# Hermeneutics and Genesis 1-11

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## Introduction

Beyond all question, the church's premier interpreters of Holy Scripture are its pastoral preachers—that is (and I am purposely being precise here) those who, when they stand in the pulpit, seek to let the Bible do the talking, so that the living triune God may presence himself with the congregation and lay his constraint upon them directly, in all the glory of his wisdom, holiness, love, and power, through the opening up to them of his own written word. A narrow definition? Yes. Neither professional pulpiteers who make the Bible a peg on which to hang their own ideas, nor political agitators who use it to support their private agendas, nor pure academics who pack biblical truth into the head with no care for the heart, count as pastoral preachers in my sense. My definition fits only those who practice what John Stott calls double listening, whereby they attend both to the truth and relevance of the inspired word and also to the state and needs of people, pagan and Christian alike, in today's distorted world; and who are always looking to see how the word speaks specifically to people at the interface, or meeting of horizons, or the point of encounter, or application, or however else we may choose to describe the directing, correcting, renewing, and invigorating impact on us of God's utterance from the text to our hearts. In my view, it is only those who seek to be channels for the outgoing of the word of God who merit the title *preachers,* and it is only those who seek to apply truth for the changing and sanctifying of human lives who merit the description *pastoral.* Now it is in hope of helping pastoral preachers that this article has been written

We are to discuss hermeneutics. Quite so, but what is hermeneutics? Historically, ever since Protestants started writing (in Latin, in the seventeenth century) about *hermeneutica sacra* and *ars hermeneutica,* this English word, when used (which until quite recently was not often), has signified the principles of biblical interpretation, and that is how I use it now, though with an emphasis on the communicative process, and the enlightening of the person at the receiving end, which the older idea of interpretation did not carry. In 1977 the term was unfamiliar to a large study gathering I attended, where a brilliant spelling out of the hermeneutical task for Bible-believers led only to "Herman Eutics, the new German theologian" becoming the conference joke. But today we need to know and use the word, for whereas in the late nineteenth century the biblical debate centered on inspiration and in the first half of the twentieth century on revelation, interpretation, communication, and comprehension of meaning are currently center stage, and are likely to stay there for some time to come. Hermeneutics nowadays means interpretation viewed as like an ellipse with two foci: alongside the old, single focus on the objective, historical meaning of the text there now appears a second, subjective locus, on mapping and tracking its modern meaning for modern people. The scope of the scientific art, or should I say the artful science, of interpreting documents, biblical ,and otherwise,

has been so enlarged in recent discussions that this once unfamiliar term is now needed to cover all that is held to be involved in properly understanding the Bible.

What really has happened? The short answer is that whereas the process of interpreting Bible texts used to be viewed as entirely author-centered, in the sense that when we saw what he meant his envisaged readers to learn from what he wrote we thought the job was done, today's interpreters press the questions, what more than he knew does the writer's text convey and—the crucial enquiry—what meaning does his work finally have for us latter-day readers, none of whose cultural backgrounds and conditionings match his own. The same two new questions are currently pressed, be it said, in all fields of literary and documentary study in the school and university world, under the influences of the critical technique of deconstruction and the cultural tyranny of postmodern relativism.[1] But Christians cannot evade these questions in relation to the Bible, for we all know (don't we?) that every biblical book when seen and studied in the context of the canon, God's organic multi-unit revelation to which each book belongs, means more than ever it could mean on its own, and we all know too that our North American culture is in truth very different from the ancient cultures out of which the Bible books came.

What then should we do? If the fullness of God's revealed truth applied to the fullness of present-day life is what we are honestly after, then the answer is clear: we should take in stride these two new questions, for they are valid and relevant, and by facing up to them we shall be helped forward to our goal. Approached on the basis of a defective view of the nature and function of the Bible as such, the new questions become swamps in which scholars sink; but with belief in the truth, trustworthiness, coherence, completeness, clarity, and canonicity of the inspired writings as our starting-point, we can move through these admittedly complex enquiries without losing our footing, and there is good hope that by so doing we shall end up better communicators of God's unchanging revelation than we were before.

