

UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

Much of this Bible study originates from "The Real Story" by Edward Sri and Curtis Martin. For more about these topics, please consider reading "The Real Story."

Don't be fooled. There's a lot more going on in the opening chapter of the Bible than you might expect. But to grasp its powerful meaning, you must be willing to see the story from the perspective of its original audience: the ancient Israelites.

The way ancient near eastern cultures like Israel told stories and passed on their history is very different from our own. They did not typically offer straightforward, chronological, "play-by-play" accounts as modern-day historians or newspaper reporters might do. Instead, the Biblical writers often organized material by themes and employed elaborate literary techniques that involved repetition, parallelism, allusion, and alliteration—artistry that readers today often miss.

This is certainly the case with the first chapter of the Bible, Genesis 1. The account of the six days of creation, the divine commands ("Let there be light!"), and God's rest on the seventh day was never intended to be read like a scientific textbook. Rather, the account uses figurative language and poetic devices to communicate its beautiful message about creation and God's plan for the human family. These

rich theological points in Genesis 1 are more deeply appreciated when we consider the way the six days of creation unfold in the narrative.

Numerous scholars have pointed out how there is a connection in the narrative between the first three days and the next three days of creation. On the first three days, God creates day and night (first day), sky and sea (second day), and land and vegetation (third day). Then on the fourth day, God creates the sun, moon, and stars to rule over the day and night, corresponding what He created on the first day. On the fifth day, God creates the birds to fill the sky and the fish to fill the sea, corresponding to the second. And on the sixth day, God creates the beasts to crawl on the earth, corresponding to the land created on the third day.

| REALMS | | RULERS |
|--------------------------|----|--------------------------|
| DAY 1: DAY & NIGHT | ←→ | DAY 4: SUN, MOON & STARS |
| DAY 2: SKY & SEA | ←→ | DAY 5: BIRDS & FISH |
| DAY 3: LAND & VEGETATION | ←→ | DAY 6: THE BEASTS |

The author of Genesis 1 is clearly arranging a series of parallels between the first three days of creation and the last three days to reveal God as the divine architect, creating the universe with great order. He first creates three realms on days 1-3 (time, space, and life) and then he creates the rulers over those realms in days 4-6 (sun, moon, and stars over time; birds and fish filling sky and sea, and the beasts over the land). Finally, God creates man and woman as the crowning of His creation, making them in His image and likeness, and giving them the mission to rule over all creation: "Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth" (Gn 1:26). All this is missed if we do not take into account the literary artistry of the biblical writers.

Much would also be missed if we fail to consider the historical context. Israel's creation account actually subverts the accounts of creation in other ancient near eastern cultures (see sidebar).

SIDEBAR

Other ancient near eastern cultures around Israel had their own stories about how the world came into existence and how human beings were created. But Israel's story stands out for its emphasis on monotheism—the belief in only one God.

The pagan nations around Israel believed in multiple deities, many of whom were associated with the things of this world. They worshipped the sun, moon and stars. The sea monsters were powerful deities. And other pagan gods were associated with the images of various animals.

For Genesis 1, therefore, to proclaim that Israel's God is the one true God who created the sun, moon, stars, sea creatures and all the animals would have been a counter-cultural and subversive message. Genesis would be highlighting how the very gods which the pagans worship are actually not deities at all, but merely creatures of the one true God!

Image Is Everything

The drama of Genesis 1 next moves from the cosmic perspective of God creating the sun, moon and stars all the way down to the climactic moment when God creates man:

“Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image after our likeness’” (Gn 1:26).

Christians often talk about how we are made in the “image of God.” But what does this really *mean*?

While this concept has many layers of theological meaning (see CCC 356-357), what would have stood out to the ancient Israelites hearing the story of creation is that Adam has a relationship with God that is truly extraordinary. Nothing else in the visible world even comes close to the intimate communion God establishes with Adam and Eve.

