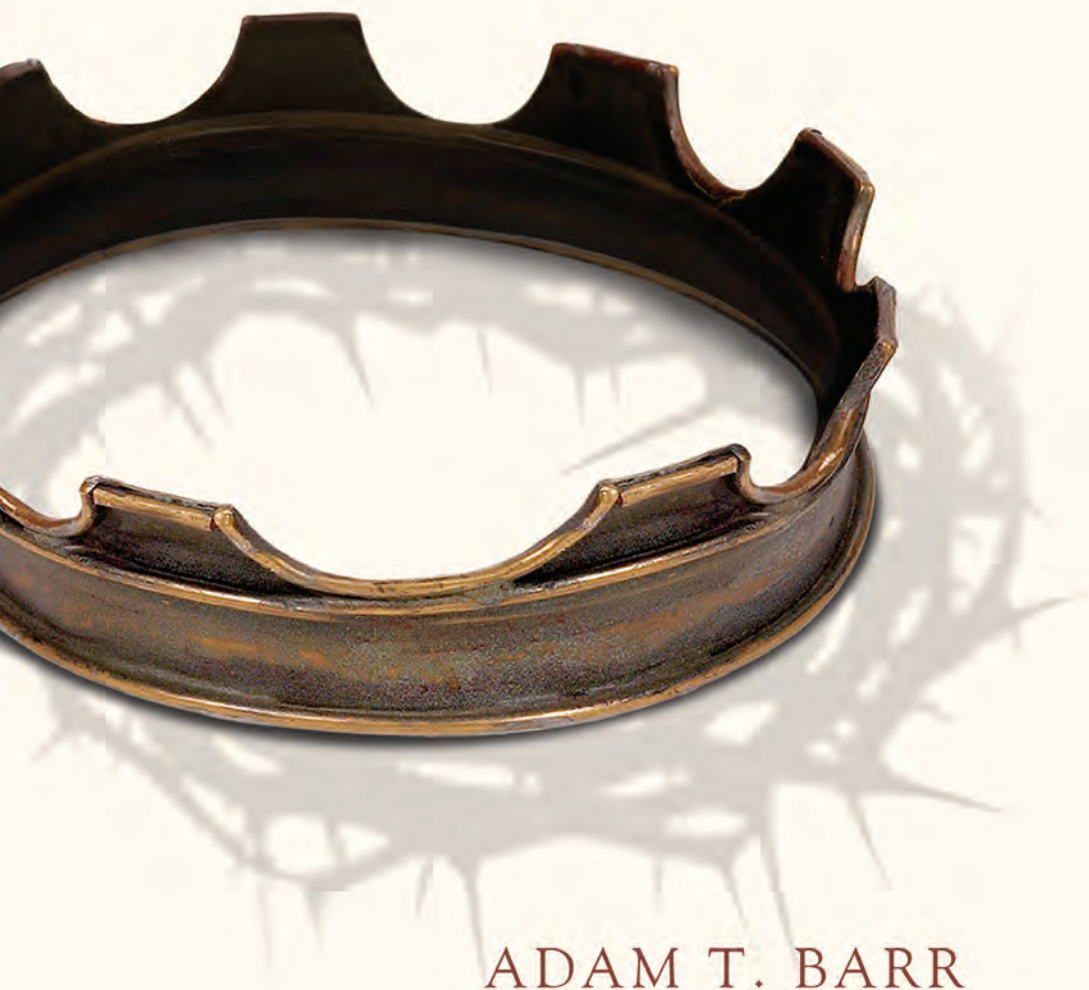


EXPLORING THE STORY

A REFERENCE COMPANION



ADAM T. BARR

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CONTENTS

Preface | 9

- 1** Creation: The Beginning of Life as We Know It | 11
- 2** God Builds a Nation | 16
- 3** Joseph: From Slave to Deputy Pharaoh | 22
- 4** Deliverance | 27
- 5** New Commands and a New Covenant | 32
- 6** Wandering | 36
- 7** The Battle Begins | 41
- 8** A Few Good Men ... and Women | 46
- 9** The Faith of a Foreign Woman | 52
- 10** Standing Tall, Falling Hard | 57
- 11** From Shepherd to King | 62
- 12** The Trials of a King | 67
- 13** The King Who Had It All | 72
- 14** A Kingdom Torn in Two | 77
- 15** God's Messengers | 81
- 16** The Beginning of the End (of the Kingdom of Israel) | 87