It will be well to remind ourselves, before we go further, of what by common consent it is already agreed that this task of communication requires of the pastoral preacher. (The common consent is of mainstream Christianity everywhere; surveying two millennia of church history, and particularly the Reformational succession over 500 years, leaves one in no doubt as to what mainstream Christianity is, and the demands of pulpit ministry is not a matter over which the church has ever split.) First of all, pastoral preachers need to be abreast of the linguistic, literary, historical, and cultural background of whatever biblical book they are exegeting. They must be clear on the frame within which, and the means by which, and the trajectory along which, and the end for which, it was written. And this requires of them a deep-level, empathetic, attitudinal, and practical identification with the human writer's faith in God, since showing and sharing that faith is always part of his purpose, implicit if not explicit, whoever he is and whatever he is writing about in whatever literary genre or form. We who preach will

[1] For a full survey of all this, see. Moises Silva, *Foundation of Contemporary Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996); Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger and Gadamer* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969); Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), and *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992); E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), and *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

not take the full measure of his material if we ignore this fact. Our own hearts must be in tune with the text or we shall miss much of what the writer meant his readers to see and realize, and we need to be much in prayer for the help of the Holy Spirit in this tuning-in process.

Then, second, as pastoral preachers approach each biblical passage, they must be clear on the following truths about God's communication through Holy Scripture, the communication of which they themselves must seek to be (he channels. These are truths about the instrumentality of Scripture, a matter of no less importance than the truth of biblical inspiration itself.

(1) God the Creator, our triune Lord, whose word of address the whole Bible ultimately is, still speaks all that each passage sets forth, whether by narrating or by direct theologizing in the form of sermon, oracle, letter, proverb, meditation, prayer, song, or whatever. All the *doctrine,* to use Calvin's word, that is embodied or embedded in the verbalized flow of thought that we call the *text,* whether it concerns events or truths about God or godly living and its opposite, is from God himself, given to instruct, guide, and transform.

(2) God speaks all of this here and now with application to all to whom the text comes, whether they attend to the word of God and welcome it or not.

(3) God's purpose in so speaking is to exegete us, the life we live, and the world around us, telling us how he views our value systems, our motivations, and our present priorities; showing us what changes, intellectual and behavioral, we need to make; mediating awareness of the presence, power, and pity of Jesus so that we trust him and entrust ourselves to him; encouraging sound believers to persevere in worship and well-doing; and renewing faith, hope, love, vision, and endeavor in our hearts as we seek to obey the divine will in the family, the church, and the wider world.

And third, the preaching pastor's interpretation of the Bible must be canonical in character; that is, it must treat the Bible as our rule of faith and life. "Canon," after all, is Greek for "rule, standard," and when used of the Bible it signifies the function of control every time. Christians live, move, and exist under the direction and correction of the written word of God. (I assume, in developing this point, that the God-given canon consists of the 66 books that all Christendom recognizes.) Canonical interpretation of the Bible has three key qualities.

(1) It is *coherent.* Anglican Article 20 says that the Church may not "so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another," and what is forbidden to the church as such is forbidden to all its agents too. The reason is simply that the Holy Spirit, whose creative and overruling action upon the Bible writers gave us the inspired text, knows his own mind and does not contradict himself, any more than versatile authors like C. S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and G. K. Chesterton, who also expressed convictions in and through a wide variety of literary forms, contradicted themselves in so doing. It has often been said that it is impossible to acquit the Bible of factual self-contradiction, but the basis for that assertion seems at every point to be unawareness of the linguistic and literary limits and the culturally-determined conventions of communication that were operating, and when account is taken of these the accusation does not stick. More recently it has been fashionable to accuse the New Testament of theological inconsistency, but once one sees that the logical index of meaning is the inferences drawn from each declaration, and that the same truth (same in the sense of yielding the same inferences) can be expressed in different ways, using different pictures, analogies, and technical terms this accusation also dissolves away. Thus, Paul, John, and the writer to the Hebrews, who have very different vocabularies, intellectual resources, and

expository styles, can be shown to be entirely at one in their delineation of the person, ministry, and significance of our Lord Jesus Christ, and in their understanding of the gospel of grace that has him at its center. This principle of the internal coherence and consistency of Scripture, the principle traditionally called the analogy of faith or the analogy of Scripture, must always be observed as we preach, and no less as we study with a view to preaching.

