

GENERAL EDITORS

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The
Literary
STUDY BIBLE

ESV

ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION



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EDITORS' PREFACE

This book is a literary guide to the entire Bible. We have defined the concept of literature very broadly as anything having to do with *how* biblical writers have expressed their content. The foundational premise of all verbal communication is that meaning is conveyed *through form*, starting with language itself but moving beyond that to a whole range of literary forms and genres. There is no meaning without the form in which a piece of writing is expressed.

This means that when we read the Bible, literary considerations are not optional features to which we might attend only if we have an interest in literary matters. We need to pay attention to the *how* of a Bible passage as preliminary to understanding *what* is said.

This literary Bible explains how biblical authors have embodied their messages in their chosen literary forms. The most important features of this book (the only one of its type in existence) are as follows:

- It is a study Bible in the sense of containing the text of the entire Bible, accompanied by commentary.
- It is unlike other study Bibles in that the commentary focuses on the literary features of the Bible, as distinct from historical, cultural, or linguistic features.
- It is also unlike conventional study Bibles in being a reader's guide to the Bible—a book that guides readers through the actual text of the Bible—rather than primarily a reference book about the Bible.
- It is a reader's Bible by virtue of dividing the Bible into units of a size that lends itself to daily reading or weekly group Bible study.
- The commentary and tips for reading appear at the head of passages instead of in footnotes.
- These lead-ins, moreover, move readers into the text that follows, instead of being a distraction from the text.
- The introductions to the books of the Bible provide a roadmap that points out what a reader most benefits from knowing about the book that follows.
- Literary commentary of the type provided in this book is particularly adept at showing the unity of Bible passages and the way in which they fit into the flow of a biblical book and the Bible as a whole.
- The commentary in this book is designed to draw readers into interaction with the biblical text instead of merely providing information about the Bible.
- A glossary at the back of the book provides definitions of literary terms and pointers about how to understand and interpret various literary genres.

As the foregoing list suggests, a literary Bible is distinctly different from other study Bibles. It is ideal as a first approach to the Bible because the content of the Bible can be mastered only if we pay attention to the forms in which that content is embodied. Further, the commentary that we provide is a guide *into* the Bible, not a reference source of information *about* the Bible. This literary commentary is thus a means to the end of equipping readers to renew their commitment to the Bible and to the living God who has revealed himself in the literary forms of the Bible.

INTRODUCTION

This book is both a reader's Bible and a literary Bible. It is a reader's Bible by virtue of its format, which is designed to facilitate sitting down and reading through the Bible. An important part of that format is that the biblical text has been divided into units of a length that invites devotional reading day by day, each preceded by helpful tips for reading the passage that follows.

This book is a study Bible as well as a reader's Bible. The commentary that appears before each passage contains tips for analysis as well as tips for reading. Furthermore, the format and commentary make this literary Bible ideal for use in group Bible studies. Study leaders can use the commentary to help organize their thoughts about a passage and formulate a series of discussion questions.

One of the greatest gifts of the literary approach to the Bible is that it enables readers to grasp a passage as a literary *whole*. Although this book preserves the traditional chapter and verse numbers for ease of reference, it omits the distraction of footnotes (except for the standard ESV notes dealing with translation issues). The reason for this omission is simple: a reader cannot read a passage as a flowing, unified composition while at the same time reading footnotes. Traditional study Bibles are reference books; this literary Bible is a reader's Bible. The single-column format enhances this purpose.

This book is also, as the title promises, a literary Bible. It is a guide to individual books and passages of the Bible that highlights the Bible's literary features. To explain this in more detail, we need to explore the concept that the Bible is literary and the question of what it means to approach the Bible in keeping with its literary nature.

Before we do that, however, we need to clarify a very important point: the content of any piece of writing is communicated *through form*. The concept of form needs to be construed very broadly here. It means anything having to do with *how* a writer has embodied his or her content, starting with the very words. Without literary form, no content can exist. We cannot extract the moral or theological meaning of a story without first assimilating the plot, setting, and characters of the story, or the meaning of a poem without first pondering the poem's images and figures of speech.

This means that a certain priority needs to be given to literary form—not a priority of importance but a priority in the sense of what comes first. To approach the Bible as literature as this literary Bible does is not like dessert—something pleasurable to add to more important aspects of the Bible. The literary approach is the first item on the agenda—the starting point for other approaches to the Bible. This has been a point of neglect among Bible readers and Bible scholars that this literary Bible aims to correct.

WHAT IT MEANS THAT THE BIBLE IS LITERATURE

■ **Literary genres.** The most customary way to define literature is by the external genres (types or kinds of writing) in which its content is expressed. The two main genres in the Bible are narrative and poetry. Numerous categories cluster under each of these. Narrative subtypes, for example, include hero story, Gospel, epic, tragedy, comedy (a U-shaped plot with a happy ending), and parable. Specific poetic genres keep multiplying as well: lyric, lament psalm, praise psalm, love poem, nature poem, epithalamion (wedding poem), and many others.

Still, these literary forms are only the tip of the iceberg. In addition to narrative and poetry, we find prophecy, visionary writing, apocalypse, pastoral, encomium, oratory, drama (the book of Job), satire, and epistle. Then if we start adding more specific forms like travel story, dramatic monologue, doom song, and Christ hymn, the number of literary genres in the Bible readily exceeds one hundred. Many of these genres are defined in the glossary at the back of this Bible. For entries in the glossary, the editors have placed an asterisk in front of each term the first time it appears in the commentary on a given book of the Bible.

The importance of genre to biblical interpretation is that genres have their own methods of procedure and rules of interpretation. An awareness of genre should program our encounter with a text, alerting us to what we can expect to find. For example, the most prevalent of all literary forms is narrative or story. To make adequate sense of a story, we need to know that it consists of plot or action, setting, and characters. These, in turn, constitute the basic grid through which we assimilate the story and talk about it.

In view of how many literary genres are present in the Bible, it is obvious that the overall literary form of the Bible is the anthology, as even the word *Bible* (Greek *biblia*, meaning “little books”) hints. As an anthology, the Bible possesses the same kinds of unity that other anthologies exhibit: multiple authorship (approximately three dozen authors); diverse genres; a rationale for the assembling of this particular collection of materials (a unifying religious viewpoint and story of salvation history, as well as the fact that all the books except Luke and Acts were written by Jews); comprehensiveness; and an identifiable strategy of organization (a combination of historical chronology and groupings by genre). With belief in the inspiration of the Bible as a foundational premise, we can say that the Holy Spirit is the ultimate editor of the anthology that we know as the Bible.

■ **Literary subject matter.** Literature is also identifiable by its subject matter. It is differentiated from expository (informational) writing by the way in which it presents concrete human experience. Instead of stating abstract propositions, logical arguments, or bare facts, literature embodies what literary authors often call “the stuff of real life.” We can profitably think of biblical writing as existing on a continuum, with abstract propositional discourse on one end and concrete presentation of human experience on the other. The more thoroughly a piece of writing falls on the experiential end of the spectrum, the more literary it is.

To illustrate, the command “you shall not murder” is an example of expository discourse. The story of Cain and Abel embodies the same truth in the form of characters in concrete settings performing physical and mental actions. Expository writing gives us the precept; literature gives us the example. “God’s provision extends to all of our life” is a thematic summary of Psalm 23; the psalm, however, eschews such abstraction and incarnates the truth about providence in a pastoral poem that images the daily routine of a shepherd and his sheep.

The subject of literature is human experience rendered as concretely as possible. The result is that it possesses a universal quality. Whereas history and the daily news tell us what *happened*, literature tells us what *happens*—what is true for all people in all places and times. A text can be both, but the literary dimension of a text resides in its embodiment of recognizable human experience. While we rightly think of the Bible as revelatory (God’s supernatural revelation of truth), the literary parts of the Bible are at the same time the human race’s testimony to its own experience.

The goal of literature is to prompt a reader to share or relive an experience. The truth that literature imparts is not simply ideas that are true but *truthfulness to human experience*. The implication for interpretation is that Bible readers, teachers, and expositors need to be active in re-creating experiences in their imagination, identifying the recognizable human experiences in a text (thereby building bridges to life in the modern world), and resisting the impulse immediately to reduce a biblical passage to a set of theological ideas.

■ **Archetypes and motifs.** An archetype is a plot motif (such as initiation or quest), character type (such as the villain or trickster), or image (such as light or water) that recurs throughout literature and life. The presence of archetypes in a text signals a literary quality. When we read literature, we are continuously aware of such archetypes as the temptation motif, the dangerous valley, or the hero, whereas with other types of writing we are rarely aware of archetypes.

Archetypes are the building blocks of literature. Writers could not avoid them even if they tried. The Bible is the most complete repository of archetypes in the Western world, and this makes the Bible a universal and primeval book (reaching down to bedrock human experience). Awareness of archetypes helps us see the unity of the Bible (since we keep relating one instance of an archetype to other instances), the connections between the Bible and other literature, and the connections between the Bible and life.

■ **Stylistics and rhetoric.** Literature also uses distinctive resources of language that set it apart from ordinary expository discourse. The most obvious example is poetry. Poets speak a language all their own, consisting of images and figures of speech. The most important of the special resources of language that push a text into the category of literature include the following: imagery, metaphor, simile, symbol, allusion, irony, wordplay, hyperbole, apostrophe (direct address to someone or something absent as though present), personification, paradox, and pun.

The most concentrated repository of such language in the Bible is the books that are poetic in their basic format—the prophetic books, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes (a book of prose poems), Song of Solomon, Revelation. But literary resources of language are not limited to the obviously poetic books of the Bible. They appear on virtually every page of the Bible beyond the poetic books—most obviously in the discourses of Jesus and in the Epistles, but also, though less pervasively, in the narratives of the Bible.

A related literary phenomenon is rhetoric—arrangement of content in patterned ways and employment of conventional literary techniques or formulas. Parallelism of sentence elements, for example, is an instance of stylized rhetoric. Patterns of repetition—of words, phrases, or content units—is a distinguishing feature of the Bible. So are the aphoristic conciseness and memorability that continuously raise the Bible to a literary realm of eloquence far above everyday discourse. A specimen page from a New Testament epistle might include the presence of rhetorical questions, question-and-answer constructions, direct addresses to real or imaginary respondents, and repeated words or phrases within a passage, and we can depend on it that famous aphorisms will appear in abundance.

