Responses to Questions about Genesis 1—11

There is more info in my *Genesis for Everyone Part 1* (Louisville: WJK/London: SPCK, 2010).

# Genesis 1

*How many other Near Eastern creation stories are similar to Genesis 1? If there are several, as has been said, how is the Babylonian captivity a better historical context than another? I am just wondering how Genesis 1 is able to fit within a historical context easier than Genesis 2-4.*

\*\*There several others; *Enuma elish* gives you the flavor of the Mesopotamian ones. The assumption is that it would have been in the exile that the Israelites got to know any of them.

*This doesn’t look like creation out of nothing.*

\*\*No, that idea came out of Greek thinking much later.

*What does it mean that the earth was a formless void?*

\*\*Just that it wasn’t yet shaped and full—this was before God set to work.

*How can there be days before there are sun and moon?*

\*\*This illustrates how we mustn’t be literalistic in interpreting the story.

*How did the sky divide the waters from the waters?*

\*\*There are waters underneath (i.e., the seas) and waters above the sky (i.e., where the rain comes from)

*Why are the lights “signs”?*

\*\*They show you when to celebrate festivals, Sabbath, etc.

*What are the great sea monsters?*

\*\*Presumably whales etc—but this is also a way of speaking about powers of evil, so it is a way of saying that God is in control of everything.

*The idea of God’s grace is important here. How did it develop in Israel?*

\*\*As far as we know, Israel’s religion was always based on God’s grace (see e.g., Deut 7:7-8). The covenant presupposes that.

*Let us make human beings in our image: who is the “us”?*

\*\*Perhaps God and his aides, but more likely this is the “royal plural”—someone important can talk this way. Whatever the answer, the point is to emphasize the importance of this particular act of creation—it required special deliberation. (It’s not the Trinity—at least, that’s not what God was wanting to communicate to the people for whom he inspired the story, because they didn’t know about the Trinity. Indeed, does the Trinity ever speak as “us”? Of course God *was* Trinity at creation, but the awareness of that fact had to await the coming of Jesus and the giving of the Spirit.)

*Was God tired?*

\*\*Well, when you have completed a job, part of the satisfaction is from stopping and relaxing.

*Do we need to turn every chapter of scripture into a story that has to fit into a singular well defined/understood context or is it possible that there is something more transcendent and universal being said?*

\*\*It’s a both-and: God speaks to contexts, but in doing so speaks transcendentally and universally.

*What did God expect of humanity when God told the human beings to have “dominion” over the earth (1:28)?*

\*\*To get the animals to live in harmony? Cf. Isaiah 11.

*In terms of the context of the creation story I understand how the Genesis creation story confronts the Babylonian story, but is it likely that there was an original oral or written tradition that predates what was composed during the exile that was edited to fit the context (thus the origin of the Genesis story would be earlier), or is it likely that the Genesis story was completely composed during the exile?*

\*\*I don’t know any evidence of an oral tradition. I assume it was composed as a kind of restatement of the Genesis 2 story. The contents of Genesis 1:1-26 couldn’t have simply have been passed down from generation to generation because there were no human beings there during the creation week until Friday lunchtime!

*How do we think that the Biblical story of creation and the Babylonian story relate? Would they have drawn certain elements from the other for their own story, or were these stories told and heard independently from one another?*

\*\*I picture Judahite teachers in exile knowing that their people have come to know the Babylonian story and telling their people, “Here’s the real truth” in a way that utilizes imagery from the Babylonian story but also confronts it.

*How do you read the service of humanity to the gods in Genesis as similar to "When on High?" While service does seem to be a responsibility of humanity, the "image of God" detail seems to describe the story not as service but as man's partnership and extension of God's rule through the flesh of humanity.*

\*\*I assume that it is because they are in God’s image that they are able to serve God. There’s no reverence to partnership in Genesis—God tells them what to do.

# Genesis 2

*I am not seeing, how the correlation of Genesis 2-4 to the stories of David, give us a historical context.*

\*\*Me neither. That’s the point.

*It never crossed my mind that Genesis 2-4 could have been written to meet the historical needs of Israel as I always believed that Bible was written as the inspired Word of God to record the facts of God’s story.*

It’s both!

*Why are there two stories of creation?*

\*\*For the same reasons as there are two versions of the story of the monarchy (in Samuel-Kings and Chronicles) and four Gospels. (1) An important story needs telling more than once so you can see what it says in different contexts for different sorts of people. (2) There are many implications in the story so more than one version brings out more. E.g., in Genesis 1 God is transcendent, systematic, involved with the world as a whole, and the identity of male and female is emphasized. In Genesis 2 God is involved, getting hands dirty, serendipitous, involved with one place, and the difference of male and female is emphasized.

*What about the conflicts—e.g. seven days of creation or one day? Watery or dry?*

\*\*I assume that the two stories are more like parables or portraits than items on the news, and it’s then inappropriate to try to harmonize different ways of painting a picture. Genesis 1 presupposes a context where it rains, Genesis 2 where it is more like desert. Some of the differences indicate a different focus—Genesis 1 is about the cosmos as a whole, Genesis 2 more about just humanity.