In the Bible, being made in the *image* of someone else implies a father-and-son relationship. In fact, the next time this word is used in Genesis, it describes the relationship between Adam and his own son, Seth: Adam “became the father of a son in his own likeness, after his *image*, and named him Seth” (Gn 5:3, emphasis added).

If Seth is in the image of his father Adam, what would that tell us about Adam being made in the image of God? Adam is being revealed as God's son. Thus, the entire narrative of the Bible begins with an astonishing truth about our identity: We are not mere creatures of the Creator. We are not simply servants of an Almighty Deity. We are called to an intimate relationship with this infinite God as His children, made in His image.

The Fatherhood of God

This passage also gives us a glimpse of who *God* is. If Genesis 1 highlights how Adam was created as God's son, this would suggest that God is meant to be understood not just as Lord, but also as *Father*.

The rest of Genesis 1 and 2 goes on to show God's fatherly care for Adam. God provides Adam with a garden full of water to drink and

fruits and vegetation to eat. He creates the animals and allows Adam to name them and care for them, showing Adam his mission to rule over and care for all of God's natural creation. He even provides Adam with a partner: his bride, Eve.

In the midst of the story, God gives Adam only one restrictive law—only one “Thou shall not...”: He says to Adam, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die” (Gn 2:16-17). This leads us to a crucial question for understanding the story of Adam—and the story of our own lives: Why does God give the law?

God does not give this law to Adam in order to control him and restrict his freedom. In fact, God's words underscore the broad liberty He was giving Adam to eat *freely* from *every* other tree in the garden. There is only one tree from which God does not want Adam to eat, the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

Neither is the law given merely to test Adam's obedience. There is a much deeper purpose to the command. The text says God warns Adam about this one tree because He does not want Adam to be harmed: “*for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.*” In other words, God gives this law to protect Adam from some danger that is symbolized by the tree of knowledge of good and evil (cf. CCC 396).¹ Here, we can begin to see how the moral law flows from God's love for us. As Pope John Paul II once explained: “God, who alone is good, knows perfectly what is good for man, and by virtue of his very love, proposes this good to man in the commandments.”²

¹ “The ‘tree of knowledge of good and evil’ symbolically evokes the insurmountable limits that man, being a creature, must freely recognize and respect with trust. Man is dependent on his Creator and subject to the laws of creation and to the moral norms that govern the use of freedom” (CCC 396).

² John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, 35.

The Serpent's Strategy: Rules vs. Relationship

The law flows from the Father's heart. But the devil wants Adam and Eve (and all of us) to view God's law *apart* from His love—to see the command as a rule, not as an expression of his relationship with us.

Consider the serpent's first words to Eve: “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat of any trees of the garden?’” (3:1). First, the serpent simply refers to the Lord as “God” (in Hebrew, the word is “*Elohim*”). This title is used in Genesis 1 to describe God as the Creator of the universe. The serpent's use of this title here is particularly striking because the rest of Genesis 2-3 characteristically refers to God as “the Lord God” (in Hebrew, “*Yahweh Elohim*”), which elsewhere in the Bible expresses God's intimacy with his people as Israel's covenant partner. In Genesis 2, it is the “Lord God” who creates man from the ground and breathes life into him, who creates the animals and allows Adam to name them, and who creates the woman from Adam's side. Indeed, the “Lord God” is a loving God, intimately involved in Adam and Eve's lives, providing for them as his children.

But the serpent will have none of this. He wants Eve to think of God as a remote deity, a distant creator—one who gives a burdensome law. It is as if the serpent is saying, “Did that distant Creator, that powerful law-giver, say, ‘You shall not eat of *any* trees of the garden?’” The serpent wants them to think of God as an oppressive law-giver whose rule limits their freedom.

The woman responds by mentioning that they may eat from other trees, but that if they eat from the tree in the midst of the garden they would die (3:2-3). To this, the serpent says: “*You will not die.* For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and *you will be like God, knowing good and evil*” (3:4).

