

GENESIS – IN THE BEGINNING

The opening verse of the Bible pictures this great globe on which we live in a state of chaos. Deep waters surge to and fro, and it is intensely dark. But **God the Creator**, in six days of intense activity and by the limitless energy of his Spirit power, transforms the turmoil into a new world of order and beauty. He turns on the light of the sun, dries out the land, plants trees and grasses, and stocks both sea, land and sky with an huge variety of life forms, each capable of reproducing itself. Then the mighty Designer stops work to rejoice in His creation, and proclaims the seventh day a day of rest for the man He had made. Amazingly, that is how it still is – we measure our lives by groups of seven days and we call them weeks.

The story continues with more detail. In the second chapter, we find man and beast shaped from minerals found in the dust, and brought to life with the breath of God, that life-force which keeps us going for years until our bodies wear out, or are damaged by accident, war or disease. Then, one day, we breathe in and out for the last time, and our heart stops. But that sad fate is introduced in chapter three.

Man, **Adam**, and his partner **Eve**, constructed out of his side and wedded to him as one flesh, lived in a Paradise – a watered garden. There they were subject to God's law – 'feel free to eat any fruit you desire, except from the **Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil**'. One day, years later, the **Serpent** fooled Eve into breaking God's rule, and she in turn talked Adam into joining her in crime. Soon the human pair found themselves lined up before the great Judge and condemned to die, not on the spot, but at the end of a process of ageing, inevitable and lethal. This grim news was accompanied by exclusion from Paradise, in future to find food only by toil and perspiration.

This human condition, which we all inherit (remember, we all break God's rules ourselves, and therefore deserve Adam's sentence) would be grim indeed, were it not that our God is merciful. Seeing our predicament, He has prepared a system for us to achieve reconciliation and everlasting life. Take a look at **Genesis 3:15** for a taste of the many hidden surprises in the Bible. The Serpent had deceived Eve into breaking God's law, which the Bible calls **Sin**. From this point onwards, the Serpent in the Bible becomes a synonym for Sin. So in this cryptic statement, which seems at first glance to state the obvious - that men and snakes do not get on with each other - God is subtly promising that a descendant of Eve would one day destroy Sin. He would stamp on the Serpent's head.

The solution to this 'Serpent Mystery' only became plain with the coming of Jesus, millennia later. Jesus, descended from Eve, conquered the temptation to sin day after day. Arrested and falsely accused, he volunteered to die, a sentence he did not deserve, and endured the pain of the cross so that he could share our humanity to the full. Consigned to the tomb, he could not in justice remain there, being a sinless man. God raised him to immortal life on the third day. At this point the power of the serpent was broken. And those who believe in Jesus could be forgiven their sins, and like him raised from the dead, at the Last Day. Amazingly, the whole gospel is there, in the opening chapters of Genesis!

After their expulsion from the Garden of Eden, Adam and his family worshipped God at the gates of their former paradise, through which they could see the **Way to the Tree of Life**. Fiery cherubims (probably angels) and a flaming sword now barred the road to happiness and fellowship with God. Nevertheless the hope was set before them that one day, on God's terms, and in His good time, they might eat the fruit of the Tree of Life and live forever. That would only become possible through the death of the Son of God. And so they brought to this appointed place at the required times the sacrificial animals which God had prescribed, each spotless and blemish-free, to represent in symbol His own dear son.

It was a quarrel over the offering of sacrifice which led to the first recorded murder. **Cain**, the elder son of Adam, declined to bring the appointed first-born lamb, and substituted his own

home-grown vegetables. But vegetables, however well scrubbed, cannot truly represent the Lord Jesus. Cain's sacrifice was rejected. In a fit of jealous anger he killed his younger brother **Abel**, who had brought what God required. It is surprising how often, even today, men and women choose to worship God in religions of their own invention, and not the simple obedience He asks. Cain was driven away from the Presence of God.

The next 1000 years or so of human history are compressed into a few verses. Chapters four and five of Genesis record two rival genealogies – the one of the descendants of Cain, and the other of **Seth**, born to replace Abel. Cain's family were strong, warlike and selfish, with no respect for God. Seth's people, in contrast, were believers, and kept the commandments of the Lord. At last the longsuffering of the Creator was stretched too far. The Cainites had filled the world with violence and bloodshed. God's Way, the life He taught men to live, had become corrupted like a scratched computer disc, and men did what they pleased. The time had come to wash the world clean and start again.

The account of the **Flood** in Genesis chapters six and seven is a stark reminder of the power of God to judge the world of men, and His mercy in preserving the children of faithful **Noah**. He does not condemn the righteous with the wicked. When the waters retreated, the three sons of Noah replenished the earth. From them came the three main branches of the modern human tree – the black peoples, the Asiatic/Europeans, and the Semitic Jews and Arabs.