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- 17** The Kingdoms' Fall | 92
 - 18** Daniel in Exile | 98
 - 19** The Return Home | 103
 - 20** The Queen of Beauty and Courage | 108
 - 21** Rebuilding the Walls | 113
 - 22** The Birth of the King | 117
 - 23** Jesus' Ministry Begins | 122
 - 24** No Ordinary Man | 130
 - 25** Jesus, the Son of God | 137
 - 26** The Hour of Darkness | 142
 - 27** The Resurrection | 148
 - 28** New Beginnings | 153
 - 29** Paul's Mission | 159
 - 30** Paul's Final Days | 166
 - 31** The End of Time | 170

Resources for Further Study | 175

PREFACE

This reference guide serves as a companion to *The Story*, which captures the biblical story line in thirty-one chapters. If you are a preaching pastor, teacher, student ministries leader, or someone who just wants to go deeper in biblical study, this guide will help you do that. Each chapter in this reference guide corresponds to a chapter in *The Story* and provides helpful background information as you prepare sermons, craft lessons, or simply take time to expand your understanding of Scripture. Every chapter is broken into the following sections:

- **Timeline.** Get a sense of the “big picture.” How do the events in *The Story* relate to the rest of history? Every chapter contains a helpful timeline that coordinates biblical and secular events.
- **Plot Points.** These short lists cut to the heart of each chapter and reveal the key themes.
- **Cast of Characters.** This list of every character in each chapter will help you get a sense of “who fits where.” In addition to a name, you will find a brief description and, if available, the meaning of that person’s name.
- **Chapter Overview.** A brief two to three paragraph summary of each chapter.
- **Section Commentary.** Each chapter in *The Story* covers some major events. We break down these events and provide commentary. Each section commentary provides deeper insight into theological issues, relevant archaeological discoveries, or just a powerful launch point for further reflection.
- **Discussion Questions.** *The Story* has a set of discussion questions in the back. We have crafted more questions for individual reflection or group study.

In addition to these chapters, I would refer you to the appendix. There you will find a brief annotated bibliography that will help you expand your investigation. I pray you will find your journey through *The Story* as exciting as I did!

God Bless,
ADAM T. BARR

CREATION

The Beginning of Life as We Know It

Plot Points

- God, the main character of *The Story*, is revealed as the absolute sovereign of creation, totally distinct from yet intimately involved with all he has made.
- Nature is not simply a collection of random, meaningless matter in motion; it is a carefully crafted revelation of a loving God.
- Humanity, made in God’s image, occupies a unique role and position in this creation, a place of dignity and responsibility.
- Humanity’s tragic rebellion against God’s command impacts *everything*.
- God has a plan to redeem his fallen creation, giving us a hint of the good news to come in his promise that a descendant of Adam and Eve will crush the serpent.
- Throughout the New Testament, the flood story forecasts God’s future and final judgment (e.g., Matt. 24:37 – 39; Luke 17:26 – 27; 2 Peter 2:4 – 10).

The Days of Creation

Day 1	Light and dark	Days of forming
Day 2	Sky and water	
Day 3	Land	
Day 4	Sun, moon, and stars	Days of filling
Day 5	Birds and sea creatures	
Day 6	Animals and humans	
Day 7	God’s Sabbath	Day of rest

Cast of Characters

Abel. Son of Adam and Eve; younger brother of Cain; a shepherd and devoted worshiper of the Lord; killed by his brother; name means “vanity, breath, vapor.”

