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modern instead of ancient, we will get ourselves into a bind. Before we can ask the hard questions—for example, “Is Genesis 1 in harmony with scientific thought? Or does Genesis 1 trump scientific thought?”—we must ask a more foundational question: *What do we have the right to expect from God’s word as a book written in an ancient world?*

Jesus and the Bible Are Similar

Let me give you a challenge that will help you examine your expectations about the Bible: Think of the Bible the way we think of Jesus.

Christianity teaches that Jesus is, mysteriously, both God and human. He is not half one, half the other. He does not appear to be one while “really” being the other. He is both: all God and all human all the time.

Now think of the Bible by drawing a parallel: In the same way that Jesus is both completely divine and human, the Bible also has divine and human dimensions.

Remember, this is only an *analogy*; it certainly does not tell us everything we need to know about the nature of Scripture. But it is a helpful one. Jesus was fully divine and fully human; the Bible is ultimately from God, but every last word of it was written by human beings in certain places and historical settings. Jesus is without sin; and in the same way, the Bible does not fall short of God’s purpose.

Think of Jesus, walking around Palestine in the first century. Although he was God’s son, there was nothing particularly striking about him. He was easily mistaken for just another Galilean Jew—which is one reason why some people were so amazed at his teaching and miracles, while others were so offended (“Who does this guy think he is?”). In fact, for the most part everything about him said “human.” He was born, he had skin and bones, he ate, he laughed, he cried, he wore a robe, he had a Middle Eastern complexion, he wore sandals.

I could go on. My point is that *none of the humanness of Jesus of Nazareth detracts from his being the Son of God*. In fact, through such a lowly state God *chose* to communicate himself. But as human as Jesus was, he was without sin.

Now apply this same point of view to the Bible. If you make a commitment to become more knowledgeable about the ancient world, you will come away realizing how very much at home the Bible was in ancient times. Just like Jesus' clothing and customs were at home in his world, the Bible was written in ancient, very common, languages. It used many of the same expressions and ideas of the ancient world. But because these writings are ultimately from God, they don't "slip up" anywhere. There is no place in the Bible where the Holy Spirit says, "Oops, I really didn't mean to put it that way. Can I have another go at it?" The Bible does exactly what God wants it to do.

Maybe the chart below can help clarify this analogy between Jesus and the Bible.

Jesus	Bible
Both divine and human nature	Both divine and human authorship
Did not sin	Does not misrepresent God
Appeared like an everyday Jew	Appears like an ancient book
Power and authority derived from God	Power and authority derived from God

Jesus was without sin, although fully human. The Bible does not fall short of God's purpose, even though it was written by humans. Both derive their authority by being from God.

Now think carefully about the implications of this.

Considering that Jesus is the Son of God, the Gospels tell us many unexpected things about him. For example, Jesus himself admitted he had limited knowledge. In Matthew 24:36, he says,

“No one knows the day nor the hour, not the angels . . . nor the Son, but only the Father.” Luke 2:52 says, “And [the child] Jesus grew in wisdom, and in stature, and in favor with God and men”—meaning that the child Jesus learned things as he went along, like any child does, rather than coming into the world filled with complete divine knowledge. And Jesus died. God is not supposed to die.

The Bible is similar. There are many things about it that we would not expect from a book called “God’s Word.” Genesis 1 has strong resemblances to other ancient creation stories. Israel has prophets, priests, and kings, all of whom at times look very similar to the prophets, priests, and kings of the other nations in the ancient world. Laws govern the details of daily lives that are very different from our own—and some parts of which have disappeared forever. New Testament Greek is a very simple, common, everyday version of the higher, more polished classical Greek. It is the language of the common people.

But none of these properties of the Bible I just mentioned are examples of the Bible somehow “falling short.” Instead they display the humanness of the Bible. They correspond to Jesus’ humanity; they are not “errors” that would correspond to Jesus’ sin.

If Genesis 1 were to say, for example, that the God of Israel did not make the world, that would be an error. That would be like Jesus cursing the Father; that would be sin. But the fact that Genesis 1 reflects ancient creation stories does not point to error in the Bible, any more than Jesus’ wearing sandals and speaking Aramaic was sin.

I hope it is clear what I am after here. Don’t expect Jesus to be something he isn’t: a king dressed in fine robes, with servants and armies. He was lowly. He came to serve. Likewise, don’t expect something from the Bible it can’t deliver. Don’t expect it to be high and lofty, detached from the ancient world in which it was written.