(2) Canonical interpretation is *organic.* It sees every text in the context, not only of its own chapter and book, but of the entire Bible, and locates it where it belongs in the bit-by-bit unfolding of divine revelation throughout the historical process that culminated in Christ. So canonical expositors will take care not to read knowledge into, nor read meaning out of the Old Testament text, that the human writer, living where and when he did, would not have been aware of—though they will certainly do what the New Testament writers do, and shine the light of Christ on each such text in order to show how it foreshadowed and illustrated what God would finally display to the world through his Son. Canonical expository preachers will recognize that the entire Old Testament is in the broadest sense preparation for Christ, both historically and didactically, both covenantally and communicatively, both prophetically and typologically, both by promise and by law, both foundationally and as setting the stage for his arrival, and they will always keep these organic links in view. But at the same time they will recognize that everything in Scripture was written to be understood by its own envisaged first readers (yes, even Daniel and Revelation!); no part of the Bible is written in code, or anything like it, and the hunt for hidden patterns in biblical documents, which down the ages has allured so many, was misguided from the start. So pastoral preachers' expositions will begin by highlighting the literal that is, the natural, evidently intended—sense of each passage, noting precisely what it does and does not say, and pinpointing what is special about it (what older writers might have called its *quiddity,* and Gerard Manley Hopkins its *inscape).* Only then will they look in it for the universal principles about God and man, godliness and ungodliness, which the passage embodies and illustrates, and which other passages make clear also. They will duly link up their text with other passages in order to interpret organically, but they will start by appreciating their text as it is, remembering (I trust) Matthew Henry's dictum that a good textuary is a good divine.

(3) Canonical interpretation is *churchly.* By this I mean that, just as modern researchers in physics do not neglect work that was done before they arrived, but aim rather to go on from the point that the study of physics has currently reached, so pastoral expositors of the Bible will not ignore the legacy of understanding that the Holy Spirit, as interpreter of the book he inspired, has already given to the church. Rather, they will draw on this legacy, as they find it in commentaries, theologies, creeds, liturgies, and hymns, old and new, to guide, focus, and deepen their own explorations of the inspired word. They will, in other words, value and appropriate the church's tradition—for that is what we are talking about here. To be sure, they will test and judge that tradition by the Bible that it seeks to expound, for they know that tradition, while usually right, is not infallible; but for all that, and whatever other resources they tap, they listen to tradition attentively, so as to benefit from the truth and wisdom it embodies. This is learning from God through the church, with the church, for the church, fellowshipping in Bible study not just with our own contemporaries, but with those who were in Christ before us, and honoring the Holy Spirit as interpreter of the Scriptures no less than as inspirer of them: which surely is as it should be.

It is by interpreting Scripture canonically—that is, in coherent fashion, as sketched out above—that we find our answer to the two new hermeneutical questions mentioned earlier. Canonical interpretation enables us to see what, more than they themselves

knew, the individual Bible writers communicate, thus resolving what is sometimes labeled the *sensus plenior* enquiry, and it also enables us to see how far we need to adjust to our own modern culture what Scripture says in ancient cultural mode, in order that we may benefit fully from the teaching of God. Canonical interpretation has at its heart the knowledge that some things are transcultural and so do not change. God and his purpose do not change, to start with, nor does fallen human nature as God sees and knows it. Godliness and ungodliness are essentially the same in all ages. Sin, expressing itself in unbelief, pride, self-centered self assertion, and all forms of unlovingness, also stays the same, as do faith, hope, love, virtue, praise, prayer, faithfulness, humility, repentance, obedience, and thanksgiving. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever, and gospel truth and saving grace are unchanging realities.