*What do the rivers represent?*

\*\*I guess they suggest the garden was really well-watered. I think it was Karl Barth who suggested that they indicate that the creation happened in a real place in real time. Even if we cannot locate it geographically, it is in principle locatable (even if the geography is parabolically expressed).

*Was death a reality in the garden, if they needed to eat of the tree of life?*

*\*\**I presume so. That is, humanity was not created immortal, but was created with the chance to receive the gift of eternal life.

*Does God really not want man and woman to be wise, knowing good and evil?*\*\*The rest of the OT suggests God does want that.  So maybe f they had agreed not to take the fruit, God would then have said they could have it.  The prohibition is a test. Compare God’s test of Abraham in Genesis 22.   
 

*What is meant by “helper” (v. 18), and why does God create the animals to fulfill this role?*

\*\*The helper is someone to help Adam do his job, specified in v. 15. Bringing the animals establishes that they won’t do. Only someone who is complementary to Adam will do.

*If Eve is an afterthought, doesn’t that imply her inferiority?*

\*\*You could as easily infer that she is the climax of the process!

*Why does God experiment in bringing the animals? He doesn’t look very omniscient. This problem continues through the story (e.g., God asks where Adam is) and through human history. God created the earth and human beings, and human beings always make trouble for God, so that God destroyed both sinful people and the earth except Noah and his family.  Israel was a chosen people, but this chosen people sinned against God and followed other gods. Why did God create human beings in this way?  If God was omniscient and knew human beings would sin against God, then God could have declined to do this.  What is the pleasure of created human beings for God?*

*\*\**The Pentateuch doesn’t say God is omniscient, nor does any other part of scripture as far as I know. I assume he *can* know anything but he apparently likes to try things out and likes to relate to people in “real” ways rather than relying on omniscience. The main point about God’s dialog with Adam and Eve may simply be to give them chance to own up.

*What is significant about Eve being taken from Adam’s rib as opposed to another part of his body?*   
\*\*Where would one like her taken from?  His head, to rule over him?  His feet, to be ruled by him?  Taken from his side, she is his equal.  She stands alongside him.  That’s the explanation in the commentary of Matthew Henry (1662-1714). Genesis Rabbah (a collection of Jewish commentary material from maybe 300 AD) explains that it was good she wasn’t created from his head (or she might be swell-headed) or his ear (or she might be an eavesdropper)or from his mouth (or she might be a gossip), and so on, but rather from a part of Adam that stays covered (so she will be modest). Really, I don’t think it’s particularly significant!

*Was “Adam” initially a gender-neutral human being, or was he male? When did the sexes originate?*

\*\*I assume he has male, though there is a sense in which he isn’t male until there is a female to differentiate from. But see also Genesis 1:27.

*Why is Eve referred to as “his wife” and Adam is never referred to as “her husband?” Is it because of patriarchal issues when Genesis was written?*

\*\*Adam is “her husband” (3:6, 16). Each belongs to the other.

*Did God create the serpent?*

*\*\**See 3:1

*Does God enjoying testing people?*

*\*\**Yes: he’s like a personal trainer.

*Is there any means by which an argument for the constitution of the human can be made in regards to the Genesis accounts of creation (i.e. holistic monism vs dichotomy/trichotomy)?*

*\*\**The OT throughout implies holistic monism. It does also assume that the soul or personality and the body can sometimes operate semi-independently (as when we talk about being present in body but absent in spirit), but this isn’t the normal or preferred way of things working.

*What is the significance of being naked and why is it emphasized it this passage?*\*\*The usual significance of nakedness in the OT is that it is a sign of deprivation, lack of resources, humiliation.   So before their sin they were OK about having nothing and being exposed in that sense; after their sin, they were not OK about it.               
   
*Does the two become one flesh imply sex or does sex come after the fall?*

*\*\**One flesh more likely means one new family (as when we talk about “the same flesh and blood). It doesn’t tell us if they had sex in the Garden, though 4:1 may imply not.

*I have a hard time believing God has designed sex for the sole purpose of populating the planet.*

\*\*That’s only true of the creation story. While the Torah has little to say about the joy of sex, the Song of Songs has lots.

# Genesis 3

*Where did the serpent’s evil come from if everything was very good?*

\*\*Maybe it ceased to be quite so good then, when it acted the way it did. Or maybe the existence of testing was part of the goodness, to give human beings the chance to grow. Or maybe the serpent’s action illustrates why humanity’s job is to subdue the earth—not be subdued by it.