C. S. Lewis has a great way of putting it. In 1947, J. B. Phillips published a very earthy English translation of the New Testament letters. (You may have heard of Phillips’ translation of the entire

New Testament, *The New Testament in Modern English*.) Lewis wrote the introduction, defending Phillips' approach to translating the New Testament in a way that the common people of his day would connect with.

Lewis points out that the Greek style of the New Testament shows that the biblical writers did not have a high command of the language. He defends his point by drawing the same analogy we draw here, between Jesus and the Bible.

Does this [the low style of NT Greek] shock us? It ought not to, except as the Incarnation itself ought to shock us. The same divine humility which decreed that God should become a baby at a peasant-woman's breast, and later an arrested field-preacher in the hands of the Roman police, decreed also that He should be preached in a vulgar, prosaic and unliterary language. If you can stomach the one, you can stomach the other. The Incarnation is in that sense an irreverent doctrine: Christianity, in that sense, an incurably irreverent religion. When we expect that it should have come before the World in all the beauty that we now feel in the Authorized [King James] Version we are as wide of the mark as the Jews were in expecting that the Messiah would come as a great earthly King. The real sanctity, the real beauty and sublimity of the New Testament (as of Christ's life) are of a different sort: miles deeper or *further in*.²

No one says it like C. S. Lewis: Allow the Bible to be the Bible.

Neither Jesus nor the Bible are quite what we might have expected. And it is precisely *that fact* that drives us to see a more real beauty and sublimity in *both*. Sometimes we know the Bible too well; it becomes tame and predictable. But if we look at the Bible as ancient people would have read it, we can be as struck as they were by the power and authority of its message.

²C. S. Lewis, "Introduction" to J. B. Phillips, *Letters to Young Churches: A Translation of the New Testament Epistles* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1947), vii–viii.

The Bible Is Not a Rule Book or an Owner's Manual; It Takes Wisdom

If we take seriously the likeness between Christ and the Bible, we will discover that one of the most common ways of looking at the Bible soon becomes very inadequate.

I remember, in my early twenties, reading a book of advice from a pastor who answered questions that people wrote in to him. Many of these people were looking to orient their lives around the Bible; they were looking to the Bible for answers to life's questions.

Few Christians would find fault with this, but consider the following. One woman asked whether, biblically speaking, it was acceptable for Christians to go to the circus. The pastor answered that there was no clear biblical passage that addressed this issue. But then he proceeded to bring together a number of passages from various parts of the Bible and use them to prove his conclusion: Indeed, biblically speaking, it was *not* a good idea to go to the circus.

I laughed good and long when I read this. But since then, my wife and I have done our best to raise three children. Now I realize that parents do indeed crave these sorts of answers to everyday questions about behavior and cultural norms; and they feel, because the Bible is God's word, it should *give* those answers to everyday questions.

The problem is that the Bible is not that kind of book.

We need to learn the kinds of issues the Bible addresses so we can *learn to ask the questions of the Bible that the Bible is meant to answer*. The Bible is not a book on how to invest your money, which political party to join, whether to homeschool, where to go to college, whom to marry, where to live, whether you should buy that car, America as God's chosen people, or a blueprint for present-day world events. It is not, in other words, a "Christian owner's manual." Too many Christians assume that the Bible is the guidebook to address all of life's questions. But that is not what the Bible is designed to do.

The Bible tells the story of how God’s people are delivered from death to life, and as a result are now called upon to live a life in harmony with that high calling (this occupies much of Paul’s letters). The New Testament in particular describes all sorts of situations faced by early Christians, and the New Testament writers guide these first Christians through each issue. For us today, when we read the New Testament, what we see is a *portrait being painted for us of what a life in Christ looks like*. We are being given the vision of what a Christian life looks like.

What is *not* addressed in the Bible are specifically modern situations. There is no Bible verse that will, either directly or indirectly, answer many of the questions that confront Christian families today: When do you begin dating? Is it OK to watch an R-rated movie? What kinds of books should your children read? What sort of education should they receive?

In this light, I want to introduce what I think is the single most important biblical concept for living a Christian life, not only today, but during any era: wisdom.

Let me give an example.

When my son was twelve, he asked if we could watch the R-rated movie *Saving Private Ryan* together. “All” of his friends had already seen it, and he didn’t want to be the oddball.

Ultimately, we watched the movie together. But before we did, I had to consider a number of factors. What was his personality type? What kind of internal “filters” did he have? Was this the right time and place to put him in a controlled setting that might help him grow?