Attack on God's Fatherhood

Feel the gravity of the serpent's words. In saying, "You will *not* die," the serpent is calling God a liar. According to the serpent, the tree is *not* harmful. It is actually something that will make them become like God. And God is so afraid of Adam and Eve eating from the tree and becoming like him that he makes up this law in order to keep them under his control.

Notice how the devil is not simply trying to get Adam and Eve to break a rule. Ultimately, he is trying to get them to break a relationship. The first sin involves questioning God's fatherly goodness. As the *Catechism* explains, "Man, tempted by the devil, *let his trust in his Creator die in his heart* and, abusing his freedom, disobeyed God's command. This is what man's first sin consisted of. All subsequent sin would be disobedience toward God and *lack of trust in his goodness*" (CCC 397).

In conclusion, the first temptation and every one since involves an attack on God's loving Fatherhood. In our own relativistic world today, many people adopt the serpent's view about God's moral law—they doubt that there really is a moral law that is given for our good. When a culture views religion as "just a bunch of rules" and morality as the Church "trying to tell others what to do with their lives," it no longer sees the moral law as coming from the heart of a loving Father who wants what is best for us. Like Adam and Eve, our modern world has not just abandoned moral truth. In doing so, it has bought into the serpent's lie about God Himself. When we reject God's moral law for our own preferences, we are ultimately rejecting the Father's loving care for us.

The 'First Gospel'

Through sin, Adam and Eve bring discord into the original harmony they had with God and find themselves in desperate need of being restored. Spiritually separated from God and having introduced death into the world, Adam and Eve now have a problem that they are incapable of solving on their own. Right at this desperate moment, God offers a message of hope.

After the Fall, God confronts the serpent, saying, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel" (Gn 3:15). These words represent the first time in the Bible when God's plan of salvation is prophetically foreshadowed. The imagery of the strife between the serpent's offspring and the woman's offspring depicts a long battle between those who follow the serpent's ways and those descendants of the woman who will follow God's ways. In the end, however, the woman is described as having an offspring who will defeat the devil. Since the use of the imagery of *crushing the head* in the Bible denotes a king defeating his enemies, this passage portrays the woman as having a royal offspring who will emerge to defeat the serpent.

Christians have called this passage the *Protoevangelium*, or the "first Gospel." According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, these words represent the first prophecy about the redemptive work of Christ. "Christian tradition sees in this passage an announcement of the 'New Adam' who, because he 'became obedient unto death, even death on a cross,' makes amends superabundantly for the disobedience of Adam. Furthermore, many...have seen the woman announced in the *Protoevangelium* as Mary, the mother of Christ, the 'new Eve'" (CCC 411).

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Genesis 1:1-13, 14-15, 26-27; 2:16-7; 3:1-6, 15

Please read aloud: The Bible can be intimidating. After all, it is no ordinary book; it's more like a library. It consists of 73 books, written in different languages, by different authors, to diverse audiences at various periods of time. And while some people might be familiar with the major stories of the Bible—Moses and the Exodus, Noah and the flood, David and Goliath, Jesus and the cross—few understand how all these varied stories actually fit together.

In this Bible study, however, we will discover the “big picture” of the Bible—how the many smaller stories of Scripture fit into the overarching epic story of God's covenant family plan, centered on the person and mission of Jesus Christ. At every step of the way, we will see how God is preparing His people for the coming of Jesus Christ and the Church He established. In this way, the unity of God's plan as revealed in the Bible will shine out more clearly.

This first chapter of the study begins at the very beginning of the Bible in the book of Genesis.