*Who is the serpent, with an agenda of tempting the people?  Is the serpent a literary device made possible by the context when the story was written?  People equate the serpent with Satan but that seems to be a stretch not made by the Bible.*\*\*You’re right that it’s interesting to ask what the serpent would mean in the context. One answer is that it is a symbol in Canaanite religion, so it could symbolize false religion—which is not far from linking it with the later idea of Satan. Genesis doesn’t make the equation, but the Bible may later do so, in Revelation 12:9, so that Revelation indicates that Satan’s activity behind the serpent.  But in Genesis the serpent is explicitly a creature God made.  So there are things to learn from Genesis in its own right and from Genesis looked at in light of Revelation. (See the extra section on the fall of Satan at the end of this document.)

*Why did the serpent speak to Eve first?*

*\*\**Because she hadn’t been there when God issued the command in 2:16?

*The man was with the woman when first sin happened. It seems like the man’s actions is very passive. If he was with the woman, why did he not stop her?*

*\*\**That’s his side to the sin!

*Why didn’t they die as God said (wasn’t the serpent right)?*

*\*\**They didn’t die because God was merciful and perhaps the serpent knew that God would end up being merciful!

*Why didn’t God just put a fence round the tree rather than expelling them from the garden?*

*\*\**Because the point was to get them to exercise responsibility?

*What is the fear that God has at the end of Genesis 3, where he takes the tree of life away? What was wrong with human beings living forever?*

*\*\**It would be inappropriate now they were rebels, wouldn’t it? That problem needs to be solved, first.

*Are the curses descriptive (this is how things will be—but we can then work against them) or prescriptive (this is how God intends things to be—so we had better accept it)?*

*\*\**They look like a mixture, don’t they? Since God says things in the first person (I will put/increase) they can’t all be descriptive. Maybe the words don’t distinguish prescriptive and descriptive as sharply as we might. But the OT doesn’t seem to have drawn the inference that (e.g.) you can’t therefore work against the thorns and thistles. So paradoxically all the consequences of the rebellion are ones humanity can work against.

*What difference does Christ’s resurrection make to the curses?*

*\*\**We do sometimes experience the victory made possible by Jesus’ death and resurrection. But the serpent still crawls, there is still enmity between humanity and serpents, motherhood is still painful, relations between husbands and wives are still painful, work is still toilsome, human beings still die. So it’s really important that Jesus comes back to bring about the new world.

*What was the difference about work outside the garden?*

*\*\**There wasn’t the natural supply of water there—that’s why thistles and thorns would grow. It would be much harder work.

*Shouldn’t we be able to see the flaming sword?*

*\*\**I assume that like the other features in the story it’s a symbol. The fact that we can’t get back into the garden shows that the sword is there.

*What is puzzling is the entire idea of free choice.  If God is an omnipotent God, why not create humankind without choice, in order to maintain the peaceful co-existence as outlined in Genesis 1-2?  Why allow society to disintegrate in the way in which it did, beginning in Genesis 3 and 4?*\*\*The Bible doesn’t handle that question - it’s one that emerges from our culture.  Maybe the answer lies in the question - if God had created people without freewill, they would have been people without freewill.  They would not have been people.

*What does it mean that he will strike your head, you will strike his heal? People refer to it as containing the first proclamation of the gospel—Is that warranted?*

*\*\**The mutual striking is the nature of the relationship between humans and snakes. Perhaps it’s a symbol of a broken relationship between humanity and the rest of animate creation. You can see from reading the text that on its own it wouldn’t suggest a preaching of the gospel, and I don’t think anyone saw it that way until after NT times.

*What does it mean that Eve will desire her husband, but he will rule over her?*

*\*\**It suggests the tension between the sexes and the domination of the man over the woman. It may reflect the idea that she will long for him sexually but that the relationship will be marred by his domination. This is where patriarchy starts.

*What are your thoughts on why all of the curses against serpent, earth, man and woman are set in poetic verse and the rest of the story reads as prose?*

*\*\**I guess it’s to heighten their significance.

*The ground gets cursed as a result of man’s disobedience. If the responsibility is on human, then why does the earth get cursed?*

*\*\**Humanity and creation are tied up together. Maybe it’s another way of referring to the fact that humanity will fail to fulfill its vocation to subdue the earth—to bring order to it. But the curse is also a curse to affect humanity – to make life harder.

*Why is there to be pain in childbirth?*

*\*\**Both man and woman will experience hardship in their respective realms of being the one who does most of the back-breaking work on the farm and the one who does the mothering. I don’t think Genesis refers to pain in childbirth (which is built-into the process of giving birth) but to the pain of motherhood—like seeing one of your sons kill another of your sons. It’s a reference to the way human rebellion will spoil things.

*What were the results of the fall, and when did Satan fall?*

*\*\**See the extra sections at the end of this document.

# Genesis 4

*It seems that God still communes with a sinful humanity—how can that be? Isn’t God too righteous to do that?*

*\*\**Because God is love, I guess!

*Why is this story about sin given such a prominent place?*

*\*\**Because Genesis 1—11 is the story of the ever growing development of sin. And because the family is classically the place of jealousy and violence, and we need to think about it?

*This question seems so basic that I feel silly even asking it, but where did the women come from that married all the men in the genealogy of Genesis 4? There seem to be lots of people around as well as Cain*.

