

# In the Beginning

By Richie Temple

Cary, North Carolina

There are few more controversial chapters in the entire Bible than the first three chapters of the Book of Genesis. However, if one reads the Bible from the perspective that it is indeed inspired by God, it should be possible to find broad agreement amongst Christians on the fundamental, or first, principles that these chapters set forth. Most Bible believing Christians would agree that the first three chapters of the Book of Genesis set forth the foundational truths for understanding the rest of the Bible. In fact, the truths taught in these chapters are confirmed over and over again both in the pages of the Old Testament and New Testament Scriptures, including by Christ himself. In short, to understand the origins of life, the universe, and God's purposes for both mankind and his entire creation we simply *must* have a firm understanding of the creation account of Genesis chapters one through three.

Having been a student of the Bible for some 30 years now I would like to offer my own views on the proper understanding of these chapters. At the same time, I would also like to invite our readers to send articles and letters about what they have learned about these chapters in Genesis for possible publication in a future issue of *The Unity of the Spirit* devoted entirely to this subject.

## Fundamental Principles of Interpretation

Let me begin by stating a few basic and fundamental principles of biblical interpretation that should be kept in the forefront of our minds whenever we read the Bible:

1. All Scripture is **inspired by God**, including Genesis 1-3. This truth is first set forth in the Old Testament and then later confirmed by Christ himself and the NT writers.
2. All biblical writings must be understood according to the **original intent** of the biblical writer and should not be changed in order to fit modern conceptions of either science, archeology, history, or any other field of learning. A biblical text means what the writer meant for it to mean, plain and simple. The best way to begin to understand any section of

scripture is to read it over and over and many times so as to gain an overall feel of the big picture and of the main ideas that are being conveyed.

3. All languages and literature express ideas in a combination of both **literal and figurative** language. Where the language is literal the meaning is to be taken plainly as set forth. However, figurative language must be understood according to the literary conceptions or imagery of the time of the writer. Figurative language, however, is no less true than literal language. It emphasizes or calls attention to facts or truths that would otherwise be much less meaningful to us, or else, could even be beyond our understanding in a literal sense. We use figurative language every day and we do so in order to express truths or facts in ways that are more vivid or expressive than the literal statement or facts themselves would be understood. G.B. Caird's book *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* is extremely helpful in understanding the usage of figurative language in the Bible. I highly recommend it.
4. No one particular biblical passage necessarily presents **all the truth** concerning any biblical event or topic. As with the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, any one particular biblical passage only presents that particular narrative or truth from one perspective. A fuller perspective can be gained from other biblical passages relating to the same topic. This is true when comparing Genesis one and two with each other and is also true when many other biblical passages about creation are compared.
5. Biblical revelation is **progressive**. It begins with an ancient understanding about God and his purposes and progresses throughout the Old Testament until the Word is made flesh in the person of Jesus Christ as recorded in the pages of the New Testament. Only with the coming of Jesus Christ is the invisible God and his true and ultimate purposes for mankind fully revealed. It is "in Christ" that the Old Testament "shadow" is removed and the true "reality" revealed in its fullest sense.

## First Principles of Genesis Chapters 1-3

On the basis of these fundamental principles of biblical interpretation I will now set forth what I believe to be some first principles, or fundamental beliefs, that Genesis sets forth. These are broad principles which I believe that most Christians can, and do, agree on:

1. There is one and only one true God.
2. God is a sovereign God who existed before the creation of the heavens and the earth and before the creation of all other forms of life: animal or human.
3. God created the heavens and earth and all that is within them according to his own divine purpose and plan – not arbitrarily, capriciously, or through chance.
4. God’s creative acts were carried out through his spoken Word.
5. The crowning event of God’s creation was the creation of mankind - created in God’s own image and given the responsibility of ruling over the earth in accordance with God’s will.
6. God’s original creation was very good.
7. God’s creation and God’s relationship with mankind was corrupted by sin and its consequences, including death.