1. *Launching Question:* When you think about the first chapters of the Bible, the narrative of the creation of the world in the book of Genesis, what immediately comes to mind? Or what have you

heard other people say about this text?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: As we begin our study, we can't be fooled. We must recognize that there's a lot more going on in the opening chapter of the Bible than we might expect. But to grasp its powerful meaning, we must be willing to see the story from the perspective of its original audience: the ancient Israelites. The Biblical writers often organized material by themes and employed elaborate literary techniques that involved repetition, parallelism, allusion, and alliteration—artistry that readers today often miss. This is certainly the case with the first chapter of the Bible, Genesis 1. Let's investigate this further by looking at the first few chapters of the Bible.

Read Genesis 1:1-13

2. In these first three days, what does God create on each day?

Answer: On the first day, God creates the day and the night. On the second day, he creates the sky and the sea. On the third day, he creates Land and vegetation.

Note to the leader: Take out a piece of paper and write out the first three days of creation.

Day and Night

Sky and Sea

Land and Vegetation

Please read aloud: Now, let's look at the next three days of creation.

Read Genesis 1:14-24

3. The rich theological points in Genesis 1 are more deeply appreciated when we consider the way the six days of creation unfold in the narrative. Do you see a connection between days 1-3 and days 4-6? How might these sets of days be related?

Answer: Numerous scholars have pointed out how there is a connection in the narrative between the first three days and the next three days of creation. The author of Genesis 1 is clearly arranging a series of parallels between the first three days of creation and the last three days to reveal God as the divine architect, creating the universe with great order. He first creates three realms on days 1-3 (time, space, and life) and then he creates the rulers over those realms in days 4-6 (sun, moon, and stars over time; birds and fish filling sky and sea, and the beasts over the land).

Note to the leader: Write the second three days of creation in parallel to the first three.

*Day and Night -> Sun, Moon, and Stars
Sky and Sea -> Birds and Fish
Land and Vegetation -> The Beasts*

SIDEBAR (OPTIONAL)

Note to the leader: Please read aloud.

We can see that the author of Genesis is showing us that God creates with great care and great order. But, much of the meaning of Genesis 1 is also missed if we fail to consider the historical context in which this account was written. Other ancient near eastern cultures around Israel had their own stories about how the world came into existence and how human beings were created. But Israel's story stands out for its emphasis on monotheism—the belief in only one God. The pagan nations around Israel believed in multiple deities, many of whom

were associated with the things of this world. They worshipped the sun, moon and stars. The sea monsters were powerful deities. And other pagan gods were associated with the images of various animals.

4. In light of this background about pagan gods, what do you think would stand out to an ancient reader? What is different about Israel's creation story? What is this story claiming when read against this ancient background?

Answer: For Genesis 1 to proclaim that Israel's God is the one true God who created the sun, moon, stars, sea creatures and all the animals would have been a counter-cultural and subversive message. Genesis would be highlighting how the very gods which the pagans worship are actually not deities at all, but merely creatures of the one true God!

Please read aloud: The drama of Genesis 1 next moves from the cosmic perspective of God creating the sun, moon and stars all the way down to the climactic moment when God creates man.

Read Genesis 1:26-27

5. What does this verse tell us about what humanity is made for? What does it mean to be made in the image and likeness of God?
Allow the group to discuss. Don't tell them the full answer just yet.

Please read aloud: As in any piece of literature, when you come across a word or expression that you're not sure what it means, you consider the context, to see how it's used in other settings. This will be important for interpreting the Bible correctly, too. So, if we want to understand the meaning of being made in God's image and likeness, we should consider the next time the expression is used. The next time the Bible uses the phrase "image and likeness" is Genesis 5:3. Let's see how the phrase is used there.

Read Genesis 5:3

6. What does this verse tell us about the phrase “image and likeness”? And what does this mean for us, when the Bible says that we are created in God’s image and likeness (Genesis 1:26)?

Answer: Adam has a son named Seth, and Seth is in the image and likeness of his father Adam. In Scripture, therefore, the idea of image and likeness points to sonship. When Scripture states that we are created in the image and likeness of God, it is telling us that we are God’s children, his sons and daughters. Unlike anything else in all creation, God made us to share in his life, to live in friendship with him as his children.