Not surprisingly, the rebellious heart of man had not changed. Noah's descendants settled in Mesopotamia (recognised as the source of civilisation) and began to build the great cities of the plain. In an attempt to outsmart the Creator, men planned the Tower of Babel, high enough to protect them against another flood (even though God had promised He would not send one again). A visit from the **angels** (God's immortal messengers) put a stop to that by the simple expedient of confounding their languages. After that the disparate tribes spread outwards into the earth.

From this point the Genesis camera focuses on the family of one man – **Abraham**, the father of the Jews and the Arabs. Our hero, a devout believer in God, is asked by an angelic visitor to leave his comfortable home in **Ur**, a city whose ruins are still visible in Iraq. In spite of the obvious uncertainties, and his advanced age, he sets off for an unknown land. His reward was the promise of a large family, and a permanent inheritance of the land God was taking him to. This turned out when he got there to be **Canaan**, or **Israel** as we call it today.

The fascinating biography of the Father of the Faithful occupies 13 whole chapters of the Bible. Abraham's faith in God was tested time after time. He had been promised a son, but it took 25 years before the baby arrived. He had been guaranteed the land on which he camped in his tent, but until the day of his death he still owned none of it except a cemetery plot, which he paid for in cash. As the New Testament writer to the Hebrews remarks, he died in faith, *still believing* God would give him the land in which he was buried. This means Abraham's faith stretched beyond death. He believed in the **resurrection from the dead**. He was convinced God would one day bring him back to life, so that he could inherit the land for ever. That is why the Apostle Paul says the 'gospel' was preached to Abraham.

Abraham had two sons. One was born of his slave-concubine **Hagar**. This was **Ishmael**, forefather of the Arab races. The other was **Isaac**, his son by his true wife **Sarah**, and born miraculously in extreme old age. God chose that Isaac should be the heir of Abraham's promises, and repeated them to this young man as he grew up. One most moving incident, in chapter 22, involves the final and greatest test of Abraham. The angel of the Lord asks him to offer his beloved Isaac as a sacrifice on a hill three days journey away – from the directions probably Mount Moriah outside **Jerusalem**. The torment of the old man, as he is torn between love for his son and duty to God, and ultimately decides to obey, is a classic of literature. It

also helps us understand how much God suffered when He allowed his dear Son to die at the hands of his enemies, so that we could be delivered from death. But that is another story.

Abraham found a wife for Isaac from the country of his relatives, up in the north. They had twin boys. Once again the firstborn, **Esau**, was demoted in favour of the younger, **Jacob**, just as in God's great plan Adam, born first, was replaced by the Lord Jesus. Esau became the head of the **Edomites**, who like the Arabs become implacable rivals to the descendants of Jacob – **the twelve tribes of Israel**. The twists in the fortunes of Jacob as he, too, journeys north to find a wife from the family of his uncle, but ends up with two sisters instead of one, are riveting. Jacob tries endlessly to prosper himself by craft and guile. He comes to realise, after 20 years, that it was the God of Abraham and Isaac who had protected him, and given him success. In recognition, his name is changed to Israel, '*a prince with God*'. He returns to the land of his birth in triumph, but is at once devastated by the loss of his dearest wife, **Rachel**, in childbirth. Sorrow strikes again when his favourite, her son **Joseph**, is taken from him by stealth as his jealous brothers sell him into slavery and pretend to their father that Joseph is dead. Each blow wrenches at your heart as you try to enter into the feelings of this sufferer, but you begin to see that his experience is that of every child of God. We all come to appreciate that we cannot save ourselves, but must put our trust in an unseen God, and relax in what Moses calls 'the everlasting arms'.

The last 14 chapters of the Book of Beginnings tell the amazing story of young Joseph. He is kidnapped by his brothers, and taken as a slave at the age of 17 into an alien land. For 21 years he has no contact with his family or any other believer in God. Yet his faith never waivers. His master promotes him from being a slave to head of the household. At last things seem to be going better for him. Then, overnight, he is thrown into prison after his master's wife pretends he has molested her. Defenceless and alone, this second reversal must have been truly numbing. Yet even in prison Joseph makes the best of things, and works his way up until he is appointed chief of the prisoners. Eventually his God-given gift of dream-interpreting opens the door to the court of **Pharaoh** the king of Egypt, and overnight he finds himself Lord of the Land. Here he is in a position to provide for the salvation of his family in a time of famine. They all come down to Egypt to live with him, and the aged Jacob finds his favourite son is still alive, after all. God has invisibly guided the fortunes of Abraham's family through a plot whose twists and turns leave fiction behind.

In 50 fast-moving chapters we have traversed two thousand years of human history. The date is around 1600 BC. The Bible drama is poised to introduce the **Exodus**, the beginning of the nation of Israel.