\*\*I take Genesis 1-11 as more parabolic history than literal history. It doesn’t tell you how long creation actually took or how long people actually lived. It isn’t designed to give us that kind of information. You can’t press the details of the parable. It’s a sketch or a cartoon – you can’t press the details historically.

*How did people know they should worship, offer sacrifice, etc?*

*\*\**The Bible assumes that we all know the basics about a relationship with God and most cultures have assumed that offering sacrifice is a natural way to do so—awareness of God and a call to respond to that awareness is part of being human. Concrete, material ways of relating to God were there from the beginning, in keeping with the fact that we are concrete, material people.

*What is the meaning of “doing well” in verse 7?*

*\*\**It might mean worshiping properly, or it might mean responding properly to God’s not accepting his worship.

*Why was God delight in Abel’s offering and not Cain’s?*

*\*\**It doesn’t say so, which I imagine is part of the point. The question is, how do you react when that sort of thing happens?

*What does it mean when the blood of Abel is crying out to God?*

*\*\**It means God can’t ignore it.

*What was the mark of Cain?*

*\*\**We don’t know

*God seems to show favoritism rather than fairness.*

*\*\**Yes, I think that’s characteristic of the Bible, and it fits with human experience—different people have different gifts, experiences, sufferings, etc, and you can’t explain it on the basis of deserve. The question is, what do you do with the hand you are dealt with, and how does God want to use you as the person you are with your gifts etc within his purpose. We as individuals aren’t the center of the universe. God doesn’t tell us why he deals with different people in different ways. So it’s good that the Bible almost starts with a story like that!

*Is God geographically located—Cain goes away from his presence.*

*\*\**We talk the same way, don’t we?

*Both Cain and Lamech are portrayed as negative characters, and there’s nothing to indicate that the rest of Cain’s line are viewed positively (as opposed to Seth’s line who “invoked the name of Yahweh”), yet there are a number of Cain’s descendants that appear to represent aspects of human culture we would consider positive (music, craftsmanship, building a city). Does Genesis 4 have a negative view of culture?*

*\*\**Genesis 4 shows how culture and technology are developing in fulfillment of God’s creation intent, but also shows their mixed significance. The people are sinners but the developments are ones God can use. Lamech uses technology for murder and poetry for boasting about it. The chapter illustrates how things are both developing positively and also more and more falling apart through Genesis 3—6. 

*What is up with Lamech’s little speech at the end of the chapter? How is Lamech avenged 77-fold?*

*\*\**Because he takes vengeance that vastly exceeds the offence. It shows how sin in getting worse. It’s part of the background to the idea in Exodus that punishment must not be excessive but be limited to equivalent compensation—poetically put, an eye for an eye.

*At the end of chapter 4, what led people to begin invoking the name of the Lord? What does it mean? What was their perception of and relationship to the Lord before that, and what caused it to change?*

*\*\**It means simply what we would call “worship”, with reference to words (in the OT, terms that are actually translated “worship” usually refer to bodily action such as prostration). I agree that it’s hard to see why that should happen after the events in chapter 4. Maybe “at that time” means “at the time of those events in chapter 4” - i.e., when people had left the garden. It’s saying that the fact that they were outside the garden didn’t mean they were out of touch with God. It’s a sign of hope against the bleak background of the chapter.

*Why in the genealogy do we go all the way to Lamech, and then digress back to Adam and Eve with Seth? What is the point of the distinction between Cain’s line and Seth’s line?*

*\*\**The distinction introduces the way God will restore creation by taking one line—Seth, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob/Israel, Jesus…

*Is there a reason for the similarity of Seth’s son and Cain’s son, Enoch and Enosh?*

*\*\**Actually they are less similar in Hebrew than in English – Enoch is more literally Chanoch.

*Why did God protect Cain from those who might kill him? Was this an act of grace or further judgment?*

*\*\**An act of grace, surely.

*When God expelled Cain, did God go with him or was God’s presence just with Adam and Eve? Did God still fellowship with Adam and Eve after relocating them?*

*\*\**It looks as if God doesn’t go with Cain, but he evidently is with Adam and Eve.

*Though God had mercy on Cain, why did he demonstrate so much love to save Cain from being killed?*

*\*\**Because God is love?

*Did Cain repent?*

*\*\**It doesn’t say so.

*If Genesis 1-11 is really allegory similar to Nathan’s confrontation of David, then why does the author go into specifics of lineage (4:16-22)?  If the author of this part of Genesis was simply trying to ascribe imagery/symbolism to something none of us could understand, it seems like he/she would not go into specifics of lineage, which feels historical and factual.*

\*\*Stories often give lots of material that looks historical and factual, even if they are not themselves historical and factual.  One of the points would be to say that this is not just myth.  Creation really happened, it really was good, the first sin really happened, and so on.