■ **Artistry.** Literature is an art form in which beauty of expression, craftsmanship, and verbal virtuosity are valued as rewarding and as an enhancement of effective communication. The one writer of the Bible to state his philosophy of composition portrays himself as, among other things, a self-conscious stylist and wordsmith who arranged

his material “with great care” and who “sought to find words of delight” (Eccles. 12:9–10). Surely our impression is that the other writers of the Bible did the same.

The standard elements of artistic form include unity, theme-and-variation, pattern, design, progression, contrast, balance, recurrence, coherence, and symmetry. Authors cultivate artistry like this because it is important to their effect and intention. The Bible is an aesthetic as well as a utilitarian book, and we need to experience it as such, both for our understanding and for our enjoyment.

■ **Summary: Reading and interpreting the Bible as literature.** Any piece of writing needs to be assimilated and interpreted in terms of the kind of writing that it is. The Bible is a literary book in which theology and history are usually embodied in literary forms. Those forms include genres, the expression of human experience in concrete form, stylistic and rhetorical techniques, and artistry.

These literary features are not extraneous aspects of the text—not optional matters to consider if we have time or interest to do so after we have assimilated the message or content of a passage. Instead, they are the forms *through which* the content is mediated. If the writing of the Bible is the product of divine inspiration—if it represents what the Holy Spirit prompted the authors to write as they were carried along (2 Peter 1:21)—then the literary forms of the Bible have been inspired by God and need to be granted an importance in keeping with that inspiration.

APPROACHING THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

We might think that acknowledging the literary nature of the Bible would automatically produce a literary approach to the material, but this has not been the case. Even scholars and commentators who subscribe to the literary nature of the Bible as outlined in the preceding section overwhelmingly ignore the Bible’s literary features in their commentary. The concept of the Bible as literature has tended to be head knowledge only, without application to the text.

The goal of this literary Bible is to provide literary commentary and tips for reading the Bible in keeping with its literary features. Accordingly, the commentary provided in this book takes seriously the traits that make the Bible literary. Specifically, the critical apparatus that the editors have provided will do the following things:

- provide prompts to the human experiences that we find in the text
- identify the genre(s) of a passage
- name archetypes and motifs that permeate a passage
- comment on the style and rhetorical patterns of a passage
- make occasional observations regarding the artistry of a passage, with particular attention to the unity of passages
- show the flow of passages within themselves and also as they relate to the books of the Bible in which they appear and ultimately to the Bible as a whole

In all of these areas, the editors’ commentary provides a starting point. It is up to readers to apply and extend what the commentary has begun.

FALLACIES ABOUT A LITERARY APPROACH TO THE BIBLE

Before we can embrace a literary approach to the Bible with enthusiasm, we of course

need to be relieved of anxieties about viewing the Bible as literature. Resistance to viewing the Bible as literature has rested on misconceptions about what literature is, both in itself and as it relates to the Bible. Below are five false characterizations that have prevailed in some Christian and non-Christian circles, accompanied by an explanation of why the allegations are untrue.

■ **Fallacy #1: Viewing the Bible as literature betrays a liberal theological bias.** It is untrue that viewing the Bible as literature means automatically adopting a liberal theological attitude toward the Bible. A survey of commentators who conduct literary analysis of the Bible shows the same range of viewpoint, from conservative to liberal, that other approaches to the Bible manifest. There is nothing inherent in a literary approach that requires a liberal perspective. In fact, it is entirely possible to begin a literary analysis of the Bible exactly where all study of the Bible should begin—by accepting as true all that biblical writers say about the Bible (its inspiration by God, its reliability, its complete truthfulness, etc.).

We need to remind ourselves that it is possible to approach the Bible theologically and miss the mark of truth, too. Theologizing by itself is no guarantee of truth. There has been as much false theology as there has been true theology, so a literary approach to the Bible is neither more nor less suspect than a theological approach.

■ **Fallacy #2: The idea of the Bible as literature is a modern idea that is foreign to the Bible itself.** The idea of the Bible as literature began with the Bible itself. The writers of the Bible refer with technical precision to a whole range of literary genres in which they write—proverb, saying, chronicle, complaint (lament psalm), oracle, apocalypse, parable, song, epistle, and many another.

Furthermore, some of the forms that we find in the Bible correspond to the literary forms that were current in the authors' surrounding cultures. For example, the Ten Commandments are cast into the form of suzerainty treaties that ancient Near Eastern kings imposed on their subjects, and the New Testament epistles, despite unique features, show many affinities to Greek and Roman letters of the same era.

Mainly, though, we can look to the Bible itself to see the extent to which it is a literary book. Virtually every page of the Bible is replete with literary technique, and to possess the individual texts of the Bible fully, we need to read the Bible as literature, just as we need to read it theologically and (in the narrative parts) historically.

■ **Fallacy #3: To speak of the Bible as literature is to claim that the Bible is fictional.** While fictionality is common in literature, it is not an essential ingredient of literature. The properties that make a text literary are unaffected by the historicity or fictionality of the material. A text is literary based on a writer's selectivity and molding of the material and the style of presentation, regardless of whether the details really happened or are made up.

Nor does the presence of convention and artifice in the Bible necessarily imply fictionality. The modern television genre of docudrama is filled with conventions (interviews of people, film clips of events, material from archives) that do not detract from the factuality of the account.

■ **Fallacy #4: To approach the Bible as literature means approaching it only as literature.** Some people resist embracing the concept of the Bible as literature out of the fear that to speak of the Bible as literature necessarily means paying attention *only* to the Bible's literary features and ignoring its more important aspects. But the same

argument might be used to preclude a study of the history or language of the Bible, since with these approaches, too, a person might remain fixed on those aspects only.

To analyze the Bible as literature need not entail abandoning the special authority that Christians ascribe to the Bible or the expectation that God will speak to us through it. Nor does it necessarily mean that the reader will not pay equal attention to other aspects of the Bible—its history, its language, its theology, its sociology, its psychology. The Bible requires multiple approaches, and the literary approach is one of them. A theological approach to the Bible by itself is incomplete. A literary approach seeks to complement other approaches, not to replace them. It is appropriate to say again, however, that the literary forms of the Bible are the means *through which* the content is expressed, and this means that literary analysis has a particular priority as the only adequate starting point for other kinds of analysis.

■ **Fallacy #5: To say that the Bible is literature denies its divine inspiration.** If we believe in the inspiration of the Bible by the Holy Spirit, we believe that whatever we find in the Bible is what God wanted us to know and possess. We do not believe in the inspiration of the Bible because of the content that we find there. It is actually the other way around: we begin with the premise of inspiration, so that whatever is in the Bible is what God the Holy Spirit inspired the human authors to compose.

If God moved the writers of the Bible to write as they did, the only plausible inference is that God inspired the forms of the Bible. We should not say he inspired “the forms of the Bible as well as its content,” because the content is embodied *in* the forms. The three modes of writing that we find in the Bible—theological, historical, literary—are all equal in regard to inspiration. God inspired the writing of all three, and the writers of all three were equally dependent on inspiration by the Holy Spirit to write the truth.

Second Peter 1:21 tells us that the writers of Scripture wrote as they were “carried along by the Holy Spirit.” Thus when the Bible gives us literary subject matter—the concrete embodiment of human experience—that subject matter is present through the agency of divine inspiration. So are the genres and forms of the Bible. If God inspired some writers to tell stories, others to write poems, others to write satire or letters or visions, then those forms deserve attention in keeping with their inspired nature.

TWELVE LITERARY FEATURES OF THE BIBLE

The Bible is not a totally unique book. In general, its literary forms function in the same way that these forms function beyond the Bible. A story is a story, whether in the Bible or beyond it. A metaphor is a metaphor. Nonetheless, it is possible to make generalizations about characteristic literary features of the Bible, with no implication that these features do not exist elsewhere. Below are twelve literary qualities or preferred literary techniques that we often find in the Bible.

1. A unifying story line. Although the overall genre of the Bible is the anthology of individual books and passages, the Bible possesses a unity far beyond that of other literary anthologies. The technical term for a unifying superstructure such as we find in the Bible is *metanarrative* (big or overarching story). In the Bible, the metanarrative is the story of salvation history—the events by which God worked out his plan to redeem humanity and the creation after they fell from original innocence. This story of salvation history is Christocentric in the sense that it focuses ultimately on the substitutionary sacrifice and atonement of Christ on the cross and his resurrection from death. The

unifying story line of the Bible is a U-shaped story that moves from the creation of a perfect world, through the fall of that world into sin, then through fallen human history as it slowly and painfully makes its way toward consummation and arrives at the final destruction of evil and the eternal triumph of good.

2. The presence of a central character. All stories have a central character or protagonist, and in the overarching story of the Bible God is the protagonist. He is the unifying presence from the beginning of the Bible to the end. All creatures interact with this central and ultimate being. All events are related to him. The story of human history unfolds within the broader story of what God does. The result is a sense of ultimacy that comes through as we read the pages of the Bible.

3. Religious orientation. The subject of literature is human experience, and this is true of the Bible, too, but a distinctive feature of the Bible is that it overwhelmingly presents human experience in a religious and moral light. Events that other writers might treat in a purely human and natural light—a sunrise, a battle, a birth, a journey—are presented by the authors of the Bible within a moral or spiritual framework. Part of this moral and spiritual framework is the assumption of the biblical authors that a great conflict between good and evil is going on in our world and, further, that people are continually confronted with the need to choose between good and evil, between working for God’s kingdom and going against God.

4. Variety of genres and styles. Every literary anthology of the Bible’s magnitude displays a range of literary forms, but the Bible’s range may well top them all. We need to be alert to this, because the religious uses to which we put the Bible can easily lull us into assuming that the Bible is all one type of writing. The list of individual forms, if we include such specific motifs as the homecoming story or trickster or love poem, keeps expanding. (A complete guide to these literary forms as we find them in the Bible is Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998].) The variety that we find in the Bible stems partly from the large categories that converge—history, theology, and literature, for example, or prose and poetry, realism and fantasy, past and future, God and people.

