

Meet God Again for the First Time (2003)

By Jon Paulien

Chapter 2

How It All Began

It's nice to have friends you can count on. Brooks is a card-carrying nut and chronic practical joker. All the melancholy types run for cover when he approaches. But he is so much fun to be around that he is often surrounded by a crowd of children. . . and he fits right in. But whatever one may think of Brooks' sanguine ways, no friend of his will ever be in need. You can count on him.

When the Pathfinders need a driver for their bus, Brooks is quick to respond. If there is a weekend campout that needs adult supervision, Brooks is there. If your kids need a ride to some church activity, Brooks finds a way to pick them up. If you need a ride to the airport and don't know where to start, Brooks is willing to help. And the neat thing about it is that Brooks responds with such generous eagerness that you don't ever feel guilty for asking. I really treasure people like him.

One of the most reassuring and powerful messages in the first part of the Bible is that God is a lot like Brooks. He is consistent in His efforts to care for the needs around Him. You can count on Him, just as I have learned to count on Brooks. Let's take a closer look at this picture

of God. We'll begin at the beginning.

The Creation Story

The story about the origin of the human race starts in Genesis 1-2, the very first part of the Bible. The story of creation opens a section scholars call the Primeval History, the first eleven chapters of Genesis. Genesis 1-11 is about the pre-historic period of earth's history, the period before our earliest first-hand records or archaeological evidence.

Within the creation story, Genesis 1 gives you the big picture. It covers the entire creation week, the creation of slugs and eels, mountains and oceans, birds and mammals. The progression of the story through the original week leads up to the climax of the story, the creation of the first pair of human beings, the parents of the whole human race, Adam and Eve.

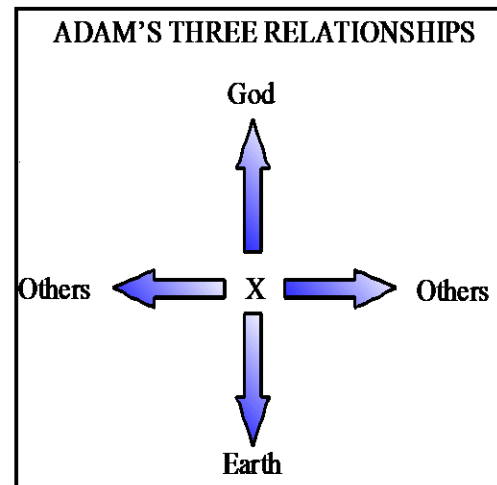
In Genesis 2, then, an interesting thing happens. The rest of the creation is taken for granted and the story zeroes in on the first couple. They become not only the center of attention, but virtually the sole focus of attention. The origin of the human race is the reason the story is being told.

The key to the whole creation story is found in Gen 1: 26-28. There God reveals His intention for the human race: *"Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.' So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule*

over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

Three Basic Relationships

This text describes three basic relationships, illustrated below. Mr. X in the center is Adam. God created Adam in His image, making God Adam's superior. Adam relates to God as his authority in a "mentor-client" or "mentor-disciple" type of relationship.



But while Gen 1:26-28 emphasizes the God–humanity dynamic very strongly, the text also emphasizes clearly that the image of God was both male and female. Adam and Eve are placed on a level of equality where they love and serve one another. This indicates that there is a social dimension to the image of God as well as a spiritual one.