*Although historical context is important in reading these scriptures (that is, by shedding light on some of points, does it really matter? On a post-modern view, the author doesn’t really matter. Can a similar point be made here?*

*\*\**Yes

# A Contemporary Context: Patriarchy

*If a culture views patriarchy as normative, would it be culturally appropriate for one to desire to change this? How does one decide when this should or should not be pursued?*

*\*\**That’s a great question. I have two thoughts. (1) It needs a prophet to say. (2) Often the world sees things and then we can follow.

*Aside from a patriarchal view of the relationship between men and women, what does the true biblical example of submission look like?*

*\*\**See Ephesians 5 – it means a man lets himself be crucified for his wife and his wife accepts his letting this happen

*Can you discount patriarchy and still maintain the authority of Scripture?*

*\*\**I am helped by Jesus’ comment about some of Scripture being written for our hardness of hearts (Mark 10). It starts where we are and deals with issues on that basis rather than being hopelessly idealistic. But its description of God’s ideals (e.g., in Gen 1—2) gives a context for the making of allowances.

*In relation to the authority of man over women as a result of the fallen state, what are your thoughts on 1 Peter 3 “Wives accept the authority of your husbands”?*

*\*\**It’s an NT example of that same statement by Jesus, like the way 1 Peter also accepts slavery.

*If we set aside millennia of interpretation, how do we keep from remaking the text in our image rather than being remade by it?*

*\*\**That’s a real danger. One important factor is being aware of the danger. So we look very carefully when Scripture seems to clash with our culture and are wary assuming we must be right.

*Should we go off Genesis 1 where man and woman are equal or off Genesis 2—3 where they are viewed differently or both?*

*\*\**I’d put it a different way. In Genesis 1 there is no difference in the position (status, authority) of man or woman and no mention of difference in role. In Genesis 2 there is no difference in position (status, authority) but there is an implied difference in role—the two have different roles but difference in role doesn’t mean one has authority over the other (nor does it contradict Genesis 1). In Genesis 3 the difference in position comes in as a result of their rebellion against God. From then on we have to live with both the ideal in terms of position and with the results of sin—the same as in other areas of life.

# The Fall

*Does Genesis describe the fall?*

\*\*The Bible doesn’t use the word “fall” to describe what happened in the Garden of Eden, though it does use the word “fall” in a different connection in Genesis 4:4-5. The noun “fall” comes from the Apocrypha, from 2 Esdras. “Esdras” is the Latin equivalent of “Ezra”—the oldest extant form of 2 Esdras is in Latin. The book presents itself as a vision by Ezra following on the fall of Jerusalem in 587, but it was actually a Jewish work written after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in AD 70. “Ezra” comments on the fact that Adam alone sinned, but that his “fall” from the possibility of immortality affected us all (7:118). The language of “fall” then later came to be accepted by Christian writers such as Augustine.

In Christian thinking, the idea of a fall sometimes expresses what Scripture says, sometimes adds to scripture, sometimes contradicts scripture.

1. In 2 Esdras, the “fall” idea suggests that originally human beings were immortal, and as a result of the fall, death came into the world. But Genesis 2—3 implies that they needed to eat from the tree of life if they were to live forever. This fits with the fact that the human body seems to be designed to go through a cycle of birth, maturing, senescence, and death, just like a plant’s or an animal’s. It is difficult to imagine a human body of any other form. Thus it was always going to need to be transformed if it human beings were to live forever, as God intended. That is why humanity was banned from the tree of life. So death did come in as a result of human sin, but not in the sense that otherwise we would have been “naturally” immortal.
2. The “fall” idea can suggest that human beings originally lived a life of happiness and closeness to God. As a result of the fall their relationship with God was broken. But Genesis 1—3 does not say anything about how their life actually was, while Genesis 4 pictures them after Adam and Eve’s disobedience as working together with God, worshiping, and in conversation with God. Their relationship with God was no doubt affected by their disobedience, but not terminated.
3. The “fall” idea can suggest that human beings could originally obey God, but afterwards they could not. But on the one hand, when we read Genesis 3 we find the same dynamics of temptation and disobedience as we ourselves experience. And on the other, Genesis 4 assumes that Cain can obey God.
4. The “fall” idea can suggest that originally the world worked in a harmonious way in which there were no earthquakes and lions lay down with lambs. Now the world is spoiled. But Genesis 3 says only that God cursed the snake and the soil, which for humanity outside the garden (with its profuse water supply) would henceforth therefore produce thorns and thistles as well as edible plants. When Romans 8 describes the world as subject to futility, it does not say when or how this came about. Genesis 1 with its commission to subdue the earth suggests that God made it that way; humanity’s failure meant it never reached its goal and therefore it still longs for it. The Bible does not suggest that creation is not fallen though it did suggest it didn’t reach its goal.

I suggest that Genesis offers a different perspective.

1. To judge from Genesis 1, humanity did not fall from a state of bliss but did fail to realize their vocation. Human beings “fell short of the glory of God.”
2. To judge from Genesis 2—3, they failed a test and disobeyed God.
3. To judge from Genesis 4, they committed sin in starting to attack one another.