5. Preference of the concrete over the abstract. While the New Testament contains a great deal of theological writing, the general preference of biblical authors is for concrete vocabulary. This is especially true of the Hebrew language of the Old Testament. In the Bible, God is portrayed as light and rock and thunder. Slander is a sharp knife. Living the godly life is like putting on a garment or suit of armor. Heaven is a landscape of jewels. To read the Bible well, we need to read with the “right side” of the brain—the part that is activated by sensory data.

6. Realism. The prophetic and apocalyptic parts of the Bible give us a steady diet of fantasy (flying scrolls, for example, and red horses), but the general tendency of the Bible is toward everyday realism. The Bible displays the flaws of even its best characters (Oliver Cromwell famously said that the biblical writers paint their characters “warts and all”). Although the Bible does not delineate the sordid experiences of life in the extreme detail that modern literary realism does, it nonetheless covers the same real experiences, such as violence, murder, sexuality, death, suffering, and famine. Of course the Bible differs from modern realism by showing us that there is a realism of grace as well as a realism of carnality. In other words, the Bible is not content to portray the degradation of a world that has fallen into sin without also portraying the redemptive possibilities of a world that has been visited by the grace of God and is destined for glory.

7. Simplicity. Although the Bible is certainly not devoid of examples of the high style, especially in the poetic parts, its overall orientation is toward the simple. The prevailing narrative style is plain, unembellished, matter-of-fact prose. Shakespeare's vocabulary is approximately twenty thousand words, Milton's thirteen thousand, and English translations of the Bible six thousand. Biblical writers often work with such simplified dichotomies as good and evil, light and darkness, heroes and villains. Of course there is a simplicity that diminishes and a simplicity that enlarges. The simplicity of the Bible paradoxically produces an effect of majesty and authority.

8. Preference for the brief unit. Linked with this simplicity is a marked preference for the brief literary unit. Biblical poets tend to write brief lyrics, for example, not long narrative poems. Most long narratives in the Bible such as the story of Abraham or the Gospels are actually cycles of stories in which the individual episodes are briefer and more self-contained than what we find in a novel. The prophetic books are actually anthologies of self-contained oracles and snatches of narrative. Other familiar biblical genres reinforce this tendency toward simplicity—proverb or saying, parable, lists of individual commands or rules, summaries of what various kings did, occasional letters (epistles) in which the author responds to a list of questions that have been asked or a crisis that has arisen in a local church.

9. Elemental quality. The Bible is a book of universal human experience. It is filled with experiences and images that are the common human lot in all places and times. The Bible embraces the commonplace and repeatedly shows ordinary people engaged in the customary activities of life—planting, building, baking, fighting, worrying, celebrating, praying. The world that biblical characters inhabit is likewise stripped and elemental, consisting of such natural settings as day and night, field and desert, sky and earth. Even occupations have an elemental quality—king, priest, shepherd, homemaker, missionary.

10. Oral style. Even though the Bible that we read is a written book, in its original form much of it existed orally. This is true because ancient cultures were predominantly oral cultures in which information circulated chiefly by word of mouth. The literary forms of the Bible show this rootedness in an oral culture. The prevalence of dialogue (directly quoted speeches) in the Bible is without parallel in literature generally until we come to the novel. Everywhere we turn in the Bible, we hear voices speaking and replying. The spare, unembellished narrative style of the Bible arises from the situation of oral circulation of the stories. Additionally, many of the nonnarrative parts of the Bible show signs of oral speech—the prophetic discourses and oracles, the psalms (which were sung in temple worship), the epistles (which were read aloud in churches), and the Gospels (where the words of Jesus are a leading ingredient).

11. Aphoristic quality. An aphorism is a concise, memorable statement of truth—in the words of English poet Alexander Pope, "What oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed." The Bible is the most aphoristic book of the Western world. It is filled with sayings that are part of the common storehouse of proverbs and idioms: "pride goes before destruction" (Prov. 16:18); seeing "eye to eye" (Isa. 52:8); a "house divided against itself" (Matt. 12:25). This quality is present not only in the wisdom literature of the Bible but in all parts of the Bible and most notably in the sayings of Jesus.

12. The literature of confrontation. When we read Shakespeare or Dickens, we find ourselves moved to agreement or disagreement, but we do not ordinarily feel that we have been confronted by someone or something that requires us to make a choice. By

contrast, when we assimilate the Bible we feel as though we have been personally confronted with something that requires a response. While this choice is ultimately for or against God, the ideas of the Bible, too, require us to believe or disbelieve them. The Bible displays a vivid consciousness of values—of the difference between good and evil—with the result that it is virtually impossible to remain neutral about the ideas that confront us as we read the Bible.

■ **Summary.** Perhaps none of the twelve features noted above is unique in itself. But if we put them together, they produce a book that is unique. Reading the Bible is not just like reading another book. It has an affective power and aura of authority that cannot be duplicated. It possesses a quality of encounter that other books do not display, so that as we read we are confronted with the voice and presence of God and are virtually compelled to believe or disbelieve what we are reading. The Westminster Confession of Faith provides an apt summary of the things that make the Bible unique: “the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole [which is to give all glory to God], the full discovery it makes of the only way of man’s salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God.”

HOW TO USE THIS LITERARY BIBLE

This literary Bible is governed by a twofold goal: (1) to make the Bible reader friendly and (2) to show how application of literary tools of analysis helps in reading and understanding the Bible. We can apply these goals to two common uses that we make of the Bible.

First, we read the Bible devotionally. While this reading usually is not highly analytic in nature, we can nonetheless develop habits of reading that make our devotional reading more substantial than it often is. The literary prompts that appear in the introductions and headnotes of this literary Bible can become a “second sense” that we naturally put into practice as we read. Furthermore, even in devotional reading, we benefit from seeing the flow of a passage, and the lead-ins to individual passages in this literary Bible will help readers to perform that function.

Second, we study the Bible as well as read it devotionally. The commentary in this literary Bible provides analysis of individual passages and books of the Bible. Equally important, the critical apparatus of this Bible is filled with tools of literary analysis that can be applied to many passages. Much commentary on the Bible, including that found in conventional study Bibles, is more of a substitute for reading the Bible than a guide to studying it. This literary Bible is a guide to the Bible that pushes the reader into the text instead of providing mere summaries of the content that readily become substitutes for reading the Bible.

This literary Bible is an introduction to literary analysis. As noted above, we cannot assimilate the religious content of a Bible passage without first interacting with the form in which it has been embodied. Given that the Bible is a literary book, it cannot be studied and taught adequately if we do not start with analysis of the literary form of the passage we wish to explore. Thus the skills of literary analysis are themselves central to an informed experience of the Bible.

GENESIS

The book at a glance. 50 chapters, 1,533 verses. As its title signals, the book of Genesis is the Bible's book of beginnings. It is a foundational book that informs us about the first principles of the biblical faith—such first principles as how the world came into being, how sin entered the world, how God began to unfold his plan of salvation, and what people and human institutions (especially the family) are like. Although Genesis is a history book, its history is packaged in highly literary forms, the most dominant of which is *hero story. Because the history that is recounted in the book of Genesis reaches back to the primitive origins of the human race, it is particularly rich in universal, elemental human experience. Despite the seeming remoteness of the world of Genesis, the experiences are actually very close to our everyday lives.

■ **Genres.** The book of Genesis is very complex, with numerous *genres converging in it. We are on safest ground if we begin with the premise that Genesis is an anthology or collection of diverse works. This anthology is more highly unified than most anthologies, however, inasmuch as all the material falls into the overall genre of historical *narrative. But the history is not packaged like history books with which we are familiar. Instead, the book of Genesis is primarily a collection of *hero stories, with interspersed *genealogies. In keeping with the nature of heroic narrative, the heroes of Genesis, for all their uniqueness in the drama of salvation history, are also representatives of the human condition generally. As a result, we can see our own experiences in their stories, and their heroism is in many cases a model for us to emulate. The first three chapters belong to a genre known as the *story of origins. Also, because the story is one of universal history (chapters 1–11) and the origins of the nation of Israel (chapters 12–50), the book of Genesis has affinities with *epic. (For more information on items accompanied by an asterisk, see the glossary at the back of this Bible.)

■ **The literary concept of a hero.** A literary approach to the book of Genesis requires that we think correctly about the concept of a literary hero. Here are five crucial principles regarding a literary hero: (1) real life provides the materials for a hero, but the image of the hero is always a selection and distillation drawn from a larger body of information about a person; (2) cultures celebrate heroes as a way of codifying their ideals, values, and virtues; (3) literary heroes are representative of the culture producing them and of people universally; (4) to rank as a hero, a person must be generally admirable—an ideal character to whom we look up; (5) this does not mean, however, that heroes are wholly idealized, and in the Bible they rarely are wholly idealized. Much of what a storyteller aims to say about life is embodied in the character

Passage	Content	Contribution to the Story of Redemptive History	Type of History	Cast of Characters	Most Memorable Events or Characters
1:1–2:25	God's perfect creation	God blesses his creation	Primeval history	The whole human race	Four main events: creation, fall, flood, Tower of Babel
3:1–24	Humanity's fall into sin	The human race forfeits God's blessing			
4:1–5:32	Cain, Abel, genealogies				
6:1–9:29	Noah and the flood				
10:1–11:32	Dispersion of the nations				
12:1–25:18	Story of Abraham	God unfolds a plan to bless his covenant people	Patriarchal history	A single family line	Four main characters: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph
25:19–26:35	Story of Isaac				
27:1–35:29	Story of Jacob				
36:1–43	Generations of Esau				
37:1–50:26	Story of Joseph and his brothers				

and experiences of the hero. As we read a hero story, we become the observant traveling companion of the hero, sharing his or her experiences and learning the lessons that the hero learned.

■ **The story lines.** Even though Genesis is an anthology of diverse (mainly narrative) units, there are underlying story lines that unify the book. The first eleven chapters tell the history of the entire human race and are called primeval history. The rest of the book gives us patriarchal history and tells the story of a single family line beginning with Abraham. Despite all the diversity, therefore, two main stories are told. Another unifying plot line is covenant history—the story of the binding agreements by which God relates to his people. Some of these are stated explicitly and others are inferred by the reader: the covenant of works with Adam and Eve (Genesis 2), in which their complete perfection depended on their continued obedience to God; the covenant with Noah (Gen. 9:1–17), in which God promised never to destroy the earth with a flood again; the covenant with Abraham, in which God promised to bless all nations. Within the context of the foregoing story lines, an additional one emerges: the story of individuals’ choosing either to trust and obey God or to follow a path of expediency in which they behave according to their own inclinations (which are usually depraved).