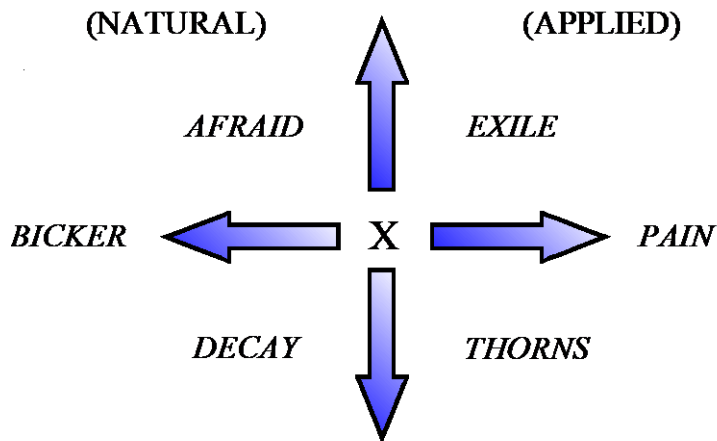
But the image of God has a third dimension, a physical one. Not only do human beings have a relationship with God and a relationship with others, there is also a relationship with the

earth. As stewards of the Creator, the human race is to cultivate the earth and make it a better place for all God's creatures to live. That relationship is spelled out in more detail in Genesis 2 where Adam is expected to care for the garden and is given a position of authority over the animals.

The Fall

So with Genesis 1 and 2 the human race gets off to a good start. There is peace, prosperity, and ordered relationships in a safe place. But it was not to last. Notice the stunning contrast between Gen 1:27 and 6:5. *"So, God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them (Gen 1:27)."* That sounds good, doesn't it? Everything's functioning the way it should. Then comes Gen 6:5, only a short time after: *"The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time."* The Primeval History moves from "created in the image of God" to "every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time." What a difference! What a tragic change! What happened in the short time between these two? We call it "The Fall." The Fall broke the perfect relationships of Eden. And broken relationships are at the root of evil in the world.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF SIN



This diagram looks a lot like the previous one but this version illustrates that there are two consequences of sin, the natural consequences and the applied consequences. When our relationship with God is broken, the natural consequence is fear, we become afraid of Him. When our relationship with others is broken, the natural consequence is division, bickering, arguments and violence. When Adam's relationship with the earth was broken, the natural consequence was decay and decline.

As the story is told, the natural consequences occur even before Adam and Eve meet God. They become aware of their nakedness and take steps to remedy the situation (Gen 3:7,10-11). God doesn't make them fearful of Him, they are fearful even before He meets them (Gen 3:8-10). On the other hand, when God meets them, He articulates a further series of consequences (Gen 3:16-19, 22-24). As sinners, Adam and Eve were required to leave the garden and go into exile, they could no longer stay in the direct presence of God. The pain of childbirth is another applied consequence of the broken relationships. And to the natural consequence of decay and death was added the complication of thorns and weeds in the

environment. What lies behind all of these “curses” is the ultimate individual penalty, death, eternal separation from God. From the perspective of the Bible every aspect of the human tragedy can be traced to the Fall.

From Creation to Abraham

The Flood Story

The next big event after the Fall is the Flood story (Gen 6-9). And this story is closely related to the stories in Gen 1-3. You see, in the creation of the physical earth, God had worked on the principle of separation and distinction. He separated the dry land from sea, and He separated the waters above from the waters below (Gen 1:7,9, cf. also 1:4,18). The Flood story reverses that very same process. The waters from above come down and the waters from below come up. The waters of the sea come over the land, completely covering the earth and restoring the planet to its pre-creation condition (Gen 7:11,20). In the Flood story, the process of separation and distinction was reversed, undoing creation, and returning to pre-creation chaos (Gen 1:2,9-10 cf. 7:18-20).

But God doesn't leave things in chaos. After the Flood story He restores the earth by means of a new creation. The language of Genesis 8-9 picks up on the same language already used in Genesis 1-2 and 6-7. It expresses the rebuilding of creation, God is doing once again what He had done before. He begins with a wind over the watery chaos (Gen 8:1, cf. 1:2). The vegetation returns (8:11, cf. 1:12). The animals are restored to the environment (8:17, cf. 1:25,28). God restores the seasons (8:22, cf. 1:14-18). He once again establishes care for the

animals. Just as Adam took care of the animals in Eden, so Noah does it on the ark (Gen 2:18-20; 7:6-10,14-16). And the covenant God makes with Noah also echoes the language of creation (cf. Gen 1:28-30; 9:1-3).