All this is not to question whether something terrible happened in the Garden and that it had effects that were humanly irreversible—just as Paul says in Romans. Indeed it did. The first human beings decided to do the opposite to what God said, an act that had a devastating influence on everyone who was to follow and made it impossible for them to decide to do what God said. Likewise it meant that everything they did was marred by their waywardness. So the fall, original sin, and total depravity are good doctrines, but bad words.

# Genesis: The Fall

The Bible does not use the word “fall” to describe what happened in the Garden of Eden, though it does use it in a different connection in Genesis 4. The term comes from the Apocrypha, from a work called 2 Esdras (sometimes referred to as 3 Esdras or 4 Esdras). “Esdras” is the Latin equivalent of “Ezra”—the oldest extant form of 2 Esdras is in Latin, but it may have been written in Hebrew or Aramaic. The book presents itself as a vision by Ezra following on the fall of Jerusalem in 587, but it was actually a post-Christian Jewish work, written after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in AD 70. Ezra comments on the fact that Adam alone sinned, but that his “fall” (Latin *casus*) from the possibility of immortality affected us all (7:118). In subsequent centuries, some Jewish works that were not in the Hebrew Bible were treated as scripture within the church (the ones we refer to as the Apocrypha) and they included 2 Esdras, and the language of “fall” came to be accepted by writers such as Augustine.

In Christian thinking, the idea of a fall has become a kind of “myth” which sometimes adds to scripture, sometimes contradicts scripture.

1. The “fall” idea suggests that human beings originally lived a life of happiness and closeness to God. As a result of the fall their relationship with God was broken. But Genesis 1—3 does not say anything about how their life actually was, while Genesis 4 pictures them after Adam and Eve’s disobedience as involved in working together with God, in worshiping, and in conversation with God. Their relationship with God was affected by their disobedience, but not terminated.
2. The “fall” idea suggests that originally human beings were immortal. As a result of the fall, death came into the world. But Genesis 2—3 implies that they needed to eat from the tree of life if they were to live forever. This fits with the fact that the human body seems to be designed to go through a cycle of birth, maturing, senescence, and death, just like a plant’s or an animal’s. It is difficult to imagine a human body of any other form. Thus it was always going to need to be transformed if it human beings were to live forever, as God intended. That is why humanity was banned from the tree of life.
3. The “fall” idea suggests that human beings could originally obey God, but afterwards they could not. But on the one hand, when we read Genesis 3 we find the same dynamics of temptation and disobedience as we ourselves experience. And on the other, Genesis 4 assumes Cain can obey God.
4. The “fall” idea suggests that originally the world worked in a harmonious way in which there were no earthquakes and lions lay down with lambs. Now the world is spoiled. But Genesis 3 says only that God cursed the snake and the soil, which for humanity outside the garden (with its profuse water supply) would henceforth therefore produce thorns and thistles as well as edible plants. When Romans 8 describes the world as subject to futility, it does not say when or how this came about. Genesis 1 with its commission to subdue the earth suggests that God made it that way; humanity’s failure meant it never reached its goal and therefore it still longs for it.

I suggest that scripture offers a different perspective.

1. To judge from Genesis 1, humanity did not fall from a state of bliss but failed to realize a possibility. Human beings “fell short of the glory of God.”
2. To judge from Genesis 2—3, they failed a test and disobeyed God.
3. To judge from Genesis 4, they committed sin in starting to attack one another.

Certainly something terrible happened in the Garden. The first human beings decided to do the opposite to what God said, an act that had a devastating influence on everyone who was to follow and made it impossible for us to decide to do what God said. And it meant that everything we do is marred by our waywardness. So the fall, original sin, and total depravity are good doctrines, but bad words.

# Satan and his Fall in the OT

*What is the timeline in Genesis in terms of cosmic order: did Lucifer fall first and then become incarnate as a snake? Or did he possess the snake? Or is this evil influencing the snake and did it later also influence Lucifer to fall? How did Satan come into the picture? Why doesn’t Genesis give an account of the origin of Satan?*

\*\*The Bible doesn’t tell us anything about the fall of Lucifer/Satan. It is more interested in how he gets defeated. “That great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to earth, and his angels were thrown down with him” (Rev 12:9). Revelation here puts together several different OT figures, but in order to understand passages such as Genesis 3, Job 1, and Isaiah 14/Ezekiel 28, you need to keep them apart initially.