I will stop here because I think that these basic truths are pretty much all-inclusive of the first principles that could be, and are, agreed on by most Christian believers. In any interpretation or study of Genesis chapters 1-3 these truths should be fundamental. Most other truths could be characterized as details which may, to some degree, depend on how much of the language of these chapters is meant to be understood literally or figuratively.

### **Pictorial Language and Figurative Expressions in Genesis Chapters One through Three**

As with most Christians who have been students of the Bible for many years I am well aware of the controversies amongst sincere Christian believers about literal vs. figurative language in the Bible. However, I will only remind our readers that all languages consist of both literal and figurative language. To say that any particular expression in a

language is figurative does not lessen the truth that it conveys; on the contrary, figurative language can, at times, make truth more vivid or real than literal language. I list below some examples that I believe indicate the usage of figurative language or imagery in the first three chapters of Genesis:

1. The first two verses of Gen. 1 have quite a few features in them that could be intended to be a pictorial presentation of God’s preparation for creating the heavens and earth in six days. First, Gen. 1:1-2 can be translated in at least three different ways and can also be understood in at least three different ways. The traditional rendering as reflected in the KJV, NKJV, etc. states, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was without form and void ...” The second possible translation which is reflected in many modern translations such as the NRSV and the NAB says, “In the beginning *when* God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was formless and void ...” These two translations leave open the possibility of two possible understandings of Gen. 1:1-2. The first is that Gen. 1:1 be taken as God’s first creative act. Verse 2 would be the result of that creative act – an earth that is formless and void. Then verses 3ff would be the setting in order of God’s creation through forming and filling the heavens and earth. The second option would be that 1:1-2 is a preface to the entire account of creation in six days and that the creation account begins with an already existing earth, though formless and void. The NIV translation is a third option and it reads, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty...” This translation could be interpreted either way as the NIV translators acknowledge. If Gen. 1:1-2 *is* a preface – which most scholars believe is likely - then verses 1-2 may show God’s creative activity beginning with an earth that is already formless and void existing before the creation of the heavens and earth in six days beginning with verse 3. This would fit with the picture of the Spirit of God “hovering” or “brooding” over the waters – in apparent anticipation of God’s creative acts beginning at verse 3. This would also mean that the earth existing in a formless and void state would be unexplained and thus leave the origins of the