In our particular situation, watching that movie was a tremendously positive experience for him. (The opening battle scene was the most graphic representation of war he had ever seen, and it helped him understand how horrible war is.) Some might think that the violence and dialogue in the movie are inappropriate for a twelve-year-old. I certainly understand the point, but quoting Proverbs 22:6, as one shocked parent did, is not going to resolve the

issue: “Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it.”

The truth is that this famous proverb is often misunderstood. It doesn’t mean “How you train your child will determine his or her life path,” as if a parent’s patient, daily influence will guarantee results, while if you make mistakes the child will stumble. Instead, it means that a commitment to train your children in wisdom will bear fruit when they come of age, but there are no guarantees.

However one understands the proverb, it takes wisdom to know how *that* proverb applies to *this* situation—which means understanding the proverb, having an intimate knowledge of the circumstances, and then using both to make a decision. In my opinion, I *did* apply the wisdom of Proverbs 22:6 by allowing my son to watch an R movie (even if others disagree).

Now maybe that one example is enough to make you want to throw this book into the fireplace. I hope not. When we get down to it, much of our lives as Christians requires us, as a wise friend once said to me, to “wing it.” I don’t mean that the Christian life is haphazard with no guidance. I mean that many of the decisions we are called upon to make every day we make, not because of a verse here or there, but because of the wisdom we have accumulated over the years. That wisdom is acquired through the study of Scripture, prayer, life in a Christian community (not just “going to church”), and plain old life experiences (otherwise known as learning from your mistakes).

I am a wiser man today in my late forties than I was at thirty-five or twenty-five, not because I am, all of a sudden, a better Bible reader, but because a lot of things have happened to me through the years. And I am thankful that I have been supported, as I’ve dealt with the ins and outs of life, by a lot of wise people. I am responsible for passing that wisdom on to my children, both in word and in deed (and we all know the latter is much harder).

Our lives are a journey, and raising our children is part of that journey. We are in a constant search to conform our lives to the

Not a “Book-by-Book” Approach

Reading the Bible book by book is an extremely important thing to do. Entire books of the Bible, not just individual verses, form our thinking.

But we are dealing with young people. Book studies, as important as they are, typically require an adult attention span. To be fruitful, book studies also require a certain base knowledge. To go back to the analogy I used at the very beginning, the more hooks and shelves you have in your closet, the more the details can be organized in a way that makes sense.

The focus in the approach I outline (as you will see in Part Two) is not on a study of each book *in detail*, but on the flow of the story *in general*. This overview of the biblical *drama* will help make subsequent book studies by your children in their adult years more profitable.

Adults can and should study the Bible in books—or at least in large chunks. But this is too much for many young students, and particularly for very young children—so the tendency has been to move to Bible stories or character studies instead. But there is a better way: get to know Jesus, then see the broad brush strokes of the biblical story, and then begin looking at the Bible in a more adult fashion in the high-school years by addressing some of the bigger issues.

Not a “Defensive” Approach

Most of us are familiar with the controversies surrounding Genesis and science. Battles have raged, most famously in the Scopes trial of the 1920s, and more recently in the Intelligent Design debate (such as the case in Dover, Pennsylvania, that made national headlines in 2005).

These debates have come about because Christians have attempted to apply the Bible to current events and current discoveries that the Bible does not speak to. Expecting from the Bible

things it may not be prepared to deliver can encourage a defensive, even argumentative, approach. Sometimes defending the Bible (with humility) is important and necessary. The difficulty comes when we *teach the Bible* in such a way that we *focus* on the conflicts, rather than on laying the groundwork for a lifetime of study.

The Bible is not a book that was written to be defended. Yes, defending the Bible and Christianity has its place. But just because you can defend the Bible doesn't mean that you understand it. You can argue about whether or not the Exodus is a historical event—but that won't help you understand the book of Exodus.

A defense of Scripture is only as good as what lies beneath it, which should be a mature understanding of the nature of the Bible. Too often, I see Christians defending positions that are based on a false understanding of the biblical story. These positions may temporarily convince young children of the Bible's truth, but as children begin to think for themselves, free of their parents' protection, the inadequacy of the arguments they have been taught may become clear.

As we teach the Bible to our children, we should not be *focused* on defending a particular view of Genesis—or on any other controversial issue. There will be time for this later. Rather, the biblical story should be presented in a positive manner, keeping a focus on the bigger portrait the Bible is painting. We must learn to let the Bible have its way with us, learn to ask *its* questions first, rather than rush to it with ours.