Discovering a Pattern

What we see in these two stories is the basis for a pattern. God works in a consistent fashion, His actions form their own patterns. There is a consistency, a dependability, in God's actions that is not there in human actions. Human actions are dependable only in their lack of consistency.

When you read broadly through the Old Testament you discover that there are four major mighty acts of God recorded in it. These four great acts of God stand head and shoulders above all others in the Old Testament. They are Creation, the Flood, the Exodus and the Babylonian exile and return. We will see that there is a consistent pattern of God's action running through these four acts of God.

The creation story of Gen 1-2 begins with a situation of chaos: the waters cover the whole earth, and the Spirit or wind (it's the same word in the Hebrew) overshadows the waters, the waters that are above are divided from the waters that are below. When the waters are divided, and the dry land appears, human beings are created in the image of God, and they are given dominion over the earth. Then the man is put to sleep, the woman is formed, and they both live together in Paradise. You have the tree of life, a test over the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and a serpent.

As we have already seen, the destructions of the Flood are deliberately described in language reminiscent of Creation. The steps God took to build His creation in Genesis 1-2 are reversed. He takes His creation apart in Genesis 6-7 and then He puts it back together again in Genesis 8-9. There is clearly a consistency in the pattern. God is doing the same thing over again. On the other hand, He isn't carrying out the whole pattern, He isn't doing everything He did before. So while God is consistent in His actions He is not mindless--His consistency is a creative consistency. He doesn't have to do everything He did before. There is clearly a pattern in Genesis between the flood and creation but not every detail is continued as the pattern unfolds. We will come back to this concept of pattern later on as we move through the Old Testament.

Creation	Flood
Chaos	Chaos
Waters cover earth	Waters cover earth
Spirit overshadows	Wind blows
Waters divided	Ark
Dry land appears	Dry land appears
Image of God	
Dominion	Dominion
Put to sleep	
Woman formed	
Paradise	New earth
Tree of life	
Test	
Serpent	
Covenant implied	Covenant renewed

The Two Sides of Judgment

There is one other aspect of Gen 4-11 that I would like to point out. The judgments of God during the Primeval History were always two-fold, both positive and negative. When people think of judgment, they often think of the negative. "Oh, no--they're going to check out all my personal record, I'm in big trouble!" But to the ancient Hebrews, judgment was two-fold--positive as well as negative. We see this clearly after The Fall. God cursed the ground and banished Adam and Eve from the garden, this is certainly negative (Gen 3:22-24). But on the positive side He makes clothing for them so they can handle the climate outside paradise (Gen 3:21). And He puts enmity between them and the serpent so that its damage will be limited (Gen 3:15). Even in their mistake, God judges them positively as well as negatively.

The story of Cain might also seem to be totally negative in its judgment. God offers Cain some choice words of rebuke (4:6-7) and banishes him from the human race (Gen 4:11-12). But there is a positive side to the judgment as well. God puts a mark on Cain so that nobody will hurt him (Gen 4:13-15). In the flood story, of course, there is a negative judgment: the whole world was destroyed and all the people in it. But there is a positive judgment as well. In providing the ark, God set a group of people apart to carry on His mission.

Immediately after the flood story we encounter the Tower of Babel. Again, the negative judgment is obvious-- God knocks the tower down, confuses their languages, and scatters the people (Gen 11:7-9). The positive judgment is a lot less obvious, especially for Western minds with their chronological perspective. But if you read Genesis as a literary piece, Genesis 11

concludes with the story of Abraham. And what does God say to Abraham? “All the peoples on earth will be blessed through you (Gen 12:3).”

While our Western minds immediately note that there are at least 600 years between Babel and Abraham, the language of the story line ties the call of Abraham back through the Tower of Babel story to the table of nations in Genesis 10. In that chapter you have a listing of all the nations of the world--it is the entire world in need of God. It is a messed-up world that is under the curse. Does God have a positive judgment for that world? Yes, the positive judgment comes through Abraham.