7. If the phrase “image and likeness” reveals that we are God’s children, then what does this same phrase tell us about God?

Answer: This passage also gives us a glimpse of who God is. If Genesis 1 highlights how Adam was created as God’s son, this would suggest that God is meant to be understood not just as Lord, but also as Father.

Please read aloud: The rest of Genesis 1 and 2 goes on to show God’s fatherly care for Adam. God provides Adam with a garden full of water to drink and fruits and vegetation to eat. He creates the animals and allows Adam to name them and care for them, showing Adam his mission to rule over and care for all of God’s natural creation. He even provides Adam with a partner: his bride, Eve. In the midst of this, God gives Adam some specific instructions.

Read Genesis 2:16-17

8. Like a good Father, God is very generous with Adam. God’s words underscore the broad liberty He was giving Adam to eat

freely from every other tree in the garden. But, he also gives Adam a command, a “thou shalt not.” In light of what we have been reading about God’s Fatherhood, why do you think God gives this command? Why would a good Father tell his children “no?”

Answer: The text says God warns Adam about this one tree because He does not want Adam to be harmed: “for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.” Like a good Father, God gives this law to protect Adam from some danger that is symbolized by the tree of knowledge of good and evil (cf. CCC 396).¹ Here, we can begin to see how the moral law flows from God’s love for us. God gives us laws because he loves us.

Please read aloud:

The law flows from the Father’s heart. But the devil wants Adam and Eve (and all of us) to view God’s law *apart* from His love—to see the command as a rule, not as an expression of his relationship with us. This leads us to the next part of our story.

Read Genesis 3:1-6

Please read aloud: To understand the subtleties of this passage, we need to look at the story in its original language, Hebrew. Genesis 2-3 characteristically refers to God as “the Lord God” (in Hebrew, “*Yahweh Elohim*”), which elsewhere in the Bible expresses God’s intimacy with his people as Israel’s covenant partner. Indeed, the “Lord God” is a loving God, intimately involved in Adam and Eve’s lives, providing for them as his children.

¹ “The ‘tree of knowledge of good and evil’ symbolically evokes the insurmountable limits that man, being a creature, must freely recognize and respect with trust. Man is dependent on his Creator and subject to the laws of creation and to the moral norms that govern the use of freedom” (CCC 396).

The serpent will have none of this. In Genesis 3:1, the serpent simply refers to the Lord as “God” (in Hebrew, the word is “Elohim”). This title is used in Genesis 1 to describe God as the Creator of the universe. He wants Eve to think of God as a remote deity, a distant creator—one who gives a burdensome law.

The devil even goes so far as to directly contradict God, saying to Eve, “you will not die.” Feel the gravity of the serpent’s words. In saying, “You will *not* die,” the serpent is calling God a liar. According to the serpent, the tree is *not* harmful. It is actually something that will make them become like God. And God is so afraid of Adam and Eve eating from the tree and becoming like him that he makes up this law in order to keep them under his control.

9. Considering this background, what is the serpent trying to do? Who or what is he attacking? What is at the heart of this temptation?

Answer: Notice how the devil is not simply trying to get Adam and Eve to break a rule. Ultimately, he is trying to get them to break a relationship. The first sin involves questioning God’s fatherly goodness. As the Catechism explains, “Man, tempted by the devil, let his trust in his Creator die in his heart and, abusing his freedom, disobeyed God’s command. This is what man’s first sin consisted of. All subsequent sin would be disobedience toward God and lack of trust in his goodness” (CCC 397). The first temptation and every one since involves an attack on God’s loving Fatherhood.