Adam. First man, made from earth; husband of Eve; like his wife, Eve, made in God’s image; tragically disobeyed God’s prohibition and affected all of human history; name can mean “man” and is closely related to the Hebrew word for “ground” (*adamah*).

Cain. Son of Adam and Eve; older brother and murderer of Abel; ancestor of Lamech, who killed indiscriminately (see Gen. 4:23–24); name sounds like the Hebrew for “gotten,”

conveying the sense of optimism Eve held for his life.

Eve. First woman, made from man; wife of Adam; tempted by Satan in the form of a serpent, disobeyed God’s command; name means “living.”

God. Creator of all things and central character of *The Story*; God chose to reveal himself to us through his creation.

Noah. Descendant of Adam and Eve; a “righteous man, blameless among the people of his time” (Gen. 6:9); commanded to build a great boat to save himself and his family from the flood God sent to wipe out everything having “the breath of life” (Gen. 6:17); name sounds like “rest” in Hebrew, expressing his parents’ hope that he would help bring rest from the effects of the curse.

Shem, Ham, Japheth. Noah’s three sons; called to help “increase in number and fill the earth” (Gen. 9:1) after the flood.

Chapter Overview

The first nine chapters of Genesis have raised questions throughout church history. What kind of literature are these passages? How do the events described here relate to the theories formed by contemporary scientists and archaeologists? Are the “days” twenty-four-hour segments or *ages*, long periods of time? Was the flood local, covering the known world, or was it global, covering the entire planet?

These questions are significant. They lead us to think deeply about the purpose of Scripture, and Christians who take Scripture as seriously as Jesus did will not be content simply to write these questions off as “academic.” To work toward the answers we seek, it is help-



God measures the earth he has created in this illustration from a mid-thirteenth-century Bible.

ful to begin by reflecting on the central narrative intent of these chapters. For the people of Israel and for us today, they reveal *why* the world we see and know is the way it is. They help us grasp what it means to be human and the causal forces that shape our lives. These are questions of existence and meaning.

Think about the fall and the disobedience of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3. The fruit of their rebellion against God is a series of curses, each of which takes a good, God-ordained source of blessing and twists it into a form of heartache — work is now toil, marriage a battle, childbirth a painful ordeal. Consider the flood as well. In this story we see a reversal of God’s work in creation as the life and the land that had come from the sea is now covered and destroyed by the waters of chaos and judgment. The stunning beauty and heart-wrenching tragedy of our world is explained and understood through these stories, helping us understand why something good has gone terribly wrong.

God’s Word invites us to consider the powerful connections between the original world God created, our disobedience, and our ongoing relationship to God. We are invited to consider how human disobedience has universal implications. Although we often think of our choices as individual decisions that don’t impact other people (“If it doesn’t hurt anyone else, it’s not a problem”), this chapter shows us that the simple act of eating fruit, if done in disobedience to God, can lead to suffering and death — for everyone. The choices and decisions we make



Possible locations of the garden of Eden.

in this life are writing a moral drama, and our every deed illustrates how we embrace or reject our Creator God.

One more thing: consider how this chapter reveals *God* as the supreme storyteller. Unlike a human author who relies on words and print to convey a story, God is enacting a grand narrative in flesh and blood, neutrons and nebulae. Throughout the course of your study, remember who the central character is and what he is saying in this story.

Section Commentary

The Creation of All Things

(Genesis 1–2)

Just as the Creation story stood against the polytheistic myths of the ancient Near East, today it provides us with an alternative to the materialistic myth of evolution. Much of the current debate between proponents of creation and evolution can be simplified to one question: *Where do we come from?* If human life is ultimately the product of an unguided, cause-



A Phoenician ivory from the 9th-8th century B.C. depicts two figures worshiping the tree of life.

and-effect chain reaction stretching back to the Big Bang, then concepts like human rights and moral norms are just code words for majority opinion. If, however, we let the Creation story set the stage of our existence, then we are the product of a powerful, creative God. We are not here by accident, and we ultimately are accountable to the God who put us here. He stands as the ultimate arbiter of right and wrong, not us. These worldviews present us with two contrast-

ing answers to the question of our origin and lead to two very different ways to live.