Abraham as a Second Adam

A Three-Fold Promise

Genesis 12:1-3: *"The LORD had said to Abram, 'Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.'"* A careful look at this text shows that the promise to Abraham involves three things: God promises him a land, He promises that he will become a great nation, and He promises to make Abraham a blessing.

If you were to read your way through the Pentateuch--Genesis to Deuteronomy--you'd find some form of this three-fold promise stated at least twenty-five times. The promise keeps getting repeated, reformulated, and restated in different ways. Let's take a look at just one of

these restatements in Genesis 17, because it helps us to unpack the meaning of these three promises: the land, the nationhood, the blessing. As you read through Genesis 17:1-8 below, look for hints of these three promises in it.

"When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, 'I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless. I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers.' Abram fell face down, and God said to him, 'As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. . . . I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God.'"

First of all, in Genesis 12 there was the promise of blessing, but in Genesis 17 that promise is restated. Instead of blessing, God speaks there of the covenant He will establish with Abraham and with all of his descendants. Second, along with another reference to nationhood, He talks about the numerous descendants Abraham will have. Third, God also restates the promise of the land and becomes more specific, it is to be the land of Canaan.

THE PROMISES TO ABRAHAM

Gen 12:1-3	Gen 17:1-8
Blessing	Relationship
Nation	Descendants
Land	Land (Canaan)

*Abraham and the Restoration
of the Image of God*

Why does God promise Abraham these three things? Let's go back to the beginning for a moment. In the creation story we noticed that the image of God involved the three basic relationships of Adam and Eve: to God, to each other, and to the earth. The original curse then specifically affected those three relationships: exile from the garden resulted from a break in the relationship between Adam and God; the childbirth pain affected the propagation of the human race and human relationships; the thorns complicated the relationship between Adam and the earth. So the curse that comes in Genesis 3, in the Garden of Eden, is a three-fold curse corresponding to the three relationships that made up the image of God which Adam and Eve received at the beginning.

RELATIONSHIP AND CURSE	
Relationship	Curse
God	Exile
Others	Childbirth
Earth	Thorns

Now let's take this a step further. In the original image of God the human race received a vertical relationship with God; God became our mentor, so to speak. In Genesis 3, after the Fall, there was separation from God. But now in Genesis 12 and 17 comes a blessing, full relationship with God would be restored in Abraham. In the original image of God, there was harmonious relationship between the male and the female, after the Fall this relationship was under the curse—symbolized by the pain of childbirth. In Genesis 12 and 17, however, God promises to restore human relationship through the nationhood of Abraham and his many

descendants. The land, obviously, corresponds to both the original dominion in the garden and to the thorns that frustrated that dominion after the Fall.

ABRAHAM: RESTORER OF CREATION

CREATION	CURSE	GEN 12:1-3	GEN 17:1-8
Image	Separation	Blessing	Relationship
Male & Female	Pain	Nation	Posterity
Dominion	Thorns	Land	Land

So God promised Abraham not just a fresh start, but a restoration of Eden. He was promising to restore the fullness of the image of God. Not simply national in scope, the promises to Abraham signaled the full restoration of what the human race lost in the Garden of Eden. The Tower of Babel represents the whole human race under the curse; it is the whole world in need of blessing. So when God calls Abraham, He calls him with the rest of the human race in mind. He intends to restore the image of God and bring all peoples back to paradise.

Of the three promises of God to Abraham, the book of Genesis focuses mainly on the promise of many descendants. You cannot populate a land without people. So at the climax of the book of Genesis is the story of Joseph. The main point of the Joseph story comes through in Genesis 46:3: *"I am God, the God of your father," he said. "Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you into a great nation there."* Through the events recounted in the Joseph story God brought Abraham's descendants to a place where there was plenty of food, so it was possible to multiply rapidly (Gen 47:27).