■ **The cast of characters.** God is the only character who is present from start to finish, and in the overall story of Genesis God is the protagonist or central character. All the human characters in the story interact with this great protagonist and his designs. Even though the human scene in Genesis becomes crowded as the stories unfold, there are

eight great heroes of Genesis: Adam, Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. There are also five major heroines: Eve, Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, and Rachel. In a book where the arena of action is usually the family, five couples occupy much of our interest: Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Leah, Jacob and Rachel.

■ **Unifying motifs.** (1) The characterization of God and the story of his dealings with people. (2) The sinfulness of the human race and individuals. (3) The story of God's unfolding plan to redeem a people for himself despite human waywardness (to use John Milton's formula, "supernal grace contending with sinfulness of men"). (4) Hero story as the nearly constant genre. (5) An abundance of universal, recognizable human experience. (6) Characters, characters, characters: in both the narrative parts of Genesis and in the genealogies, we are continuously drawn into an encounter with unforgettable characters and their stories.

■ **Inferred literary intentions.** The book is designed to achieve the following literary purposes:

- acquaint us with first things—the events that happened first in human history and the foundational principles of human existence
- satisfy our taste for story by giving us stories that are the very touchstone of great narrative
- give us a full-fledged portrait of the character of God
- get us to share essential human experiences with the memorable characters of the book
- clue us in to the beginnings of God's covenant of redemption that culminated in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus
- show us how to live our daily lives in accordance with God's will for people

■ **Theological themes.** (1) Creation: early Genesis is the most important repository of biblical teaching on the physical world of nature. (2) The nature of God: the acts and attributes of God are so extensively portrayed that we can compile a theology just from this book. (3) The nature of people: Genesis is also the basic biblical text on what theologians call anthropology, or the nature of people. (4) Sin: Genesis is an anatomy of human sinfulness—an ever-expanding picture of how people do what is evil. (5) Covenant: Genesis traces the early phases of God's plan to redeem sinful humanity. (6) Providence: God guides the history of the world and of individuals (especially Joseph) to accomplish his purposes. (7) Faith: the heroic characters (especially Abraham) are examples of faith in God.

■ **Genesis as a chapter in the master story of the Bible.** The master story of the Bible begins in Genesis. Genesis is our introduction to the character of God and his plan for dealing with the human race. It is also the beginning of human history, starting with the state of innocence and then plummeting to the fallen state. The great struggle

between good and evil begins in Genesis. A major strand in the master story of the Bible is the unfolding of God's covenant with the human race, and this covenant history starts with the book of Genesis. From the beginning, God's purpose for Abraham and his offspring is to bless all the nations. Genesis 3:15 is the first announcement of the master story of the Bible that finds its fulfillment in Christ.

The creation of the world [chapter 1]. Genesis 1 is a story of origins that narrates how the universe in which we live came into being. God is the only character in the story, which is structured as a catalog of his creative acts. The account is highly artistic in its patterning, with a general set of ingredients appearing in all six days of creation: (1) the announcement "and God said"; (2) a divine command using the formula "let there be" or some other form of "let"; (3) the report "and it was so"; (4) evaluation by means of the formula "God saw that it was good"; (5) placement in time, using the formula "there was evening and there was morning, the _____ day." Further patterning exists in the orderly arrangement of God's filling in the canvas as divine artist: first he creates three places or settings (light; sky and sea; dry land and vegetation), and then he fills each setting with the appropriate creatures (light bearers; birds and sea creatures; land animals and people).

1 In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.²The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.

³And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. ⁴And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

⁶And God said, "Let there be an expanse¹ in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." ⁷And God made² the expanse and separated the waters that were under the expanse from the waters that were above the expanse. And it was so. ⁸And God called the expanse Heaven.³ And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

⁹And God said, "Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so. ¹⁰God called the dry land Earth,⁴ and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good.

¹¹And God said, "Let the earth sprout vegetation, plants⁵ yielding seed, and fruit trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind, on the earth." And it was so. ¹²The earth brought forth vegetation, plants yielding seed according to their own kinds, and trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. ¹³And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

¹⁴And God said, "Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night. And let them be for signs and for seasons,⁶ and for days and years, ¹⁵and let them be lights in the expanse of the heavens to give light upon the earth." And it was so. ¹⁶And God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule

¹Or a canopy; also verses 7, 8, 14, 15, 17, 20 ²Or fashioned; also verse 16 ³Or Sky; also verses 9, 14, 15, 17, 20, 26, 28, 30; 2:1 ⁴Or Land; also verses 11, 12, 22, 24, 25, 26, 28, 30; 2:1 ⁵Or small plants; also verses 12, 29 ⁶Or appointed times

the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars.¹⁷ And God set them in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth,¹⁸ to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good.¹⁹ And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

²⁰And God said, “Let the waters swarm with swarms of living creatures, and let birds¹ fly above the earth across the expanse of the heavens.” ²¹So God created the great sea creatures and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarm, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. ²²And God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.” ²³And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

²⁴And God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures according to their kinds—livestock and creeping things and beasts of the earth according to their kinds.” And it was so. ²⁵And God made the beasts of the earth according to their kinds and the livestock according to their kinds, and everything that creeps on the ground according to its kind. And God saw that it was good.

²⁶Then God said, “Let us make man² in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

²⁷ So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.

²⁸And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” ²⁹And God said, “Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. ³⁰And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so. ³¹And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Life in Paradise [chapter 2]. Chapter 2 is not a duplicate creation story—still less a creation story that contradicts the one told in chapter 1. Rather, it takes the creation of the cosmos (chapter 1) for granted and narrates how within that cosmos God created the perfect environment for his human creatures. A new name for God appears: *Yahweh Elohim* (the LORD God), the personal and covenant name of God, to complement the name *Elohim* (the Mighty One) used in Genesis 1. The cast of characters expands from the single divine protagonist in chapter 1 to the inclusion of Adam and Eve. Dialogue now balances the list of divine acts, as God enters into relationship with his creatures. The cosmic setting of chapter 1 is replaced by the enclosed garden. The terms used for plants (v. 5) and animals (vv. 19–20) imply domesticated plants and animals (and there is no mention of sea creatures). We can organize the story around the motif of the things that God provided for his human creatures—physical life (v. 7); a perfect environment

¹ Or *flying things*; see Leviticus 11:19–20 ² The Hebrew word for *man* (*adam*) is the generic term for mankind and becomes the proper name *Adam*

that is both beautiful and functional (v. 9); food (v. 9); work (v. 15); moral choice (vv. 16–17); human companionship and marriage (vv. 20–24); overarching everything, communion with God.

2 Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them.² And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done.³ So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.

⁴ These are the generations
of the heavens and the earth when they were created,
in the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens.

⁵When no bush of the field¹ was yet in the land² and no small plant of the field had yet sprung up—for the LORD God had not caused it to rain on the land, and there was no man to work the ground,⁶ and a mist³ was going up from the land and was watering the whole face of the ground—⁷then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.⁸ And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed.⁹ And out of the ground the LORD God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

¹⁰A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden, and there it divided and became four rivers.¹¹ The name of the first is the Pishon. It is the one that flowed around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold.¹² And the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there.¹³ The name of the second river is the Gihon. It is the one that flowed around the whole land of Cush.¹⁴ And the name of the third river is the Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.

¹⁵The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it.¹⁶ And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden,¹⁷ but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat⁴ of it you shall surely die.”

¹⁸Then the LORD God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for⁵ him.”¹⁹ Now out of the ground the LORD God had formed⁶ every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens and brought them to the man to see what he would call them. And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name.²⁰ The man gave names to all livestock and to the birds of the heavens and to every beast of the field. But for Adam⁷ there was not found a helper fit for him.²¹ So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh.²² And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made⁸ into a woman and brought her to the man.²³ Then the man said,

“This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;

¹Or open country ²Or earth; also verse 6 ³Or spring ⁴Or when you eat ⁵Or corresponding to; also verse 20 ⁶Or And out of the ground the LORD God formed ⁷Or the man ⁸Hebrew built

she shall be called Woman,
because she was taken out of Man.”¹

²⁴Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. ²⁵And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.

The Fall [chapter 3]. Genesis 3 completes the Bible's three-part story of origins. Its contribution is to record how sin and suffering entered the world. The story encompasses multiple archetypal plot motifs, including temptation, the fall from innocence, crime and punishment, and initiation. Additionally, Genesis 3 is the prototypical literary tragedy in the Bible. Satan (in the form of a serpent) is the archetypal tempter; Adam and Eve are the archetypal guilty children; God is the judge who, as a divine parent, ferrets out the truth from reluctant children. Even though this is one of the saddest stories in the Bible, nonetheless loss is balanced by restoration and judgment by mercy. The mainspring of the plot is disobedience. The story is an anatomy of how sin works in people's lives and of the effects of sin. The theological center of the story is Adam and Eve's spiritual alienation from God through sin, but at the human level the story is also a psychological portrayal of the dynamics of guilt. This historical narrative tells us both what *happened* on that fateful day and how sin *happens* in our own lives.

3 Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made.

He said to the woman, “Did God actually say, ‘You² shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’” ²And the woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, ³but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.’” ⁴But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. ⁵For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” ⁶So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise,³ she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. ⁷Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.

⁸And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool⁴ of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. ⁹But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, “Where are you?”⁵ ¹⁰And he said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.” ¹¹He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” ¹²The man said, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.” ¹³Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this that you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.”

¹⁴The LORD God said to the serpent,

“Because you have done this,
cursed are you above all livestock

¹The Hebrew words for *woman* (*ishshah*) and *man* (*ish*) sound alike. ²In Hebrew *you* is plural in verses 1-5. ³Or to give insight. ⁴Hebrew *wind*. ⁵In Hebrew *you* is singular in verses 9 and 11.

and above all beasts of the field;
 on your belly you shall go,
 and dust you shall eat
 all the days of your life.

¹⁵ I will put enmity between you and the woman,
 and between your offspring¹ and her offspring;
 he shall bruise your head,
 and you shall bruise his heel.”