What may need to change, however, is the specific way one's heart-relationship with God and with others for God's sake finds expression in action in a changed culture. Thus, sixty years ago the British Bible translator J. B. Phillips rendered the "holy kiss" of mutual greeting and acceptance that is prescribed in Romans 16:16, 1 Corinthians 16:20, 2 Corinthians 13:12, 1 Thessalonians 5:26 and 1 Peter 5:14 as "a handshake all round," and more recently Eugene Peterson, in *The Message,* englished it as "a holy embrace" (that is, evidently, a hug). And Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:5-10 has set today's Christian woman a problem: how, when she leads in church worship ("prays or prophesies," vs. 5), may she show publicly that she knows her place in the order of creation to be that of a complementary help to males (or, perhaps, to her husband specifically)? Being "covered" (almost certainly, veiled) evidently conveyed that in Paul's day, but would not do so now; how then can a modern woman make a gesture which shows that for her it is so? In both cases new gestures are needed to express the old points, and so fulfill apostolic requirements. But such changes are hardly major matters. More important is the fact that changed forms of human community (urbanization, for instance) may call for new forms of service to the needy, beyond those that Scripture specifies; but this is cultural adaptation and extension of a moral imperative, rather than finding a contemporary cultural equivalent for a meaningful gesture that the New Testament actually prescribes. We must now apply all this to the interpretation of Genesis 1-11.

## II

The pastoral preacher, as we have seen, must be a canonical expositor, and a canonical expositor must know how to read the Old Testament both forwards and backwards. Reading forwards, he moves through the history that is peculiarly "his (God's) story," leading up to the historical coming of Jesus Christ, the Son of God incarnate, the one and only Mediator and Savior of sinners, who has temporarily left this world but will return to complete the saving of his people and make all things new. Reading backwards, the canonical expositor shines the light of Christ on all Old Testamental material, seeing it as posing questions Christ answers, displaying needs he meets, showing patterns of redemption and worship that he fulfills, demonstrating the covenantal way of living that he teaches, focusing hopes of the kingdom of God in which he is God's gracious king, and illustrating in all sorts of ways what godliness and ungodliness, justice and injustice, love and hate, in the family, the nation, and the human community as such, really amount to. This two-way reading is supremely important in dealing with Genesis 1-11, where creation and fall, the disordering of the world, and divine judgment and mercy for a rebel race, are the leading themes. We would hardly know how to read these chapters did not Christ and his apostles, by their

references to them and the topics with which they deal, give us the clues that put us straight on their significance.[2]

The layout of the chapters is as follows. (Chapter divisions are, of course, no part of the original text, but these are discerning and convenient.)
(1) God creates this world. All is in order; all is good.
(2) God sets the first human pair in a garden; all is good for them, so long as they do not eat the fruit of just one tree.
(3) For sinfully eating the forbidden fruit, they are expelled from the garden and their life is cursed.
(4) Sibling rivalry in their family brings murder. From the murderer and his offspring come cities, music, technology, and power-mad violence.
(5) From Adam to Noah, genealogically.
(6-8) Universal wickedness brings the universal judgment of a universal flood, in which by God's mercy just one family is saved.
(9) God promises future stability to his sinful world. Sin invades the saved family.
(10) From Noah to all nations, genealogically.
(11) God restrains ambition at Babel by diversifying languages and scattering mankind. From Seth to Abraham, genealogically.
After this, chapter 12 begins the story of God's saving purpose, God's saved people, their corporate covenant commitment, and their journey to the promised land, which is the subject-matter of the rest of the Pentateuch.

The Pentateuch is the literary unit of which Genesis 1-11 is the curtain-raising prologue. That is the angle from which these chapters must be approached. The Pentateuch as a whole, whatever sources its writer (whom I name as Moses) may have drawn on, is a work of great and conscious art, and clearly Moses knew what he was doing when he shifted stylistically from the poetical-prose mode of narration in Genesis 1-11, with its pictorial, imaginative, quasi-liturgical phraseology, its paucity of mere information and its drumbeat formulae, to the ordinary narrative-prose mode of the rest of his work. This transition of genre (for that is what it is) must not be lost sight of. Evocative prologues that of set purpose are informationally enigmatic but imaginatively haunting, and so pull readers into the main story, are familiar in modern book-writing, so we should not find it too hard to recognize in Genesis 1-11 an enormously powerful ancient counterpart of such prologues, to which under God Moses' communicative instincts, literary skills, and planned strategy for the whole work evidently led him.

