And it was just getting started! Oh, what joy and delight are to come as Adam and Eve embrace their marvelous vocation in obedience to God.

Reflections for Today

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

The Maker

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

What God Makes

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

be. For example, we say that a “normal” human temperature is 98.6° Fahrenheit or 37° Celsius.

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

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

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

The Masterpiece

If we were to hand you a photograph of, say, your graduating class from high school, whose face would you seek out first? Right—your own! And so, of course, would we. We humans can be extraordinarily

self-centered creatures. A reading of the early parts of Genesis may seem at first to flatter that kind of human vanity, since the fashioning of humankind, in all our male and female glory, is quite clearly the pinnacle of the Creator's work. But it should soon begin to sink in that the most glorious of all the qualities of the man and woman who tended the garden is not their physical beauty, their gifts of language and self-consciousness, or their intellect. Our most glorious quality is that we reflect in miniature God's inexpressible glory. Of all God's creatures, only we can truly know what it means for God to love us, to speak to us, to listen to us—because only we have been made to do these things. No other creature reflects God in this way.

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

FINDING OUR PLACE IN THE STORY

1. A number of authors have made the point that the evangelical tradition lives without a doctrine of creation.² Do you agree? Why or why not?
2. How do the Psalms (e.g., Pss. 8; 19; 33; 65; 104) show God as present and active in the world? How could this understanding help to reshape our view of the world?
3. The name *Yahweh Elohim* makes the point that the same God who redeems us is the one who created all things. Why is this

so important? How do Christians separate salvation from creation?

4. Why is it so important for Christians to remember that God made all things good (see Gen. 1:4, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31)? What does the apostle Paul mean when he says that to deny the goodness of creation is something “taught by demons” (1 Tim. 4:1–5)?
5. What might be the relationship between the Genesis story and modern scientific ideas about the origins of the earth and human life?
6. Genesis shows the universe coming into being at a word from God, and in the New Testament that same Word is shown to give order to all things (see John 1:3; Heb. 1:3). How has God ordered political authority, economic life, sports, art, and emotionality?