¹⁶ To the woman he said,

“I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing;
 in pain you shall bring forth children.
 Your desire shall be for² your husband,
 and he shall rule over you.”

¹⁷ And to Adam he said,

“Because you have listened to the voice of your wife
 and have eaten of the tree
 of which I commanded you,
 ‘You shall not eat of it,’
 cursed is the ground because of you;

in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
¹⁸ thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;
 and you shall eat the plants of the field.

¹⁹ By the sweat of your face
 you shall eat bread,
 till you return to the ground,
 for out of it you were taken;
 for you are dust,
 and to dust you shall return.”

²⁰ The man called his wife's name Eve, because she was the mother of all living.³

²¹ And the LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them.

²² Then the LORD God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever—” ²³ therefore the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken. ²⁴ He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.

The story of Cain and Abel [chapter 4]. We can organize our experience of this story as an exploration of Cain's evil heart. In fact, the story is structured as an unfolding series of bad actions and attitudes on Cain's part. He is the archetypal criminal, and his story is a story of crime and punishment. It is the story of a person who did not master sin in his life (v. 7) and of the consequences of that failure. To read the story as literature, we

¹ Hebrew *seed*; so throughout Genesis ² Or *against* ³ Eve sounds like the Hebrew for *life-giver* and resembles the word for *living*

need to be receptive to the abundance of recognizable human experiences embodied in just a single chapter: domestic violence, sibling rivalry, murder, a guilty child, lying to a parent (God), lack of self-control, harboring a grudge, giving in to an evil impulse, anger at having gotten caught, an attempted cover-up, trial and sentencing. The action unfolds in these phases: the criminal's family, occupational, and religious background (vv. 1–4); the motive for the crime (vv. 4–5); the criminal's counseling history (vv. 6–7); the circumstances of the crime (v. 8); arrest, trial, and sentencing (vv. 9–12); appeal and modification of the sentence (vv. 13–15); serving the sentence (v. 16).

4 Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, “I have gotten¹ a man with the help of the LORD.”² And again, she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground.³ In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground,⁴ and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering,⁵ but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his face fell.⁶ The LORD said to Cain, “Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? ⁷If you do well, will you not be accepted?² And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for³ you, but you must rule over it.”

⁸Cain spoke to Abel his brother.⁴ And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him.⁹ Then the LORD said to Cain, “Where is Abel your brother?” He said, “I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?”¹⁰ And the LORD said, “What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground.¹¹ And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand.¹² When you work the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength. You shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.”¹³ Cain said to the LORD, “My punishment is greater than I can bear.”¹⁴ Behold, you have driven me today away from the ground, and from your face I shall be hidden. I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me.”¹⁵ Then the LORD said to him, “Not so! If anyone kills Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold.” And the LORD put a mark on Cain, lest any who found him should attack him.¹⁶ Then Cain went away from the presence of the LORD and settled in the land of Nod,⁶ east of Eden.

¹⁷Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch. When he built a city, he called the name of the city after the name of his son, Enoch.¹⁸ To Enoch was born Irad, and Irad fathered Mehujael, and Mehujael fathered Methushael, and Methushael fathered Lamech.¹⁹ And Lamech took two wives. The name of the one was Adah, and the name of the other Zillah.²⁰ Adah bore Jabal; he was the father of those who dwell in tents and have livestock.²¹ His brother's name was Jubal; he was the father of all those who play the lyre and pipe.²² Zillah also bore Tubal-cain; he was the forger of all instruments of bronze and iron. The sister of Tubal-cain was Naamah.

²³Lamech said to his wives:

“Adah and Zillah, hear my voice;
you wives of Lamech, listen to what I say:

¹ Cain sounds like the Hebrew for gotten ² Hebrew will there not be a lifting up [of your face]? ³ Or against ⁴ Hebrew; Samaritan, Septuagint, Syriac, Vulgate add Let us go out to the field ⁵ Or My guilt is too great to bear ⁶ Nod means wandering

I have killed a man for wounding me,
a young man for striking me.

²⁴ If Cain's revenge is sevenfold,
then Lamech's is seventy-sevenfold."

²⁵ And Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son and called his name Seth, for she said, "God has appointed¹ for me another offspring instead of Abel, for Cain killed him." ²⁶ To Seth also a son was born, and he called his name Enosh. At that time people began to call upon the name of the LORD.

The genealogy of Adam [chapter 5]. As we work our way through Genesis, we swing back and forth between overview and close-up. Chapter 5 is an overview that lists the generations of Adam. There are several ways to approach the *genealogies of the Bible: (1) we need to recognize that ancient cultures (and some modern ones) were very interested in family origins; (2) the genealogies fit into the biblical theme of the continuity of generations; (3) the genealogies show the importance that God places on every individual; (4) the genealogies demonstrate that the Bible is a historical rather than a fictional book; (5) the genealogies sometimes have hidden theological meanings (for example, embodying either true faith or sinfulness, thereby serving as an encouragement or warning to us).

5 This is the book of the generations of Adam. When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God. ² Male and female he created them, and he blessed them and named them Man² when they were created. ³ When Adam had lived 130 years, he fathered a son in his own likeness, after his image, and named him Seth. ⁴ The days of Adam after he fathered Seth were 800 years; and he had other sons and daughters. ⁵ Thus all the days that Adam lived were 930 years, and he died.

⁶ When Seth had lived 105 years, he fathered Enosh. ⁷ Seth lived after he fathered Enosh 807 years and had other sons and daughters. ⁸ Thus all the days of Seth were 912 years, and he died.

⁹ When Enosh had lived 90 years, he fathered Kenan. ¹⁰ Enosh lived after he fathered Kenan 815 years and had other sons and daughters. ¹¹ Thus all the days of Enosh were 905 years, and he died.

¹² When Kenan had lived 70 years, he fathered Mahalalel. ¹³ Kenan lived after he fathered Mahalalel 840 years and had other sons and daughters. ¹⁴ Thus all the days of Kenan were 910 years, and he died.

¹⁵ When Mahalalel had lived 65 years, he fathered Jared. ¹⁶ Mahalalel lived after he fathered Jared 830 years and had other sons and daughters. ¹⁷ Thus all the days of Mahalalel were 895 years, and he died.

¹⁸ When Jared had lived 162 years he fathered Enoch. ¹⁹ Jared lived after he fathered Enoch 800 years and had other sons and daughters. ²⁰ Thus all the days of Jared were 962 years, and he died.

²¹ When Enoch had lived 65 years, he fathered Methuselah. ²² Enoch walked with God³ after he fathered Methuselah 300 years and had other sons and daughters. ²³ Thus all the days of Enoch were 365 years. ²⁴ Enoch walked with God, and he was not,⁴ for God took him.

²⁵ When Methuselah had lived 187 years, he fathered Lamech. ²⁶ Methuselah lived

¹ Seth sounds like the Hebrew for *he appointed* ² Hebrew *adam* ³ Septuagint *pleased God* ⁴ Septuagint *was not found*

after he fathered Lamech 782 years and had other sons and daughters.²⁷ Thus all the days of Methuselah were 969 years, and he died.

²⁸When Lamech had lived 182 years, he fathered a son²⁹ and called his name Noah, saying, "Out of the ground that the LORD has cursed this one shall bring us relief¹ from our work and from the painful toil of our hands."³⁰ Lamech lived after he fathered Noah 595 years and had other sons and daughters.³¹ Thus all the days of Lamech were 777 years, and he died.

³²After Noah was 500 years old, Noah fathered Shem, Ham, and Japheth.

Events leading to the Flood [chapter 6]. The story of Noah and the flood occupies four chapters, which together constitute a complete action. Nonetheless, it is possible to divide the story into four successive phases. Chapter 6 is the prelude to the main action. In this prelude, we learn about why God sent the flood (vv. 1–7, 11–12); about the heroism of Noah that led God to choose him as an agent of rescue (vv. 8–10); about God's instructions for the ark as Noah becomes God's confidant (vv. 13–21); about Noah's obedience (v. 22). In effect, God gives Noah a survival kit and survival plan for the entire creation.

6 When man began to multiply on the face of the land and daughters were born to them,² the sons of God saw that the daughters of man were attractive. And they took as their wives any they chose.³ Then the LORD said, "My Spirit shall not abide in² man forever, for he is flesh: his days shall be 120 years."⁴ The Nephilim³ were on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of man and they bore children to them. These were the mighty men who were of old, the men of renown.

⁵The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.⁶ And the LORD was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.⁷ So the LORD said, "I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them."⁸ But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD.

⁹These are the generations of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation. Noah walked with God.¹⁰ And Noah had three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth.

¹¹Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence.¹² And God saw the earth, and behold, it was corrupt, for all flesh had corrupted their way on the earth.¹³ And God said to Noah, "I have determined to make an end of all flesh,⁴ for the earth is filled with violence through them. Behold, I will destroy them with the earth.¹⁴ Make yourself an ark of gopher wood.⁵ Make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and out with pitch.¹⁵ This is how you are to make it: the length of the ark 300 cubits,⁶ its breadth 50 cubits, and its height 30 cubits.¹⁶ Make a roof⁷ for the ark, and finish it to a cubit above, and set the door of the ark in its side. Make it with lower, second, and third decks.¹⁷ For behold, I will bring a flood of waters upon the earth to destroy all flesh in which is the breath of life under heaven. Everything that is on the earth shall die.¹⁸ But I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you.¹⁹ And of

¹ Noah sounds like the Hebrew for rest ² Or My Spirit shall not contend with ³ Or giants ⁴ Hebrew The end of all flesh has come before me ⁵ An unknown kind of tree; transliterated from Hebrew ⁶ A cubit was about 18 inches or 45 centimeters ⁷ Or skylight

every living thing of all flesh, you shall bring two of every sort into the ark to keep them alive with you. They shall be male and female.²⁰ Of the birds according to their kinds, and of the animals according to their kinds, of every creeping thing of the ground, according to its kind, two of every sort shall come in to you to keep them alive.²¹ Also take with you every sort of food that is eaten, and store it up. It shall serve as food for you and for them.”²² Noah did this; he did all that God commanded him.