There has been much discussion as to whether words such as "legend," "saga," "epic," "myth," or "tale" would be good labels for the kind of narrative that these chapters contain, but none of them will really do, because they all imply that what is narrated is fiction rather than fact, and by linking his narratives with genealogies that take us from Adam and Eve down to Abraham and across the entire MidEast Moses shows that he means those narratives to be understood as space-time history, although told in his chosen incantatory-poetic way. Certainly, his poetical-prose style, which like all poetry seeks to focus and concentrate experiences and perceptions so that they resonate with the readers and sensitize them to reality, has the effect of making, us aware that the

[2] References to Adam and Eve: Christ, Matthew 19:4-5; Paul, Romans 5:12-19; 1 Corinthians 15:21-22; 2 Corinthians 11:3; 1 Timothy 2:13-14.
Reference to Cain and Abel: Christ, Matthew 23:35; Hebrews 11:4; John, 1 John 3:12; Jude 11.
Reference to Enoch: Hebrews 11:5.
Reference to Noah: Christ, Matthew 24:37-39=Luke 17:26-27; Hebrews 11:7; Peter, 1 Peter 3:20; 2 Peter 2:5.

stories he tells reflect our own stories, since parallel things have happened to us, and clearly this is .in effect that Moses intended. Those who would categorize Adam's story, and the other stories with it, as myth regularly tell us that in his temptation and fall Adam is the figure of Everyman, as are also Cain and Lamech and each builder of Babel, and this is not wrong. We have all lapsed as they lapsed. But it is important to see that for Moses Adam is only Everyman because first he was Adam, the pioneer human being and our racial ancestor, a space-time historical character in his own right. To call the stories of Adam, Eve and these others "primal history" or "proto-history" (*Urgeschichte),* as some do, is appropriate enough, but a better phrase for catching their generic, "us-too" quality is “archetypal history"—an archetype being a universal pattern that is repeated in other subjects or objects over and over again. This, then, it seems, in the fittest label to use.

And it is vital to remember, as we do so, that the archetypal history of Genesis 1-11, like the four histories of Jesus' earthly ministry in the gospels (and, indeed, Bible history generally), is theological through and through: that is, it is told not for its own sake or to advance any secular interest, racial, political, antiquarian or any other, but do show forth God—the will, work, and ways of the Creator— and godliness—the walk, work, and worship of believers— and, of course, ungodliness—its perversity, idiocy, and enormity. This is not hard to see in Genesis 1-11, where the sovereignty of God and the sins of mankind are highlighted so vividly, but things that are not hard to see are yet easily missed if we are preoccupied with something else.

When, now, a pastoral preacher, a would-be canonical expositor, approaches Genesis 1—11, or any other biblical context for that matter, what questions must he ask? A series of four, I think. The exegetical question comes first: what was the writer's meaning and message about God and godliness for his own envisaged readership? The way into the mind of God is, after all, via the mind of his human messengers, so our quest for understanding must start here. The theological question comes next: how does the truth that the writer was bringing to bear on his contemporaries apply to us today?—which is to say, what is the word from God to us in and through this passage? It may take a wide biblical survey and a good deal of study and debate to answer that question. Third in line is the hermeneutical question: are there cultural prejudices operating in our lives as distorting spectacles, obstacles to our understanding, keeping us from seeing or taking seriously that word of God? Do we suffer from cultural blind spots? This question calls for serious self-criticism and culture-criticism by the light of Scripture as a whole. Finally, the practical question emerges: what then must we do? The notes that follow are offered simply as paths to some of these questions.

## III

Genesis 1-11 is the scene-setting, frame-fixing, view-finding, God-focusing prologue to the Pentateuch, which is the relatively detailed story of the flawed MidEast family, clan Abraham as we may call it, that God chose to be his people, rescued from Egyptian captivity, covenanted with, and led to the promised land, It is as the prologue to that history, and to the rest of Bible history following it, that the canonical expositor must deal with this introductory material. So it is not for him to dwell on questions that go beyond the text, such as the distancing, satirizing, censuring, and correcting relationship in which the prologue's account of creation, paradise, the flood, and the building of cities seems to stand to their polytheistic counterparts found in various MidEastern mythologies. Similarly, his business is not to trawl for the sources that Moses