The Tragic Fall (Genesis 3–4)

“What is wrong with the world?” Everyone is trying to answer this question, whether he or she realizes it or not. At some level we all sense that something big is broken. Cosmic scales are waiting to be balanced. We understand what it feels like as we constantly try to change something about ourselves but find that we fail every time. What is wrong with the world? And what is wrong with us? Why are things so “out of joint”?

The story of Genesis 3–4 answers those questions. We read that things are the way they are because humans, at the very beginning, chose to live life on their own terms. Humankind chose independence and rebellion rather than trust and obedience.

Humans constantly try to come to grips with the world we inhabit. On the one hand, we sense that much about this world is good. People are capable of amazing heroism and selfless sacrifice. On the other hand, unspeakable tragedy occurs and horrific evils are committed every day all over the world. The story of the fall tells us why things are this way. The goodness of God’s creation could not be wholly destroyed by our sin and rebellion, but until the story is over, we cannot experience the good life God intended apart from the taint of sin and the curse. We live in a fallen world, waiting to be redeemed and made new by the Creator.

The Great Flood (Genesis 6–9)

In the creation story, we saw the Lord separating light from darkness, the waters below

from the waters above, and the land from the water. In each case God was refining his creation and crafting the perfect environment for creatures. After setting the stage, God began filling it with life!

In the flood, however, we see a reversal of this process. The heavens rain down. The earth

is covered in the waters of chaos. A world teeming with life becomes a global graveyard. Everything with “the breath of life in its nostrils” is destroyed (Gen. 7:22). Later in Scripture the apostle Paul will write that the “wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). In this passage we discover just how true that really is.

The ancient Near East abounded with creation stories, but not one revealed the Creator God of Genesis 1 and 2. For instance, the Babylonian Genesis told of the goddess Tiamat, who gave birth to all the gods. Eventually, she was killed by her son Marduk. Her dead corpse became the earth. Human beings were created to take care of the world so the gods could relax.

Discussion Questions

1. What words would you use to describe the God who is revealed in the Creation narrative?
2. The story of the fall indicates that every part of God’s good creation was fractured by Adam and Eve’s rebellion. As you observe our world, what evidence do you see that the world was created to be a good and beautiful place? Where do you see evidence that it is broken by sin?
3. In the flood story, we encounter a God who takes action to prevent the spread of human rebellion and sin by destroying most of his creation. The flood is both an act of judgment and salvation. How do you see these two activities of God reflected in the story? How do these themes differ from the “popular” picture of God that is often presented in this passage?

2

GOD BUILDS A NATION

Plot Points

- God calls Abraham out of the darkness of pagan idolatry into the light of true fellowship.
- God works through a covenant, making Abraham and his descendants his chosen people, marking out a special land for their inheritance, and promising to bless all nations through Abraham's family.
- When Abraham and Sarah try to make God's plan work through their own efforts, things get very messy.
- God keeps his promise, miraculously giving Abraham and Sarah a son in their old age; one generation later Jacob will produce twelve sons of his own and the nation of Israel will be born.

The Chosen Family (2200–1800 B.C.)

Biblical	Secular
2166 Abraham born 2091 Abraham moves to Canaan 2066 Sarah gives birth to Isaac 2050 Abraham offers Isaac 2006 Rebekah gives birth to Jacob and Esau 1991 Abraham dies 1915 Rachel gives birth to Joseph	2160–2010 The First Intermediate Period (Egypt), marked by regional famine and a general decline in Egyptian culture. 2112–2095 King Ur-Nammu restores the Sumerian kingdom and develops a law code and justice system. He dies "abandoned on the field of battle like a broken pot." But his son Shulgi (2094–2047) ushered in a period of peace. 2106–1786 The Middle Kingdom, a period of renaissance and growth in Egypt. 2000 Epic of Gilgamesh records the Sumerian flood legend.