10. Do you see this same temptation in the lives of people today? How so?

Allow the group to discuss. Answer: In our own relativistic world today, many people adopt the serpent’s view about God’s moral law—they doubt that there really is a moral law that is given for our good. When

a culture views religion as “just a bunch of rules” and morality as the Church “trying to tell others what to do with their lives,” it no longer sees the moral law as coming from the heart of a loving Father who wants what is best for us. Like Adam and Eve, our modern world has not just abandoned moral truth. In doing so, it has bought into the serpent’s lie about God Himself. When we reject God’s moral law for our own preferences, we are ultimately rejecting the Father’s loving care for us.

Please read aloud: But the story doesn’t end here. Through sin, Adam and Eve bring discord into the original harmony they had with God and find themselves in desperate need of being restored. Spiritually separated from God and having introduced death into the world, Adam and Eve now have a problem that they are incapable of solving on their own. Right at this desperate moment, God offers a message of hope.

Read Genesis 3:15

Please read aloud: These words represent the first time in the Bible when God’s plan of salvation is prophetically foreshadowed. The imagery of the strife between the serpent’s offspring and the woman’s offspring depicts a long battle between those who follow the serpent’s ways and those descendants of the woman who will follow God’s ways. In the end, however, the woman is described as having an offspring who will defeat the devil. Since the use of the imagery of *crushing the head* in the Bible denotes a king defeating his enemies, this passage portrays the woman as having a royal offspring who will emerge to defeat the serpent.

Christians have called this passage the *Protoevangelium*, or the “first Gospel.” According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, these words

represent the first prophecy about the redemptive work of Christ:

“Christian tradition sees in this passage an announcement of the ‘New Adam’ who, because he ‘became obedient unto death, even death on a cross,’ makes amends superabundantly for the disobedience of Adam. Furthermore, many...have seen the woman announced in the *Protoevangelium* as Mary, the mother of Christ, the ‘new Eve’” (CCC 411).

11. Why do you think the *Protoevangelium*, or the “first Gospel,” appears at this point in the text?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: But Genesis 3 not only provides a prophecy about Christ's victory over the devil; the narrative also foreshadows how Jesus will restore the sons of Adam to covenant with God. Let's compare the curses Adam receives and what Jesus experiences in his passion.

Read Genesis 3:17-19

Please read aloud: Remember this passage. I am going to summarize a couple passages about Jesus. See if you can identify the connections between Adam and Jesus in these passages.

- In Matthew 26:36-46, before Jesus dies, he goes to the Garden of Gethsemane he is tested. In his agony, he sweats blood, but says to God “Thy will be done.”
- In Acts 5:30, Peter states that Jesus died “on a tree.”
- Matthew 27:29 tells us that a crown of thorns was put on Jesus' head.
- Jesus dies and rises from the dead.

12. What do these passages show us about Jesus in relation to Adam's curses? What similarities do you see?

Answer: As the New Adam, Jesus confronts the curses laid on Adam that have plagued the human family ever since the fall. Like Adam, Jesus, on the night before He died, enters a garden—the Garden of Gethsemane—where He is tested (Mt 26:36-46). There, He takes on Adam's sweat as He experiences “sweat-like drops of blood” falling from His face. On Good Friday, Jesus symbolically takes on the curse of Adam's thorns as He is handed over to the Roman soldiers, who place a crown of thorns on His head (Mt 27:29). Finally, Jesus even takes on the curse of Adam's death as He goes to a tree—the wood of the cross—and dies on Calvary. And, like Adam, Jesus is placed in the cursed ground where He is buried in a tomb. It is precisely from the darkness of that tomb in the cursed ground that Jesus, the Light of the World, rises victoriously from the dead on Easter Sunday to shine the light of salvation at the dawn of the new creation.²

13. As we come to the close of this chapter, what have you come to understand about God's plan and the story presented by the Scriptures? How do you think this chapter is going to help us understand the rest of the story of the Bible?

Allow the group to discuss.

² Parts of this chapter were based on an article by Edward Sri “From the Father's Heart: God's Law and Our Happiness” *Lay Witness* May/June 2011, pp. 10-11.