1. *The great dragon* in the OT, the sea monster, is a personal embodiment of dynamic power asserted against God. It is the OT entity with the nearest personality profile to Satan. In the OT its name is Leviathan (e.g., Job 3:8; Isa 27:1) or Rahab (e.g., Job 9:13; 26:12)—note that in Hebrew this name is spelt differently (*rāhab*)from that of the Rahab who kept a bar in Jericho (*rākhāb*). This power was defeated by God before creation and again at the Red Sea, and is due to be finally defeated at the End.
2. *The ancient serpent* also recalls Leviathan (cf. Isa 27:1) but more specifically it recalls the snake in Genesis. In Genesis, however, the snake is “one of the animals Yahweh made,” not a supernatural being.
3. *Satan* in the OT is never someone’s name. The Hebrew word *satan* usually denotes a human “adversary” (e.g., 1 Kings 11:14, 23, 25). It can specifically refer to an adversary in court, an accuser (Ps 109:6). In four passages *satan* denotes a heavenly being:

* Yhwh’s angel acting as “an adversary” to Balaam (Num 22:22, 32)
* one of the sons of God acting as “the adversary” in relation to Job, accusing him (Job 1—2)
* a member of the court in heaven acting as “the adversary” who rightly accuses the high priest Joshua of being tainted by exile (Zech 3)
* “An adversary” who tempts David into taking a census (1 Chr 21:1)—apparently on Yhwh’s behalf (compare 2 Sam 24:1).

We do not necessarily need to assume that this is the same person each time. There could be several supernatural beings who acted like this.

1. *The Devil* does not come in the OT. But in the standard Greek translation of the OT, the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek word *diabolos* (devil) translates *satan* in Job 1—2, Zechariah 3, and 1 Chronicles 21. The Wisdom of Jesus Ben Sirach 2:24 (in the Apocrypha) also says that it was through the envy of *ho diabolos* that death entered the world—in other words, it sees the Devil’s activity in Genesis 3.
2. The translations in the LXX and the passage in Wisdom show how Jewish interest in a power of evil over against God and human beings was developing after OT times. The NT in its references to “the devil” takes this theological development for granted, and Revelation 12 does the same in bringing together three separate figures from the OT.
3. Theologically we may then say that we can see the activity of Satan behind the sea monster, the adversary/ies, and the snake. But in understanding what God was saying to people in these passages, such as Genesis 3, it is important to avoid reading Satan into them. We will get confused about the passages and miss the point they are making in themselves, and thus miss what God wants to teach us through them.
4. The only passage where the Bible tells us about heavenly beings falling into sin is Genesis 6:1—3. That passage comes as the climax of the story of wrongdoing that runs through Genesis 3—6 (and is taken further in Genesis 9—11). Wrongdoing involves first human disobedience to God (Gen 3), then the sin of human violence to other human beings (Gen 4), then heavenly beings crossing the boundary that divides them from human beings (Gen 6). This leads to the conclusion that the world is devastatingly spoiled. It is Genesis 6:1-3 that is the nearest thing to an OT account of the fall of Satan.
5. The OT does not discuss how the dynamic power represented in the sea monster came to be in opposition to God. Apparently it just always was. Nor does it tell us how the Adversary got his job or whether he got too enthusiastic about it.
6. There are a number of Canaanite and Mesopotamian stories that tell of junior gods rebelling against senior gods, and either winning or losing. *Enuma elish* is an example. The OT does not have any such story.
7. Because readers have not been satisfied with not knowing where Satan came from, they have had to hit the Bible on the head to make it tell them the answer. The chief passages that have been victims of this treatment are Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28. Theologians such as Tertullian and Origen in the second century AD were the first to take these passages as accounts of the fall of Satan (see e.g., Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 2:10; Origen, *De Principiis* 1:5). Isaiah 14 is where the word “Lucifer” comes from, in the KJV. This interpretation of Isaiah and Ezekiel then makes its way into Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. What these passages in Isaiah and Ezekiel do is take those Canaanite and Mesopotamian stories and use them as parables of the arrogance and downfall of the kings of Babylon and Tyre. The passages in Isaiah and Ezekiel are thus not about events in heaven but events on earth. Ironically, Tertullian, Origen, and Milton give them back their pagan meaning.
8. There are two NT passages that refer to the fall of Satan, Rev 12:9 itself and Luke 10:18. These refer not to a fall of Satan from grace before creation but to a fall of Satan from power that is brought about through the work of Christ. They invite us to rejoice in the fact that Satan has fallen from power.

# Genesis 5—11

There is more info in my *Genesis for Everyone Part 1* (Louisville: WJK/London: SPCK, 2010).

*What does it mean that humanity is still in God’s likeness?*

*\*\**Evidently human disobedience did not mean the likeness was effaced (compare the argument of James 3:9). We are still God’s representatives in the world.

*What’s up with the long lives? Does it serve some purpose for the narrative? Physically speaking, it just seems impossible.*

*\*\**I assume it’s part of the parabolic nature of the chapters. What is striking is that they all live 900+ years - they almost make a millennium, but none does. Each little paragraph ends with that somber “and he died.” The exceptions are 365 and 777, which certainly look symbolic numbers.

*What were the sons of God and who were the Nephilim?*

*\*\**In the OT the expression “sons of God” (or sons of the gods or divine beings) always refers to supernatural beings. So the story says that some supernatural beings came and “took” human girls (which might mean married or might mean raped). It was the ultimate sign of things being terribly wrong with God’s creation—not only among human beings but among supernatural beings. The passage half-implies that the Nephilim were the offspring of these unions – the later Nephilim are often assumed to be giants (see Numbers 13:32-33). But Genesis doesn’t quite say that.