Canaan was experiencing a period of miserable weather for growing things. One drought followed another. In Egypt, on the other hand, you didn't have to worry about the weather--it's sunny every day. Whenever you need water, you can go to the Nile which has more than enough for everybody. Egypt didn't have the agricultural problems that you had in ancient Canaan.

What happens when there is a shortage of food? Children get sick. They often don't make it to adulthood. There are parts of the world even today where parents have eight or nine children in the hope that, eventually, two or three will be able to grow up. God used Joseph to bring his family to Egypt so that they could be safe and grow according to the promise (Gen 50:20). In Egypt a family of seventy (Exod 1:5) would become a huge multitude.

The Story of the Exodus

The Exodus is, in many ways, the focal point of the entire Old Testament. It is a mighty act of God, described on the same scale as the Creation or the Flood. It is a talking point for everything that follows in the Old Testament. Moving beyond that to the New Testament, the Exodus story provides many of the key New Testament terms for salvation, words like "redeemed," "deliver," "ransom," "purchase," "slavery," and "freedom." So this story is a major piece of the Bible puzzle.

The Exodus event is described in the four books that follow Genesis; Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. These accounts pick up on the promises made to Abraham in Gen 12 and 17. They show how the promises to Abraham are fulfilled in the course of history. Gen

12:1-3, then, is like the hinge of the Pentateuch. That central text looks back on Primeval History. It's focused on dealing with the curse and restoring the Garden of Eden. And then the promises God makes to Abraham set the tone for everything that follows. Genesis focuses particularly on the building up of the population. Exodus and Leviticus focus particularly on the promise of relationship with God. In Numbers and Deuteronomy the focus is on the land. So, the Pentateuch is an intentional package put together to show the theological grounding of God's dealing with Israel.

THE PROMISES FULFILLED

GEN 12:1-3 GEN 17:1-8 PENTATEUCH

Blessing	Relationship	Exodus/Leviticus
Nation	Posterity	Genesis
Land	Land	Numbers/Deut.

Keeping in mind the chart above, let's take a brief look at the Exodus story. Just as the Flood was an undoing and restoration of Creation, so the Exodus account also makes use of creation language. Exod 14:21-22: *"Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea and all that night the Lord drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land. The waters were divided, and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left."* Does the language of this text look familiar? There is a chaotic sea that is acted upon by the wind (Gen 1:2; 8:1). The waters are then divided (Gen 1), producing dry ground. The author of Exod 14 uses the specific terminology of Creation and the

Flood to describe the mighty act of God by which Israel escaped from Egypt (this story is well known in popular culture through the blockbuster movies “The Ten Commandments” and “The Prince of Egypt”).

So the description of the Exodus clearly follows the pattern of Creation and the Flood. But there is an interesting shift. No longer do the waters of chaos cover the entire earth. The story actually begins with "spiritual chaos"-- the people are in slavery. Then the passage through the Red Sea is described in the language of both the Flood and the original creation. The dominion of Adam and Noah over the animals is replaced by dominion over Canaan, the land of the promise. In place of the image of God, Israel is called "God's firstborn" (Exod 4:22). So, Israel becomes a second Adam, it takes the place of Adam in the original creation. Where in Genesis a woman was formed shortly after the creation, here a people are created.

THE PATTERN OF GOD'S SAVING ACTIONS

Creation	Flood	Exodus
Chaos	Chaos	Spiritual chaos
Waters cover earth	Waters cover earth	Red Sea
Spirit overshadows	Wind blows	Wind blows
Waters divided	Ark	Waters divided
Dry land appears	Dry land appears	Dry land appears
Image of God		First born
Dominion	Dominion	Dominion over Canaan
Put to sleep		Creation of a people
Woman formed		Canaan
Paradise	New earth	Manna
Tree of life		Test in wilderness
Test		Serpent
Serpent		Covenant
Covenant implied	Covenant renewed	

Taking the comparison further, the land of Canaan parallels the paradise Garden of Eden. Where in the garden there was the tree of life, in the desert they had the manna to sustain them. Just as Adam and Eve were tested by a serpent in the Garden, the Israelites were tested in the wilderness--the opposite of a garden--with a serpent. And, of course, the covenant came on Sinai.