The flood [chapter 7]. This is one of the most famous stories in the Bible, and one that stretches our imagination. We have all known localized floods, but this one magnifies that a hundredfold. We need to experience the terror of the event, and the story itself can be regarded as a cosmic horror story, invested with spiritual experience because the terror that God sent on the earth was his judgment against human sinfulness. It is also a grand death-rebirth story, and in regard to the rebirth we need to thrill at the care that God took to ensure the perpetuation of animal and human life on the earth. The concluding verse is like the moment of calm after a long storm, as people survey the aftermath of the cataclysm.

7 Then the LORD said to Noah, “Go into the ark, you and all your household, for I have seen that you are righteous before me in this generation.”² Take with you seven pairs of all clean animals,¹ the male and his mate, and a pair of the animals that are not clean, the male and his mate,³ and seven pairs² of the birds of the heavens also, male and female, to keep their offspring alive on the face of all the earth.⁴ For in seven days I will send rain on the earth forty days and forty nights, and every living thing³ that I have made I will blot out from the face of the ground.”⁵ And Noah did all that the LORD had commanded him.

⁶Noah was six hundred years old when the flood of waters came upon the earth.⁷ And Noah and his sons and his wife and his sons’ wives with him went into the ark to escape the waters of the flood.⁸ Of clean animals, and of animals that are not clean, and of birds, and of everything that creeps on the ground,⁹ two and two, male and female, went into the ark with Noah, as God had commanded Noah.¹⁰ And after seven days the waters of the flood came upon the earth.

¹¹In the six hundredth year of Noah’s life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month, on that day all the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened.¹² And rain fell upon the earth forty days and forty nights.¹³ On the very same day Noah and his sons, Shem and Ham and Japheth, and Noah’s wife and the three wives of his sons with them entered the ark,¹⁴ they and every beast, according to its kind, and all the livestock according to their kinds, and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth, according to its kind, and every bird, according to its kind, every winged creature.¹⁵ They went into the ark with Noah, two and two of all flesh in which there was the breath of life.¹⁶ And those that entered, male and female of all flesh, went in as God had commanded him. And the LORD shut him in.

¹⁷The flood continued forty days on the earth. The waters increased and bore up the ark, and it rose high above the earth.¹⁸ The waters prevailed and increased greatly on the earth, and the ark floated on the face of the waters.¹⁹ And the waters prevailed so mightily on the earth that all the high mountains under the whole heaven were

¹ Or seven of each kind of clean animal ² Or seven of each kind ³ Hebrew all existence; also verse 23

covered. ²⁰The waters prevailed above the mountains, covering them fifteen cubits¹ deep. ²¹And all flesh died that moved on the earth, birds, livestock, beasts, all swarming creatures that swarm on the earth, and all mankind. ²²Everything on the dry land in whose nostrils was the breath of life died. ²³He blotted out every living thing that was on the face of the ground, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens. They were blotted out from the earth. Only Noah was left, and those who were with him in the ark. ²⁴And the waters prevailed on the earth 150 days.

The rescue [8:1–19]. The story of the flood is a U-shaped death-rebirth story in which the action descends into calamity, reaches the bottom, and then gradually winds its way upward toward a restored earth. In terms of physical action, the story of the flood is a pyramid in which the waters rise to cover the earth and then subside so the earth can reappear. Chapter 7 was a survival story, as Noah's family was protected from drowning. Chapter 8 is a rescue story in which the family that survived the flood is rescued from their confinement on the boat. As every child knows, this is a suspense story: every time we read it we wonder anew what will happen to the dove, and we thrill to the climactic detail that the dove did not return to the ark. Equally perpetual is the sense of renewal that we feel as we read about Noah's family leaving the boat into a springtime setting.

8 But God remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the livestock that were with him in the ark. And God made a wind blow over the earth, and the waters subsided. ²The fountains of the deep and the windows of the heavens were closed, the rain from the heavens was restrained, ³and the waters receded from the earth continually. At the end of 150 days the waters had abated, ⁴and in the seventh month, on the seventeenth day of the month, the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat. ⁵And the waters continued to abate until the tenth month; in the tenth month, on the first day of the month, the tops of the mountains were seen.

⁶At the end of forty days Noah opened the window of the ark that he had made ⁷and sent forth a raven. It went to and fro until the waters were dried up from the earth. ⁸Then he sent forth a dove from him, to see if the waters had subsided from the face of the ground. ⁹But the dove found no place to set her foot, and she returned to him to the ark, for the waters were still on the face of the whole earth. So he put out his hand and took her and brought her into the ark with him. ¹⁰He waited another seven days, and again he sent forth the dove out of the ark. ¹¹And the dove came back to him in the evening, and behold, in her mouth was a freshly plucked olive leaf. So Noah knew that the waters had subsided from the earth. ¹²Then he waited another seven days and sent forth the dove, and she did not return to him anymore.

¹³In the six hundred and first year, in the first month, the first day of the month, the waters were dried from off the earth. And Noah removed the covering of the ark and looked, and behold, the face of the ground was dry. ¹⁴In the second month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, the earth had dried out. ¹⁵Then God said to Noah, ¹⁶"Go out from the ark, you and your wife, and your sons and your sons' wives with you. ¹⁷Bring out with you every living thing that is with you of all flesh—birds and animals and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth—that they may swarm on the earth, and be fruitful and multiply on the earth." ¹⁸So Noah went out, and his sons and his wife and his sons' wives with him. ¹⁹Every beast, every creeping thing, and every bird, everything that moves on the earth, went out by families from the ark.

¹A cubit was about 18 inches or 45 centimeters

God's covenant with Noah [8:20–9:19]. The narrative excitement of the flood story now gives way to a passage that is heavy with theological vocabulary and significance. It is as though we have returned to the atmosphere that surrounds the first two chapters of Genesis, as God begins a new cycle of creation and a new covenant. The sequence is as follows: God responds to Noah's offering by promising never again to destroy the earth or interfere with its natural cycles (8:20–22); God blesses Noah and outlines certain foundational principles for human life in this world (9:1–7); God repeats his covenant promises and adds the rainbow as a sign of his covenant with Noah and the human race (9:8–17); brief genealogical note regarding the family of the heroic Noah (9:18–19).

²⁰Then Noah built an altar to the LORD and took some of every clean animal and some of every clean bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar. ²¹And when the LORD smelled the pleasing aroma, the LORD said in his heart, "I will never again curse¹ the ground because of man, for the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth. Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done. ²²While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease."

9 And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. ²The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth and upon every bird of the heavens, upon everything that creeps on the ground and all the fish of the sea. Into your hand they are delivered. ³Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. And as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. ⁴But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. ⁵And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man.

⁶ "Whoever sheds the blood of man,
by man shall his blood be shed,
for God made man in his own image.

⁷And you,² be fruitful and multiply, teem on the earth and multiply in it."

⁸Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ⁹"Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your offspring after you, ¹⁰and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the livestock, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark; it is for every beast of the earth. ¹¹I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." ¹²And God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: ¹³I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, ¹⁵I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh. And the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. ¹⁶When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth." ¹⁷God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth."

¹Or *dishonor* ²In Hebrew *you* is plural

¹⁸The sons of Noah who went forth from the ark were Shem, Ham, and Japheth. (Ham was the father of Canaan.) ¹⁹These three were the sons of Noah, and from these the people of the whole earth were dispersed.¹

The family tree of Noah [9:20–10:32]. The story of Noah has been a hero story up to this point—the story of an exemplary character whom God chose for extraordinary service. At this point the historical impulse takes over. We begin with an event that deheroizes Noah (his drunkenness as narrated in 9:20). As famous as that sordid chapter in Noah's life is, it gets only one verse in the biblical account, where the primary focus is not on Noah's sin but on the differentiation of Noah's sons into the categories of good and bad (9:21–27). The life of the heroic Noah reaches closure with a brief obituary notice (9:28–29). The moral judgment that Noah pronounces on his three sons on the occasion of his waking up from his drunkenness reaches its outworking in the genealogies of chapter 10. Together the names in the genealogy constitute a Table of Nations, and their number, seventy (multiple of seven and ten, important numbers in Genesis), symbolizes totality (all the nations of the earth). The list implies the unity and interrelatedness of all people (who have a common ancestry and responsibility to their Creator) but also their diversity (they are divided by geography, language, ethnicity, and culture). We can also see evidence of God's preservation of the messianic line through both primeval and patriarchal history (a leading motif in Genesis).

²⁰Noah began to be a man of the soil, and he planted a vineyard.² ²¹He drank of the wine and became drunk and lay uncovered in his tent. ²²And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father and told his two brothers outside. ²³Then Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid it on both their shoulders, and walked backward and covered the nakedness of their father. Their faces were turned backward, and they did not see their father's nakedness. ²⁴When Noah awoke from his wine and knew what his youngest son had done to him, ²⁵he said,

“Cursed be Canaan;
a servant of servants shall he be to his brothers.”

²⁶He also said,

“Blessed be the LORD, the God of Shem;
and let Canaan be his servant.
²⁷ May God enlarge Japheth,³
and let him dwell in the tents of Shem,
and let Canaan be his servant.”

²⁸After the flood Noah lived 350 years. ²⁹All the days of Noah were 950 years, and he died.

10 These are the generations of the sons of Noah, Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Sons were born to them after the flood.

²The sons of Japheth: Gomer, Magog, Madai, Javan, Tubal, Meshech, and Tiras.

³The sons of Gomer: Ashkenaz, Riphath, and Togarmah. ⁴The sons of Javan: Elishah, Tarshish, Kittim, and Dodanim. ⁵From these the coastland peoples spread in their lands, each with his own language, by their clans, in their nations.

¹Or from these the whole earth was populated ²Or Noah, a man of the soil, was the first to plant a vineyard ³Japheth sounds like the Hebrew for enlarge

⁶The sons of Ham: Cush, Egypt, Put, and Canaan. ⁷The sons of Cush: Seba, Havilah, Sabtah, Raamah, and Sabteca. The sons of Raamah: Sheba and Dedan. ⁸Cush fathered Nimrod; he was the first on earth to be a mighty man.¹ ⁹He was a mighty hunter before the LORD. Therefore it is said, "Like Nimrod a mighty hunter before the LORD." ¹⁰The beginning of his kingdom was Babel, Erech, Accad, and Calneh, in the land of Shinar. ¹¹From that land he went into Assyria and built Nineveh, Rehoboth-Ir, Calah, and ¹²Resen between Nineveh and Calah; that is the great city. ¹³Egypt fathered Ludim, Anamim, Lehabim, Naphtuhim, ¹⁴Pathrusim, Casluhim (from whom² the Philistines came), and Caphtorim.