*What’s that about the 120 years?*

*\*\**I take it to mean that God puts the world on notice—it has that amount of time to straighten up.

*Why should we view this flood as divinely appointed, when other floods aren’t?*

*\*\**I guess it’s like other catastrophes and illnesses—sometimes they are divinely appointed, sometimes they just happen. In this case, God announced the intention ahead of time, as he does through prophets later, which is an indication that it’s divinely-appointed. (One can always be more wary of people who declare catastrophes to be God’s judgment when they are speaking only after the event.)

*What made Noah righteous and blameless, and what does it mean to walk with God?*

\*\*“Righteous” mean living rightly with God and with other people, living rightly in light of your relationship with them. “Blameless” sounds as if it means sinless, but it doesn’t imply that—it means “whole” in the sense of committed, single-minded, straight. “Walking with God” means being in a friendship relationship.

*Was God really sorry?*

\*\*Well it says so! Like Genesis 2—3, the story portrays God as living in real chronological relationship with the world and with people, and therefore having surprises and having to respond to situations.

*Why did God promise not to curse the ground again?*

\*\*One of the implications of the flood story is that God comes to accept human sinfulness and live with it.

*Why does God not require Cain’s life but then endorse the death penalty?*

*\*\**I’d turn that question around. The fact that he didn’t require Cain’s life makes on ask whether he is requiring the death penalty. More likely he is stating an inevitability (as when Jesus says that people who live by the sword perish by the sword).

*What do the sacrifices of Abel and Noah tell us about what is pleasing to God?*

*\*\**The stories themselves don’t tell us. I guess that Israelites would infer the answer from what they knew about sacrifices later. Sacrifices are a costly expression of commitment and of gratitude.

*What does the word “sin” mean in these chapters? How did the idea of sin develop in the OT?*

\*\*There are actually several words that come in Genesis 1—11.

1. “sin” itself came in 4:7. In everyday usage it meant failing or coming short of a standard or a target or someone’s expectations, and therefore offending against a standard or a person.
2. “Badness” (6:5, 6)—a word that mean bad things you do and bad things that happen to you.
3. “Corruption” (6:11)—spoiled compared with what God meant it to be.
4. “Violence” (6:11)—wrong aggressive and antagonistic.

*What is a covenant?*

*\*\**An undertaking someone makes that is formalized and thus particularly solemn. Some later covenants in the Bible are two-sided, but the covenants in Genesis 6 and 9 are one-sided commitments by God—in effect, simply promises or pledges.

*Is getting drunk a sin in 9:18?*

*\*\**Genesis may imply it’s more a tragedy—the traditional translation is that Noah was the first person to plant a vineyard, who would therefore be the first person to discover intoxication.

*What’s with that passage about Noah’s nakedness?*

*\*\**It may be that the stress lies on respect for one’s father, though in Leviticus “seeing someone’s nakedness” is an expression for having sex.

*Why did Noah punish Ham’s son?*

\*\*Israelites knew that (in effect) a curse had come on Canaanites, who were conquered and turned into underlings of Israel because of their sinfulness and who were notorious among the Israelites for their sexual immorality. The way the story is told links with that fact. It relates in some way to sex, and so the curse relates to the person who will be the fruit of Ham’s sexual activity. (It should perhaps be mentioned that the story has been used to justify the enslavement of African-Americans, but it’s not difficult to see that this is a great example of making scripture mean what you want it to mean.)

*Why was it so sinful not to want to scatter?*

Because God wanted humanity to fill the earth and look after it for God, so people were declining to fulfill the reason they were created. And they were setting themselves up as God in some way. It’s a kind of obverse of the story of the sons of the gods and the human women.

*In light of Genesis 1-11, why are we now trying so hard to come together?*

*\*\**Good question. If we succeed, it will be demonic!

*Did people really live for 900 years? Did supernatural beings really have sex with human women? Was Noah's ark a true story or is it just a parable?* *Is the Tower of Babel literal or parable? Does the historical value of Genesis 1 - 11 matter?*

*\*\**I see it as follows. Genesis 1—11 is a parabolic account of events that really happened. That is, God created the world, it was good, it went wrong in terms of people’s relationship with God, of family relationships, of relationships with the supernatural world, of the workings of society, and God tried the idea of destroying it or imagined what it would be like to destroy it but realized that this would get no one anywhere. In order to give this account of the events involved in the beginnings of world history, God inspires storytellers to take up stories they know, such as a story about real killings such as Cain and Lamech, a real Mesopotamian flood that has become the means of talking about God’s judgment of the whole world, the real building of a tower, etc. God inspires them to use these stories to tell this much bigger story. But what literally happened we do not know – we cannot get behind the symbols.

*What value can be gained from historical fiction?*

*\*\**It can give us a true and an intelligible picture of God’s ways.