The Pattern of God's Saving Actions

Now we can put together the big picture—the pattern of God's saving actions. Referring again to the chart on the previous page, we can clearly see a pattern between the three mighty acts of God; Creation, the Flood and the Exodus. This pattern shows that God is consistent: when God acts, He acts in accordance with His character and in accordance with His own covenant. His earlier actions become the model for His later actions.

A careful look at the chart, however, shows that the pattern is not complete in every detail. The consistency of God is not a mindless consistency. He is not like an autistic person who keeps doing or saying the same thing over and over again. That's perfect consistency and yet it doesn't serve much of a practical purpose. God is not like that. God is not bound to every detail of what He did before. While God's character and His covenant place certain limitations on His actions, He does not carry out every detail found in His previous actions.

In the Exodus, there are also a number of features that are new. For example, the birth of Moses and the way he was threatened as a baby has no parallel in the flood story or the Creation. But that experience of Moses sets a precedent for later actions of God that we will address when we get there. So while God is consistent, He is not limited to previous patterns of action. Within an overall consistency, He can introduce new elements.

A further thing to note in this pattern is that the Exodus spiritualizes the pattern. Water didn't actually cover the whole world. But there was spiritual chaos in the whole world because God didn't have a people anywhere. He had called Abraham, yet the descendants of Abraham did not belong to Him. They belonged to Pharaoh. Spiritually speaking, the world was back to

where it was before the Flood and God had to perform a new creation all over again. So the pattern of God's actions is not always literal, it can also be spiritual or figurative.

Now as we observe the pattern we have been talking about, what language does the Bible use to describe God's actions in a particular situation? It uses the language of the past. At every stage of Bible history the language that is used to describe God's activity in the present is the language of the Bible writer's past. When God speaks to Moses, he uses the language of Moses' past--the language of the Creation and the Flood. This is the fundamental ground of careful biblical interpretation--it is respecting the fact that God uses the language, culture and experience of each biblical writer to get across the message he wanted to give.

So, the Bible material comes in the time, place, language, and circumstance of the original writer. If you want to understand the Pentateuch, you've got to start where Moses was. If you want to understand Daniel, you have to know something of what life was like back then. If you want to understand Revelation or Romans, you have to "get under the skin" of the writer. You have to understand that writer's world, his or her language, time and place. God meets people where they are.

Conclusion

There was a time not long ago when anyone reading the Old Testament for the first time in a Western country found it to be a very strange. The behavior of the people and even the behavior of God was very foreign to Western ways of thinking (sometimes called "modernism")

today). Reading the Bible in a Western context raised more questions than it answered, and many people lost their faith.

At the same time many people in the developing countries were living in a world not much different from the world of the Old Testament. Their life experience and ways of thinking were quite parallel to the Hebrew nature of the Bible in many ways. So they often found (and still find) the Bible easier to appreciate than Westerners do. But today the situation has changed in Western countries. Secular westerners are increasingly seeing the world in ways similar to Old Testament times. We sometimes call this more Hebraic style of thinking “post-modernism.” But while the younger generation is more likely to think like people did in Bible times, a living experience with Jesus is, in most cases, still to come.

A main reason Christian faith has so little impact on the world today is that most Christians read the Bible in Greek Western terms that are both inappropriate to the material in the Bible and increasingly incomprehensible to the average person on the street, whether in Boston or Bombay, Berlin or Bujumbura. That is the reason I wrote this book. When the full impact of Hebrew thinking is explored, the Bible becomes a life-changing book again.