evidently used; his job, rather, is to open up the coherent, flowing narrative that this prologue actually gives us. Nor is he required to speculate about the biology of Eve's formation, or the identity of Cain's wife, or the botanical classification of the trees of life and of knowledge, or to square Genesis 1 with any form of science. It belongs to the poetical prose style in which Moses wrote this prologue to be historically and scientifically non-specific; the planned resonance within the readers is partly secured, as in poetry generally, by omitting everything that might trigger cognitive detachment from the imaginative sense of involvement that the pictorial language is intended to generate. Legends and fairy stories also work this way (think of the overtones of I he words "once upon a time"), but what we have in Genesis 1-11 is matters not of fantasy but of fact, historical realities shaped by the living God, space-time persons and events from the past now brought before us in order to give us a perspective for understanding God and man in the rest of the Bible, and thus ourselves in our own life-situations. The poetical-prose manner is what makes the stories haunt the imagination and stick in the memory as they do, but the matter is factual, and the stories are there to explain to us what sort of world we now live in, what sort of people we now are, and what sort of God we have to relate to. We must learn to expound accordingly.

To this end, some literary points must be noted. The difference between the poetical-prose genre of Genesis 1-11 and the chronicle-prose style of the patriarchal narratives lies in the use by the former of poetical devices — patterned narration, with crafted echoes, repetitions, balances, and verbal vividness heightening intensity — while the latter is simply prosaic in the modern sense. For adequate exposition of Genesis 1-11 we must appreciate its quasi-poetic techniques of presentation.

Genesis 1:1-4a pictures God's making and ordering of this world as a week's work, effected by fiat at each stage with a day of rest following the six days of labor. The picture is memorable, and the heavily formalized narrative is stately, dignified, ceremonial, almost liturgical, and very arresting. It has its own inner balance: first God establishes day and night (day one); open sky (day two); and land and sea (day three); then he calls into being sun, moon, and stars to mark day and night and seasons (day four); birds and fish to fill the air and sea (day five); and animals and humans to populate the land (day six). The message to readers is not, "Meet the creation," as if we had never noticed these things before, but, "Meet the Creator! Learn from what he has made what sort of being he is—almighty and wise, rejoicing in variety, rational and righteous in his relationships and his rule, bringing order out of chaos, and generating good of all kinds." And then, "Know that we were made to reflect God at our own level—to image him and be like him in all these ways."[3]

Genesis 2:4b-3:24 is a single story telling us of Adam and Eve first enjoying and then losing paradise, because they disobeyed God. The narrative is heavy with parabolic symbolism. And what is that? By *symbolism* I mean the use of analogous images in place of veridical descriptions in order to maximize the "me-too" resonance at the receiving end of what the story sets forth. The intended effect is that our insight into, and our sense of involvement and identification with, the event or reality symbolized should be as deep as possible, even though we may end up not being sure what we would have seen and heard had we been on the spot to witness it. Taking the symbols from what for most people has always been the world of everyday life, the world of gardens and fruit

[3] For a convincing exposition of this approach to Genesis I, see Henri Blocher, *In the Beginning: The Opening Chapters of Genesis* (Leicester: IVP and Downers Grove: IVP, 1984).

trees and visits from friends, is a very natural way of achieving this impact. Then by *parabolic* I mean that the symbolism belongs to an instructional story 1 which, like many of Jesus' parables, is meant to startle people into changing by the "me-too" realization it evokes. Parabolic symbolism, then, is a communicative technique, or device, for drawing hearers and readers into facing reality! with regard to themselves. Getting people to face reality is regularly hard; this is one way of trying to make it happen.