¹⁵Canaan fathered Sidon his firstborn and Heth, ¹⁶and the Jebusites, the Amorites, the Girgashites, ¹⁷the Hivites, the Arkites, the Sinites, ¹⁸the Arvadites, the Zemarites, and the Hamathites. Afterward the clans of the Canaanites dispersed. ¹⁹And the territory of the Canaanites extended from Sidon in the direction of Gerar as far as Gaza, and in the direction of Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboiim, as far as Lasha. ²⁰These are the sons of Ham, by their clans, their languages, their lands, and their nations.

²¹To Shem also, the father of all the children of Eber, the elder brother of Japheth, children were born. ²²The sons of Shem: Elam, Asshur, Arpachshad, Lud, and Aram. ²³The sons of Aram: Uz, Hul, Gether, and Mash. ²⁴Arpachshad fathered Shelah; and Shelah fathered Eber. ²⁵To Eber were born two sons: the name of the one was Peleg,³ for in his days the earth was divided, and his brother's name was Joktan. ²⁶Joktan fathered Almodad, Sheleph, Hazarmaveth, Jerah, ²⁷Hadoram, Uzal, Diklah, ²⁸Obal, Abimael, Sheba, ²⁹Ophir, Havilah, and Jobab; all these were the sons of Joktan. ³⁰The territory in which they lived extended from Mesha in the direction of Sephar to the hill country of the east. ³¹These are the sons of Shem, by their clans, their languages, their lands, and their nations.

³²These are the clans of the sons of Noah, according to their genealogies, in their nations, and from these the nations spread abroad on the earth after the flood.

The Tower of Babel [11:1–9]. The importance and literary richness of this story is disproportionate to its shortness. The genre is known as **etiology*—a story about the origin of something (in this case the diversity of human languages and dispersion of the human race over the earth). But the story is much more than that. The story is timeless and a picture of our own culture—a picture of the following things: the human urge for fame and permanence; human self-reliance and aspiration; excitement about technology as the thing that will make the good life possible (kiln-fired bricks as opposed to quarried stone); human confidence that the city is the ultimate environment for society; the desire to control human destiny through a unified civilization; the skyscraper as a proud symbol of the triumph of technology. The Tower of Babel is a picture of utopian planning. The author's point of view, though, is **satiric*, as he mocks the enterprise that the human race pursued with such energy. For example, we learn that the bricks are held together with bitumen or asphalt instead of mortar. The detail that God "came down" to have a look (v. 5) is also a put-down, suddenly making the skyscraper seem much less imposing than the human view that it could reach to heaven (v. 4). The whole story turns on the contrast between God's perspective on the human experiment in greatness and humanity's perspective. Because of God's intervention, the story turns on the plot device

¹ Or he began to be a mighty man on the earth ² Or from where ³ Peleg means division

of reversal, as the misguided vision of a unified human race ends in confusion and dispersion. In yet another narrative surprise, God frustrates the human attempt at autonomy not because it will not succeed but for the opposite reason—because its success is assured (v. 6). The interpretive key is therefore to ascertain why God thinks the great experiment outlined in verses 1–4 would be bad rather than good for the human race.

11 Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. ²And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. ³And they said to one another, “Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.” And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. ⁴Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth.” ⁵And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built. ⁶And the LORD said, “Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. ⁷Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another’s speech.” ⁸So the LORD dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. ⁹Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the LORD confused¹ the language of all the earth. And from there the LORD dispersed them over the face of all the earth.

The family line of Abram [11:10–32]. The lead-in tells us that the genealogy that is about to unfold represents “the generations of Shem,” the son of Noah (v. 10), but the interpretive clue to the importance of this particular family line comes at the end when the genealogy concludes with Abram and gives additional information about him and his immediate family (vv. 27–32). We need to read between the lines to pick up the story that is told at the end of the chapter about Abram’s father Terah. Under circumstances that remain unrevealed, Terah “went forth . . . to go into the land of Canaan” (v. 31) but did not follow through on his quest, instead settling in Ur of the Chaldeans. Joshua 24:2 fills in the picture somewhat when it tells us that Abraham’s ancestors, including Terah, “served other gods” (Josh. 24:2).

¹⁰These are the generations of Shem. When Shem was 100 years old, he fathered Arpachshad two years after the flood. ¹¹And Shem lived after he fathered Arpachshad 500 years and had other sons and daughters.

¹²When Arpachshad had lived 35 years, he fathered Shelah. ¹³And Arpachshad lived after he fathered Shelah 403 years and had other sons and daughters.

¹⁴When Shelah had lived 30 years, he fathered Eber. ¹⁵And Shelah lived after he fathered Eber 403 years and had other sons and daughters.

¹⁶When Eber had lived 34 years, he fathered Peleg. ¹⁷And Eber lived after he fathered Peleg 430 years and had other sons and daughters.

¹⁸When Peleg had lived 30 years, he fathered Reu. ¹⁹And Peleg lived after he fathered Reu 209 years and had other sons and daughters.

²⁰When Reu had lived 32 years, he fathered Serug. ²¹And Reu lived after he fathered Serug 207 years and had other sons and daughters.

¹ Babel sounds like the Hebrew for *confused*

²²When Serug had lived 30 years, he fathered Nahor. ²³And Serug lived after he fathered Nahor 200 years and had other sons and daughters.

²⁴When Nahor had lived 29 years, he fathered Terah. ²⁵And Nahor lived after he fathered Terah 119 years and had other sons and daughters.

²⁶When Terah had lived 70 years, he fathered Abram, Nahor, and Haran.

²⁷Now these are the generations of Terah. Terah fathered Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran fathered Lot. ²⁸Haran died in the presence of his father Terah in the land of his kindred, in Ur of the Chaldeans. ²⁹And Abram and Nahor took wives. The name of Abram's wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor's wife, Milcah, the daughter of Haran the father of Milcah and Iscah. ³⁰Now Sarai was barren; she had no child.

³¹Terah took Abram his son and Lot the son of Haran, his grandson, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Abram's wife, and they went forth together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan, but when they came to Haran, they settled there. ³²The days of Terah were 205 years, and Terah died in Haran.

The call and obedience of Abram [12:1–9]. The story of Abram (Abraham) begins here and runs through Genesis 25:18. It is a *hero story in which much of what the storyteller wants to say about life is embodied in the character and experiences of Abram. In addition to the emerging portrait of the hero, three other plot lines converge in the story of Abram: God's progressive revelation of his covenant; Abram's quest to secure a son, descendants, and a land; the conflict between faith and expediency within Abram himself. The central core of the story is the hero's quest to find fulfillment of God's covenant promises and the struggles, defeats, victories, and discoveries that he experienced in his pursuit of this quest. Genesis 12:1–9 is our introduction to all of these motifs. God announces the covenant for the first time (vv. 1–3). The quest motif begins when God tells Abraham to "go" (v. 1) and Abram "went" (v. 4). We are introduced to Abram as a hero of faith, a domestic hero (in ancient thinking, home meant possessions as well as family [v. 5]), a worshiper (vv. 7–8), and the archetypal traveler and wanderer on a quest.

12 Now the LORD said¹ to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. ²And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."²

⁴So Abram went, as the LORD had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. ⁵And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people that they had acquired in Haran, and they set out to go to the land of Canaan. When they came to the land of Canaan, ⁶Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak³ of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. ⁷Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him. ⁸From there he moved to the hill country on the east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. And there he built an altar to the LORD and called upon the name of the LORD. ⁹And Abram journeyed on, still going toward the Negeb.

¹Or had said ²Or by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves ³Or terebinth

The sojourn in Egypt [12:10–13:1]. The individual episodes in the stories of the Bible's hero stories have a more self-contained quality than is true of chapters in a novel. The story of Abraham's sojourn in Egypt is formally marked by the lead-in statement "Abram went down to Egypt" (12:10) and the concluding statement "Abram went up from Egypt" (13:1). For all the brevity of this story, it packs a huge voltage. Identifying the phases of action is the first thing we need to do to discern the pattern in the individual episodes in the life of Abram, and in this case it yields the following sequence: arrival (12:10)—danger or threat (implied)—fear (implied)—expediency (12:11–13)—disaster (12:14–16)—rescue by divine intervention (12:17–19)—departure (12:20–13:1). The story has many of the ingredients that readers like best in a story—danger, conflict, intrigue, suspense, dramatic irony, rescue. At the level of subject matter, the sexual dynamic of the event is also important. The key to the story's interpretation lies in the fact that God intervened to rescue Abram, in view of which Abram was guilty of a lapse of faith. In the conflict between faith and expediency, the latter scores an ignominious victory in this episode.

¹⁰Now there was a famine in the land. So Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land. ¹¹When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to Sarai his wife, "I know that you are a woman beautiful in appearance, ¹²and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife.' Then they will kill me, but they will let you live. ¹³Say you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared for your sake." ¹⁴When Abram entered Egypt, the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful. ¹⁵And when the princes of Pharaoh saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh. And the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house. ¹⁶And for her sake he dealt well with Abram; and he had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male servants, female servants, female donkeys, and camels.

¹⁷But the LORD afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife. ¹⁸So Pharaoh called Abram and said, "What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? ¹⁹Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her for my wife? Now then, here is your wife; take her, and go." ²⁰And Pharaoh gave men orders concerning him, and they sent him away with his wife and all that he had.

