Understanding Stories in the Bible

If you want to understand a story, you will make progress if you look for its plot and its theme, its characters and the viewpoint of its author. Here are some questions you can ask.

* What is the question or the problem or the issue that the story starts from?
* What is its answer to the question or its solution of the problem or its resolution of the issue?
* How does it get from question/problem/issue to answer/solution/resolution?
* Are there obstacles that have to be overcome on the way?
* Does the telling of the story incidentally allow other insights to emerge?
* Does the story leave issues unresolved?
* Does it incorporate surprising features that hold readers’ attention to the end?
* What is the author’s viewpoint or position?
* Who are the story’s implied audience, the people it looks designed to speak to?
* Who is the main character in a story, who are the other characters, what role do they have, and how do the events in the story affect them or change them?

Here is my attempt to apply that approach to Genesis 2—4.

# Genesis 1:1—2:4a—How God Created the World

God created the heavens and the earth. But the initial question set up by the opening verses of Gen 1 concerns how God will get to the creation of the heavens and the earth from a situation in which the earth is an empty void and darkness is over the face of the Deep (1:1-2). The answer is, by means of an eight-stage process in which four stages set the scene and four fill in the scene. God makes this process the agenda for a week’s work—so he fits two stages into days three and six (1:3-31). Some of the holding power of a story comes from its dealing with problems or obstacles or diversions that threaten or delay the move from question to resolution. In this story the account of the first three days (which only put in place the framework for creation) sets up the suspense, and the account of the second three days resolves it. But the way the story unfolds makes it possible to repeat and thus emphasize some themes, such as God’s systematic way of working, God’s authority and power, and the goodness of what God brings into being. God, indeed, is effectively the one character in the story, and by the end of it we have learned a lot about him. On the other hand, a question it implicitly raises and does not answer is how does the story fits with what we know about the world and about humanity that does not seem to be “good.”

A surprise feature to keep people watching through the credits is the fact that God stops work for day seven and makes the seventh day of the week sacred. That closing note in the story opens up the possibility that there was another quite different question to which the story was also the answer, the question why Israel observes the Sabbath, to which the story gives the explanation that Israel is thereby following the pattern of God’s work in creation. The closing note might suggest that the viewpoint of the storyteller was that of a teacher who wanted to encourage people to keep Sabbath and who through the use of sanctified imagination “knew” all about the process of creation and about God’s thinking and speaking on those days when no human beings were present, and could thus teach authoritatively about it.

# Genesis 2:4b-25—How God Made the Garden and Its Servants

The Hebrew text has no chapter break at the end of Gen 2; the text runs on into chapter 3. It is thus mostly for convenience that I separate 2:4b-25 from 3:1-24. They form the two acts of one drama. But the first act does have its own arc of completeness arising from its focus on Yahweh’s creation of a garden. The initial question it raises is similar to the question raised by the beginning of Gen 1. There’s nothing growing on the earth, partly because there’s no one to look after a garden in which things could grow. So how will God succeed in making earth and heavens (v. 4b) when there is nothing growing (v. 5-6)? The initial answer is, by planting a garden and shaping a human being to serve it (vv. 7-9), providing good water supply for the earth as a whole (vv. 10-14), and giving the human being permission and instructions (vv. 15-17). But that’s where problems arise on the way: the human being can’t fulfill the commission on his own (v. 18), and animals won’t do (vv. 19-20). So God shapes another human being to share the task with him (vv. 21-25). The first act of the drama could then look complete on its own, and two lines of verse mark its climax at 2:23. But the chapter leaves unexplained the two trees that it mentions, so we wonder about them. Further, the implied audience for the story is people involved in farming and people who know how marriage works in the village, and they will also know that they don’t live in this garden, and the story doesn’t make clear how its story fits in with some things that they know about the world and about human life as it really is. So perhaps the listeners are waiting for the other shoe to drop, and it will drop in the second act (Gen 3).

# Genesis 3:1-24—How Things Went Wrong

In Act 2 of the story that is told in Gen 2:4b—3:24 as a whole, the main question or problem is, how did the human beings end up outside the garden which they were created to serve? As is often the case, it’s the end of the story that tells the listeners where it was going from the beginning. The answer is that one of God’s creatures asserts itself and the man and woman yield to it instead of asserting authority over it. They thus eat from the forbidden tree and lose the right to eat from the other tree. And God declares consequences that will naturally follow and consequences that he will make follow. In this chapter there are no logistical problems to be solved on the way, as there were in Gen 2, which reflects the fact that Gen 3 is not a complete story but simply the second half of Genesis 2:4b—3:24, in which everything goes downhill.

**Genesis 4:1-26—How Things Got Worse**

The question or the problem that would make the audience listen attentively when the storyteller had reached the end of Gen 3 is, what will happen to the first human couple and their destiny to fill the earth? The answer is:

(a) they have a son who worships God

(b) they have another son who also worships God, and God likes his worship more, so the first kills him, and starts a line that continues accordingly;

(c) they have a third son so that things can start again.

Perhaps Gen 2:4b—4:26 is actually a three-act drama; without it, Gen 3 came to such a discouraging end, and for a while Gen 4 portrays things as getting worse, but it closes with a note of hope.

But Gen 4 has its own coherence as a story. The account of the birth of the two sons, their work, and their worship (vv. 1-4a) raises the audience’s anticipation: maybe things outside the garden will not be so hopeless. If the audience does entertain that hope, it has missed some hints that catastrophe may be on the way, and the possibility of catastrophe looms (vv. 4b-7). The audience waits to see how Cain will react, but catastrophe indeed ensues (v. 8). So what will happen now? The dynamics of the answer (vv. 9-16) overlap with those in 3:8-24.

The dynamics of what follows (vv. 17-18) in turn reprise the beginning of 4:1-4a, while the dynamics of the next scene (vv. 19-24) reprise those of 4:4b-8. We therefore expect Yahweh to undertake another confrontation like the confrontation with Adam and Eve and with Cain, but instead the sequence breaks off and vv. 25-26 closes the story with grace and mercy and thanksgiving and worship. It is a Hollywood ending that makes it possible for the audience to go home and sleep and dream.