Where, now, is the symbolism in these chapters? First, if Garden of Eden (Eden means *delight),* in which the tree of life and the tree of knowledge grew, is off all maps, since the rivers Gihon and Pishon cannot be located (see 2:10-14). Second, the forming of Adam *(ha'adam,* "the human," 2:7) from dust, and of Eve (whose name means *living,* with the implication of *life-source)* from Adam's rib, looks like meaningful imagery rather than anything else. So does the snake, which receives a snake's curse (3:14) but is identified in Revelation 12:9 and 20:2 as Satan the tempter and deceiver; a snake, be it said, is a perfect symbol for Satan, since all the world dislikes and fears snakes, and thinks of them as destructive of life, having a habit of hiding themselves, and a bite that is poisonous. Then, God walking in the garden looks like a symbol of his inescapable presence with, and knowledge of, his human creatures, just as his ownership of the garden and his putting Adam to tend it looks like a symbol of the human obligation to live for God and accept accountability to him; while the couple's embarrassment at the prospect of continuing naked before each other and before God seems to symbolize the wish to hide from all accounting when one knows one's purposes and track record have been bad. The fall into disobedience of the primitive human pair, and the penal loss, corruption of nature, and physical and spiritual mortality that they thus brought not simply on themselves but on the whole human race, as the facts recorded in the rest of the prologue illustrate, should be regarded as indubitable matters of fact, for all of this is reaffirmed by the New Testament. And surely the promise of enmity between the snake and the woman means more than that humans will try to kill snakes, which in turn will try to bite back (3:15). Surely the church was always right to read this as the first promise of the Savior, and as a pointer to the final victory over Satan that he would one day win, though at great cost to himself. There is indeed, then, much intentional symbolism here in the poetical prose in which the historical realities are couched, and it makes us realize very vividly that this is our story as well as Adam's and Eve's—which, so I urge, was precisely the effect at which Moses was aiming, and which indeed he was calculating as he deployed his literary skills.

Genesis 4 and 5, following straight on from the debacle of Eden, constitute a poker-faced recital of moral corruption, alienation from God, and universal death among Adam’s descendants. The statement, often gaily made, that original sin has no place in the fall story is true only at the verbal level. The reality of human nature set in the mould of the first transgression—self-willed rebellion, breaking bounds, overstepping limits, dishonoring and avoiding God, with subsequent shifting of blame and excusing oneself— appears at one in the behavior of Adam and Eve, and is then further illustrated by the action of Cain the murderer and the boasting of Lamech the loudmouth. The style of this section of the prologue, with its repeated phrases, vivid vignettes of Cain and Lamech, and minimal context, is still poetical—indeed, from this point on it is much like that of classic epic poetry. Moses is still calculating his effects; he means these chapters to depress readers, and that they most effectively do.

The accounts of the flood (6:1-9; 17) and of Babel (11:1-9) have been worked up, in a literary sense, by a full-scale use of chiasmic or mirror-image structure, so that

both narratives give the reader a sense of significant shape and structure that mere chronicle would not have. B. W. Anderson[4] analyzes the flood story thus:

Transitional introduction (6:9-10)
1. Violence in creation (6:11-12)
2. First divine speech: resolve to destroy (6:13-22)
3. Second divine speech: "enter ark" (7:1-10)
4. Beginning of flood (7:1-10)
5. The rising flood (7:17-24)
God remembers Noah
6. The receding flood (8:1 -5)
7. Drying of the earth (8:6-14)
8. Third divine speech: "leave ark" (8:15-19)
9. God's resolve to preserve order (8:20-22)
10. Fourth divine speech: covenant (9:1-17)

And this is Gordon Wenham's analysis of the Babel narrative.[5]

> The tower of Babel is a short but brilliant example of Hebrew story telling…Word play, chiasmus, paronomasia, and alliteration are just some of the devices used to unify and accentuate the message of the tale… Verbal inclusions link the introduction (v.1) and the conclusion (v.9)… The whole narrative can be viewed as cast in parallel panels.

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| v 1 | "one language" | v 6 | "one people" |
| | "one kind of speech" | | "one language" |
| v 2 | "there" | v7 | "there" |
| v 3 | "each other" | | "each other" |
| v4 | "build...a city: | v8 | "building the city" |
| | "name" | v 9 | "its name" |
| | "lest we are scattered over the face of the whole earth" | vv8,9 | "the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth" |

But it is possible also to see the narrative as a palistrophe, or extended chiasmus.