Cast of Characters

Abram. Husband of Sarah, father of Isaac and Ishmael; called the “father of faith” for his steadfast trust in God’s promise to make him the “father of many nations”; God changed his name from Abram (“exalted father”) to Abraham (“father of a multitude”).

Benjamin. Son of Jacob and Rachel; his mother died giving birth to him and named him Ben-oni, “son of my sorrow” or “son of my strength”; renamed Benjamin by his father, meaning “son of the right hand.”

Eliezer. From Damascus; a trusted part of Abraham’s household, perhaps a slave; name means “God is help.”

Esau. Firstborn son of Isaac and Rebekah; a hunter and man of action; swindled out of his inheritance by his younger brother and his own shortsightedness; name means “red.”

Hagar. Sarah’s Egyptian servant; given to Abraham as a wife to produce offspring; mother of Ishmael; experienced God’s favor; name means “stranger or one who fears.”

Isaac. The child promised to Abraham and Sarah; father of Jacob, called “Israel”; name means “he laughs.”

Ishmael. Abraham’s son by Hagar; while not the child of promise, given a great blessing by God; name means “God hears.”

Jacob. Second-born son of Isaac and Rebekah; received the promised blessing and inheritance of a firstborn son; married to Leah and Rachel; father of twelve sons who became the twelve tribes of Israel; name means “he takes by the heel” or “he cheats”;

name changed to Israel (“strives with God”) after a wrestling match with God.

Leah. Daughter of Laban; Jacob’s first and least-loved wife; she was the mother of Issachar, Zebulun, Simeon, Levi, Judah, and Reuben; her servant, Zilpah, produced two more sons for her, Gad and Asher; name means “weary, tired.”

Lot. Son of Haran; nephew of Abraham; rescued by Abraham after being kidnapped; rescued again by two angels from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah; name means “wrapped up, hidden.”

Melchizedek. A priest and king in Jerusalem who prefigured Jesus Christ; graciously provided food and drink for Abraham and his servant, receiving a tithe in return; name means “king of righteousness.”

Rachel. Daughter of Laban; Jacob’s true love; the mother of Joseph and Benjamin; servant, Bilhah, produced two more sons for her, Dan and Naphtali; name means “sheep.”

Rebekah. A distant relative of Abraham; daughter of Bethuel; sister to Laban; married Isaac and had two sons, Jacob and Esau; given a prophetic word for her two sons, that the older would serve the younger; name means “fat, fattened.”

Reuben. Jacob and Leah’s son; violated Jacob’s concubine, a decision he would later regret; name means “see, a son.”

Sarai. Wife of Abram; miraculously gave birth to Isaac in her advanced years; a beautiful woman and, according to Peter, a model of godly womanhood (1 Peter 3:1–6); both *Sarai*, her original name, and *Sarah*, the name given her by God, mean “princess.”

Chapter Overview

One of the first things we notice about the unfolding story of Scripture is that God is the central character driving the action and moving the plot forward: he does not need us to accomplish his purposes. We are characters in his story, not the other way around. Contrary to popular caricatures of God, he is not sitting around in heaven, wringing his hands in powerless frustration. Far from it!

In fact, God often chooses to accomplish his purposes in the most difficult way possible. Although we may scratch our heads and



The Epic of Gilgamesh includes a clay tablet that describes a big flood that occurred around the fifteenth century B.C.

wonder why God chooses to work in this way, the reason soon becomes quite clear: God is reminding us that he is the one in charge, and *nothing* will frustrate his purposes. The story

of Abraham (originally Abram) is a perfect case in point. God determines to build a great nation, give them a promised land, and bless all nations through them. He wants to reveal himself to them, entrust them with his Word, and bring his own Son to earth through them. So who does he choose to found this great nation? None other than a man and woman well past the normal childbearing age. God's ways are certainly not our ways!