13 So Abram went up from Egypt, he and his wife and all that he had, and Lot with him, into the Negeb.

The separation of Abram and Lot [13:2–18]. The story of separation is a standard narrative genre. Although the story begins with a conflict (vv. 5–7), it is not a conflict story but a story of choice. The brief narratives that make up much of the Bible regularly fall into three main phases—exposition or background information, central event, aftermath of the central event. The main point of such a story will rarely if ever be found in the opening phase of exposition, but rather in the central event and its outcome. In this story, Abram and Lot make life-determining choices. The central technique is the *foil—the contrast that heightens or sets off one character or event from another. At the level of character, Abram and Lot are opposites. Abram is godly (vv. 4, 18), generous (vv. 8–9), and self-effacing. Lot is selfish (vv. 10–11) and spiritually careless (vv. 12–13). Their choices are likewise foils to each other: Lot chooses material prosperity

with a terrible moral price tag attached, while Abram is content with the promises of God (vv. 14–17). The narrative device of ²poetic justice (virtue rewarded, vice punished) is a standard way by which we know whether a course of action is offered to us for approval and disapproval. The foreshadowing of the eventual destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (v. 10) lets us know that we have observed the anatomy of a bad choice in the story of Lot, while the fact that God rewards Abram with a renewal of the covenant lets us know that Abram has made the right choice. This is a story about priorities and ultimate allegiance.

²Now Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold. ³And he journeyed on from the Negeb as far as Bethel to the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai, ⁴to the place where he had made an altar at the first. And there Abram called upon the name of the LORD. ⁵And Lot, who went with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents, ⁶so that the land could not support both of them dwelling together; for their possessions were so great that they could not dwell together, ⁷and there was strife between the herdsmen of Abram's livestock and the herdsmen of Lot's livestock. At that time the Canaanites and the Perizzites were dwelling in the land.

⁸Then Abram said to Lot, "Let there be no strife between you and me, and between your herdsmen and my herdsmen, for we are kinsmen."¹ ⁹Is not the whole land before you? Separate yourself from me. If you take the left hand, then I will go to the right, or if you take the right hand, then I will go to the left." ¹⁰And Lot lifted up his eyes and saw that the Jordan Valley was well watered everywhere like the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt, in the direction of Zoar. (This was before the LORD destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.) ¹¹So Lot chose for himself all the Jordan Valley, and Lot journeyed east. Thus they separated from each other. ¹²Abram settled in the land of Canaan, while Lot settled among the cities of the valley and moved his tent as far as Sodom. ¹³Now the men of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the LORD.

¹⁴The LORD said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, "Lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward, ¹⁵for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever. ¹⁶I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted. ¹⁷Arise, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you." ¹⁸So Abram moved his tent and came and settled by the oaks² of Mamre, which are at Hebron, and there he built an altar to the LORD.

The hero as warrior [chapter 14]. In most heroic narrative from ancient times, the hero is a warrior, and the main action is battlefield combat. Chapter 14 is the only appearance of this motif in Genesis. The opening catalog of enemy kings (vv. 1–9) and story of battle (vv. 10–12) are exactly what we would expect in ancient hero stories. Abram's determination to rescue Lot (vv. 13–14) is an extension of his domestic identity, though we are perhaps surprised that he is the leader of a small army (v. 14), since this is the only time we see that side of the hero. Surprise enters the story when the battle itself gets only passing reference (vv. 15–16). What interests the storyteller more than the battle are two memorable encounters that Abram experiences as spin-offs from his

¹Hebrew *we are men, brothers* ²Or *terebinths*

military victory. We observe the hero as spiritual celebrity when the mysterious and awe-inspiring Melchizedek fetes Abram with bread and wine and blesses him (vv. 18–20). We see the hero as diplomat when he sidesteps sharing booty with the king of Sodom (vv. 17, 21–24).

14 In the days of Amraphel king of Shinar, Arioch king of Ellasar, Chedorlaomer king of Elam, and Tidal king of Goiim, ²these kings made war with Bera king of Sodom, Birsha king of Gomorrah, Shinab king of Admah, Shemeber king of Zeboiim, and the king of Bela (that is, Zoar). ³And all these joined forces in the Valley of Siddim (that is, the Salt Sea). ⁴Twelve years they had served Chedorlaomer, but in the thirteenth year they rebelled. ⁵In the fourteenth year Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him came and defeated the Rephaim in Ashteroth-karnaim, the Zuzim in Ham, the Emim in Shaveh-kiriathaim, ⁶and the Horites in their hill country of Seir as far as El-paran on the border of the wilderness. ⁷Then they turned back and came to En-mishpat (that is, Kadesh) and defeated all the country of the Amalekites, and also the Amorites who were dwelling in Hazazon-tamar.

⁸Then the king of Sodom, the king of Gomorrah, the king of Admah, the king of Zeboiim, and the king of Bela (that is, Zoar) went out, and they joined battle in the Valley of Siddim ⁹with Chedorlaomer king of Elam, Tidal king of Goiim, Amraphel king of Shinar, and Arioch king of Ellasar, four kings against five. ¹⁰Now the Valley of Siddim was full of bitumen pits, and as the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah fled, some fell into them, and the rest fled to the hill country. ¹¹So the enemy took all the possessions of Sodom and Gomorrah, and all their provisions, and went their way. ¹²They also took Lot, the son of Abram's brother, who was dwelling in Sodom, and his possessions, and went their way.

¹³Then one who had escaped came and told Abram the Hebrew, who was living by the oaks¹ of Mamre the Amorite, brother of Eshcol and of Aner. These were allies of Abram. ¹⁴When Abram heard that his kinsman had been taken captive, he led forth his trained men, born in his house, 318 of them, and went in pursuit as far as Dan. ¹⁵And he divided his forces against them by night, he and his servants, and defeated them and pursued them to Hobah, north of Damascus. ¹⁶Then he brought back all the possessions, and also brought back his kinsman Lot with his possessions, and the women and the people.

¹⁷After his return from the defeat of Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him, the king of Sodom went out to meet him at the Valley of Shaveh (that is, the King's Valley). ¹⁸And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. (He was priest of God Most High.) ¹⁹And he blessed him and said,

"Blessed be Abram by God Most High,
Possessor² of heaven and earth;

²⁰ and blessed be God Most High,
who has delivered your enemies into your hand!"

And Abram gave him a tenth of everything. ²¹And the king of Sodom said to Abram, "Give me the persons, but take the goods for yourself." ²²But Abram said to the king of Sodom, "I have lifted my hand³ to the LORD, God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth, ²³that I would not take a thread or a sandal strap or anything that is yours,

¹Or terebinths ²Or Creator; also verse 22 ³Or I have taken a solemn oath

lest you should say, 'I have made Abram rich.' ²⁴I will take nothing but what the young men have eaten, and the share of the men who went with me. Let Aner, Eshcol, and Mamre take their share."

Further revelation of the covenant [chapter 15]. One of the story lines in the story of Abram is the progressive revelation of the covenant. Not only does God's renewal of the covenant to Abram regularly punctuate the action, but God keeps giving more and more information about the covenant. The sequence of chapter 15 is as follows: Abram's doubt and anxiety occasioned by the slow fulfillment of God's promise to give him a son (vv. 1–3); God's informing Abram that the son of promise will be his own son, not the son of a slave, thereby eliminating a false possibility (vv. 4–5); Abram's faith in what God has disclosed (v. 6); the cutting of the covenant, an ancient ritual that was in effect a signing of a contract by the two parties (vv. 7–12); further revelation from God regarding the fulfillment of the covenant (vv. 13–20). The meaning of Abram's sleeping instead of walking with God through the path between the divided carcasses is that God takes responsibility for both sides of the bargain—he is the one who will keep the covenant to death.

15 After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." ²But Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue¹ childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" ³And Abram said, "Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir." ⁴And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: "This man shall not be your heir; your very own son² shall be your heir." ⁵And he brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." ⁶And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

⁷And he said to him, "I am the LORD who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess." ⁸But he said, "O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?" ⁹He said to him, "Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon." ¹⁰And he brought him all these, cut them in half, and laid each half over against the other. But he did not cut the birds in half. ¹¹And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

¹²As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him. ¹³Then the LORD said to Abram, "Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. ¹⁴But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. ¹⁵As for yourself, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. ¹⁶And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete."

¹⁷When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. ¹⁸On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your offspring I give³ this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, ¹⁹the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kad-

¹Or I shall die ²Hebrew what will come out of your own loins ³Or have given

monites,²⁰ the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim,²¹ the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites.”

Another venture in expediency [chapter 16]. The episode of the birth of Ishmael delineates an anatomy of a bad decision. The quest to produce a son has by now become obsessive in the lives of Abram and Sarai. The unfolding sequence in this episode is as follows: a vexing problem (v. 1); an expedient solution (vv. 1–4); family conflict (vv. 4–5); expulsion (v. 6); rescue (vv. 7–14); return (vv. 15–16). The action reenacts the archetypal withdrawal and return pattern, and it is a cycle of futility as the characters return to domestic unrest at the end. We know how to interpret a decision that characters in a story make by its outcome; the decision to have a child by Hagar produces false pride (v. 4), false blame (v. 5), and false neutrality (v. 6). Everyone ends up a loser in this experiment in expediency, a variation on the biblical theme of works versus faith (in this case, Abram and Sarai rely on their own plan instead of waiting for God to work his plan).

16 Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. She had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar. ²And Sarai said to Abram, “Behold now, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children. Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children¹ by her.” And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. ³So, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her servant, and gave her to Abram her husband as a wife. ⁴And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress.² ⁵And Sarai said to Abram, “May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my servant to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the LORD judge between you and me!” ⁶But Abram said to Sarai, “Behold, your servant is in your power; do to her as you please.” Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her.

⁷The angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. ⁸And he said, “Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?” She said, “I am fleeing from my mistress Sarai.” ⁹The angel of the LORD said to her, “Return to your mistress and submit to her.” ¹⁰The angel of the LORD also said to her, “I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude.” ¹¹And the angel of the LORD said to her,

“Behold, you are pregnant
and shall bear a son.
You shall call his name Ishmael,³
because the LORD has listened to your affliction.

¹² He shall be a wild donkey of a man,
his hand against everyone
and everyone's hand against him,
and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen.”

¹³So she called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, “You are a God of seeing.”⁴ for she said, “Truly here I have seen him who looks after me.”⁵ ¹⁴Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi;⁶ it lies between Kadesh and Bered.

¹ Hebrew *be built up*, which sounds like the Hebrew *for children* ² Hebrew *her mistress was dishonorable in her eyes*; similarly in verse 5 ³ Ishmael means *God hears* ⁴ Or *You are a God who sees me* ⁵ Hebrew *Have I really seen him here who sees me?* or *Would I have looked here for the one who sees me?* ⁶ Beer-lahai-roi means *the well of the Living One who sees me*