A "The whole earth had one language" (v 1)
B "there" (v 2)
C "each other" (v 3)
D "Come let us make bricks" (v 3)
E "let us build for ourselves" (v 4)
F "a city and a tower"
G' "the LORD came down..."
F' "the city and the tower"
E' "which mankind had built"
D' "come...let us mix up" (v 7)
C' "each other's language"
B' "from there: (v 8)
A' "the language of the whole earth" (v 9)

The point I am making is that a variety of literary skills has been used to give the stories

[4] B. W. Anderson, "From Analysis to Synthesis: The Interpretation of Genesis 1-11," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 97 (1978), 38.
5 Gordan Wenham, *Genesis 1-15,* Word Biblical Commentary (Waco: Word Books, 1987), 235.

of Genesis 1-11, the Pentateuch's prologue, a vividness, an intensity and a haunting quality that is almost if not quite unique in the Bible. Enough has been said, I think, to show that this is so. Moses wanted these chapters, which set the stage for the story of clan Abraham reaching the promised land, to stand out, and has made them do so: a fact of which the canonical preacher will take due note.

Having shown this, there is only one more thing that I wish to do, and that is to bring into focus the leading character in this prologue—God himself. It is a vital part of the purpose of the prologue to ensure that we bring to the story of clan Abraham a clear grasp of who and what God is, and it is integral to the pastoral preacher's exposition of the prologue to make this evident. What, then, does this prologue teach us about God?

First, we are shown his *sovereign power.* He calls everything in the cosmos into being, and imposes rational order in place of formless chaos, by the fiat of his own creative word, and he oversees and manages all the powers of nature in their ongoing operation. The regularities of the day and night and the round of the year (1:3, 14; 8:22), the unprecedented uprising and downpouring of waters at the flood (7:11), and the periodic appearance of the rainbow (9:13-16), are all alike under his direct control. At his fiat spoken language is changed—that is, language-users are changed, so that they find themselves unable to understand each other, and large-scale community and cooperation become impossible, and family units perforce separate, which one supposes is the process described as God scattering them (11:7-9). God's sovereignty is absolute, and his resources for exercising dominion are unlimited.

Second, we are shown God's *covenant purpose.* Communion with, and cooperation from, "the human" is what God wants; man was made to be, in Karl Barth's apt phrase, the Creator's covenant partner. God speaks to human beings, giving tasks, promises, warnings, and assurances. Enoch's walk with God (5:22, 23) is the ideal for human life. Worship, which makes offerings to God as a way of showing him gratitude and giving him glory, brings him pleasure (4:4; 8:20, 21), for it fulfills his goal of fellowship; .it least it does so when the worshipper's heart is right (4:5 7). God's covenant purpose, one way or another, shapes all his dealings with mankind.

Third, we are shown God's *moral glory* (later in Scripture termed his *holiness*), both in his commands and restrictions and in his disciplinary acts and retributive judgments. Adam and Eve, the snake, and Cain, are put under a curse, and all the early human race except Noah is snuffed out, for breaking moral bounds that God had set. Everyone is accountable to God, and the inner urgings of sin (pictured in 4:7 as a wild beast crouching to spring) must be resisted, for sinning always brings loss: God's justice, active in maintaining moral order, ensures that. The holiness of God, who cannot approve evil, must never be lost sight of.

Fourth, we are shown God's *gracious kindness* towards humans who err. His goodness and generosity to humans as such appears in the dominion he gave mankind at creation and renewed after the flood (1:26, 28-30; 9:1-3), and in the freedom Adam and Eve were given to eat anything growing in the garden of Eden except the fruit of one tree (2:16-17). After the fall, though God sentenced them to a hard and painful life and expelled them from Eden, he gave them for their comfort the promise that the woman's seed would finally overthrow the snake (3:15) and made them better clothing than they had made for themselves (3:21). After Cain had been told that his farming days were over, and he must become a rootless, godless nomad, he was marked so that

he would not be casually killed (2:13-16). After the flood, God promised a permanently stable world for mankind's future, even though he knew that the new generations would be no better than the people he had destroyed (8:21). Kindness peeps through in all this; the holy God tempers judgment with mercy, and does not abandon his aim to bless when humanity falls into sin.

This is the frame for understanding God within which Moses now sets the clan Abraham story, and within which the specifics of God's gracious purpose in due time appeared and were given canonical expression in the rest of the Bible. It is in truth the prologue to the whole Bible that we have been exploring. I hope our explorations may be of some service to pastoral preachers as they prepare to open up these vital chapters.