- earth to an indeterminate past. In other words, when Gen. 1:1-2 begins both God and the earth already exist. This doesn't mean that God did not create the earth – that would contradict other biblical passages – but it does leave that original creation of the earth to an indeterminate past. This imagery is similar in some respects to other ancient creation stories – though with many important differences as well, especially, the truth of a personal, loving, and caring God bringing his creation into existence according a godly and orderly plan. The vivid imagery of Genesis 1-3 would have fit well in the thought world of the ancient world and it would have been well understood by the people of Israel who first read this account. Readers are urged to compare the different Bible versions of Gen. 1:1-2 and the comments in study Bibles and commentaries for further details.
2. Genesis chapter one teaches that God created the heavens and earth in six days and rested on the seventh. I believe this record to be true and it is confirmed at other places in the Bible (e.g. Ex. 20:11). These seven days of Genesis may certainly be literal days of 24 hours each; however, they also may simply be representative of a larger pictorial presentation of the whole of God's creative work. This is especially indicated by the correspondence of days 1 with 3, 2 with 5, and 3 with 6 where the initial creative acts "form" and the corresponding days "fill." There are also problems with having a solar 24-hour day before the fourth day in which the sun is created. At any rate, such a possible figurative understanding would not mean that it is untrue to say that the world was created in 6 days and on the 7<sup>th</sup> God rested. There simply may be more behind this language than originally meets the eye, i.e., it may in some sense be expressing truth in a figurative or pictorial manner according to the understanding of the people to whom this was originally written.
  3. Genesis 1:6 speaks of an "expanse" or "dome" which God called "heaven" or "sky". This seems to portray a primitive understanding of the universe in a way in which it would be viewed from a human perspective and thus understood by ancient man.
  4. God seems to announce major decisions to his heavenly council of angels ("let us" Gen. 1:26, 3:22). Though there are other possible interpretations of these verses the heavenly council interpretation seems most likely. This seems to emphasize the solemnity of these decisions and presents a picture of God being surrounded by his heavenly council – a heavenly council that *already* exists when God creates the heavens and earth in six days (Cf. Prov. 8 "wisdom" and Job 38:7 "angels" or "sons of God" being present at creation). The point here is that God's creative activity of Gen. 1 *presupposes* the existence of angels before the 6 days of creation, and possibly presupposes the existence of the earth as well, though without form and void and covered by waters.
  5. The word "man" (Heb. adam) seems to be a word play all the way through Genesis 1-3. In fact, it seems to represent a possible blending of a historical "first man" with a symbolic "the [representative] man" or "everyman" – a fact brought out by many Bible scholars through the years. (There are also plays on words of other biblical names throughout Genesis and the Bible). In addition, after "the man's" expulsion from the Garden of Eden in Gen. 3, chapter 4 seems to relate the account of Adam's children as though there are other people present already on the earth – e.g., the land of Nod (Gen. 4:16-17). This type of literary device would fit well in the literature of the ancient world. It should be emphasized, however, that the NT regards Adam both as a *real* man, the *first* man, and the *representative* man.
  6. Genesis 3:8 depicts God as "walking in the garden in the cool of the day". Once again, this must be figurative language because it does not accord well with what the New Testament teaches us about the true nature of God – that is, that he is spirit, invisible, and without form. In fact, though the Old Testament speaks several times of seeing God, the New Testament insists that in reality God is a God "whom no one has seen or can see" (I Tim. 6).
  7. The serpent of Genesis three is almost certainly imagery behind which Satan stands as the New Testament specifically points out. In fact, Gen. 3

is simply loaded with figurative expressions and language throughout.

8. Finally, according to Gen. 3:23-24, God drove man out of the Garden of Eden and “placed on east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.” This passage is loaded with imagery and if we were to take it literally we would have to conclude that the Garden of Eden still exists somewhere on earth today (modern Iraq?!) - being guarded by cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth. This is not likely, nor is there any evidence that any believer in the Bible – Old Testament or New – considered that to be the case.

I will stop listing possible figurative elements of Gen. 1-3 here since I’m simply endeavoring to set forth in this article both *first principles* and *possibilities* of figurative language in Gen. 1-3 based on the biblical text itself. I will leave those interested with a few suggestions for Study Bibles and commentaries to consult on Gen. Chapters 1-3:

1. Study Bibles:

*The NIV Study Bible* and *The Harper Collins Study Bible*, based on the NRSV, have excellent and both somewhat complimentary and contrasting notes on Gen. 1-3. In addition, I also highly recommend the Roman Catholic *The New Jerusalem Study Bible*.

All of these Study Bibles are loaded with helpful and insightful information based on the original Hebrew text. The scholars who made these Study Bibles are amongst the leading Old Testament scholars in the world and there is much to be gained by studying and comparing their comments. An honest student of the Bible should not be afraid of exploring the truths set forth in Genesis from varying points of view.

2. Commentaries:

*The best commentaries I know of on Genesis are the superb Jewish Publications Society (JPS) Commentary on Genesis, by Nahum Sarna, and The New International Commentary of the Old Testament, Genesis, Vol. I by Victor Hamilton. The first of these is extremely well done and, though expensive, is well worth the money for anyone who is interested in the details of Genesis. Sarna is a renowned Old Testament scholar and the structure of the commentary based on the Hebrew text is extremely unique, enlightening, and interesting. On a simpler level I would recommend the commentary on Genesis in the Tyndale Old Testament series which is not as detailed as the others but offers sane commentary and good background information by its author Derek Kidner. But there are lots of other commentaries as well and the student of the Bible interested in this topic can either browse in bookstores or browse on-line at CBD, for example, to decide about these commentaries.*