We learn something fundamental about God in his curious choice of Abraham: it is God's grace, not our own effort, that matters most in the story. And this is something we should pay careful attention to, because it is not the last time we will encounter this theme as the story unfolds.

Section Commentary

Abraham Called into God's Promise (Genesis 12–13, 15; Romans 4; Hebrews 11)

Joshua 24:2–3 tells us that Abraham was part of a pagan family:

Joshua said to all the people, "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'Long ago your forefathers, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the Euphrates River and worshiped other gods. But I took your father Abraham from the land beyond the Euphrates and led him throughout Canaan and gave him many descendants.'

The ancient Near East was a place with many gods, each one believed to meet a specific need and to demand specific sacrifices. For Abraham to look to just one God to supply all his needs was radically counterculture in his day.



Abram's travels.

Abraham Takes Things into His Own Hands (Genesis 16)

The ancient world placed an enormous importance on producing offspring to safeguard the family inheritance. Marriage contracts would even outline potential options in case of infertility. Husbands could divorce infertile wives, take on concubines, practice polygyny (multiple wives of equal status), or adopt an heir if their first wife did not produce one. Sarah's suggestion might offend our modern sensibilities, but it was the norm in her day. Still, in light of God's promise, it revealed her lack of faith in God's promise and reminds us

that when God's people look to the surrounding culture for their values, we take our eyes off of what God values.

The Covenant of Circumcision (Genesis 17)

Circumcision was a common practice in the ancient world and was not unique to the descendants of Abraham. In Egypt it was an adolescent rite of passage, and it was regularly practiced in Canaanite culture as well. What made the mark of circumcision unique for Abraham was the God who demanded it. As this passage reveals, the mark of circumcision was intended to serve



These clay figurines from the 10th–7th centuries B.C. were worshiped as house deities. Asherah was the Canaanite goddess of fertility.

as a constant physical reminder that Abraham and his descendants had been called out and blessed so that they could be a blessing to their neighbors. In the covenant God not only promised blessing for his people, but he demanded faithful obedience.

The Promise Fulfilled (Genesis 21)

One thing is clear: God works in the face of our imperfect faith. One year before Isaac was born, Sarah had laughed at the thought that she would conceive and give birth to a son. She had doubted God's word. Yet the New Testament writer of Hebrews tells us that Sarah was "enabled to bear children" by her faith (11:11). Apparently, Sarah's faith was something like

a roller coaster, down one second and up the next. We can certainly identify with her, can't we? In this we see that the Lord can work through imperfect faith, fulfilling his promises through imperfect people!

The Test (Genesis 22)

Two thousand years after Abraham walked the earth, one of his descendants would write a letter reminding the first followers of Jesus that faith without works is dead (James 2:17). As he wrote those words, James was no doubt thinking of his ancestor Abraham. Although Abraham's faith could sometimes waver, we nevertheless see that Abraham had a persistent confidence that God would never break

his promise coupled with a willingness to obey God's commands to him. The author of Hebrews tells us that Abraham obeyed God's command to sacrifice his son Isaac because he was confident that God could raise the dead. Abraham believed God's promise that *through Isaac* the covenant promises would be established. Abraham knew that regardless of what God was asking him to do, he would be faithful to keep his promises. And so he obeyed God *in faith*.

Israel Established (Genesis 32–33, 35)

Just as God's choice of an older man and barren woman to birth his chosen people seems strange, so does his determination to use people like Jacob. From a young age, Jacob was known as a trickster, a "grasper" who constantly sought his own good, even at the expense of others (Gen. 25:29–34). Yet God pursued Jacob, wrestling with him along the banks of the Jabbok River, and called him by a new name — Israel.

Discussion Questions

1. "God's will is lived forward and understood backward." What do you think this statement means? How does it reflect the truth of Abraham's life? How have you seen this to be true in your life?
2. What kind of consequences did Abraham and Sarah face for trying to make God's plan work for him? Have you experienced negative consequences from trying to make what you perceived to be God's plan happen on your own? Explain.