Many of the details of the biblical story may seem strange to us (and even downright weird). But the story as a whole is one of a good and wise God doing unexpected things for an undeserving yet chosen people. This culminates in a vivid description of a new world that begins with Jesus' resurrection. In this new world, death is conquered and we can begin to live as we were created to live.

This is the picture we want our children to see. This is the image we want them to carry with them throughout their lives, for good times and for bad.

The Bible is a book that is meant to be on the “offensive,” aggressively presenting a God who goes to great lengths to put the world back as it should be. If there is any “defensiveness” in our teaching of Scripture, it should come during the high-school years. At that point, it is appropriate to discuss challenges to Scripture, what they imply, and how they should be addressed constructively. But remember that a proper defense is only as good as one’s *mature* understanding of what one is defending. Learning the biblical story *first* allows our children to have a mature grasp of the issues, rather than falling victim to fear, exaggeration, or a false sense of security.

I have seen many times, as I am sure you have, young people walking away from the faith because they see it as irrelevant. The first two parts of the pattern I suggest are aimed at keeping that from happening. When the really hard questions about the Bible and the Christian faith hit home during the high-school years, you can *build* on the foundation of the previous years.

What we should avoid, at all costs, is presenting difficult issues at early ages, giving simplistic answers, and then wondering why, at the age of fifteen or so, our children walk away from a faith that they find childish.



Creation and Fall

Genesis 1–11: Creation and Fall

Not to worry, here. We are not going to go through every book of the Bible in detail. Remember my daughter's room? Now it's time to put up a few hooks and shelves to *begin* bringing some organization to our minds as we turn to the Bible itself.

The Bible is basically a story with a three-part structure. The first part of the story is creation (that only takes two chapters, Genesis 1–2). In the second part of the story, something goes very wrong (Genesis 3–11). The third part of the story is what God does through Israel to set everything right. That is the rest of the Bible, or 1,178 chapters for those of you counting.

You will most often see this three-part structure referred to as Creation, Fall, and Redemption. This is the basic plotline Christians have been working with for many, many centuries; I will adopt it too, but with some modification.

The simplicity of this three-part structure shouldn't fool us. Clearly there's a lot going on in the third part of the story—1,178 chapters worth. We can't simply call that whole part "Redemption" and think that we've understood it.

Much of what we will be looking at below is how this redemption idea is fleshed out from Genesis 12 through Revelation 22. The redemption part of the story has a *lot* of important developments (Jesus being the central one), a few twists and turns, and a couple of unexpected movements.

But it all ends well.



What is the Bible saying to us in Genesis 1–11? What are we supposed to understand about God's work in the world from these chapters?

We know that Genesis 1 bears some pretty striking similarities to creation stories of other nations of the ancient world; this is something scholars have been addressing since the mid-nineteenth century at least. There are some powerful implications of this. First and foremost, Genesis 1 is making a strong theological statement: Israel's God, unlike the gods of the other nations, created the world alone, by his word/will, and this shows the Israelites that their God alone is worthy of Israel's worship.

Right from the very beginning, the Bible is making a point about who God is and how his people are supposed to respond. Remember, Israel was surrounded by other nations, all of whom worshiped numerous gods. And if you remember your Old Testament, one of the recurring temptations for Israel was to worship these gods, whether in Egypt (in slavery), Canaan (in their own land), or Babylon (while in exile). But Genesis 1 makes the bold—*very* bold—statement that this God of desert dwellers and slaves *alone* made everything that is. This God—of whom Egypt's king said "I don't know who this god of yours even *is*" (see Exodus 5:2)—is *the* Creator.

This statement is all the more striking when you realize that the creation stories of the other nations usually involved conflict among the gods, with conflict leading to the creation. In the Babylonian creation story known to us as *Enuma Elish*, the sky and earth are created after a battle where one god kills another and cuts her in half.

Genesis 1 is a strong argument *against* such stories as these. The intent of the creation account is to keep Israel from falling into the trap of worshiping someone other than the *true* Creator. This is both repeated and developed further in the rest of the Old Testament. Continually, the reasons given for why Yahweh⁴ should be worshiped are that he is not only (1) the Creator, but also (2) the deliverer (first from Egypt, then from Babylon). This dual theme continues into the New Testament: the Creator is the Redeemer.

The second important theological lesson taught by Genesis 1 is this: the creation story is about God making *order out of chaos*. When Genesis 1 describes God creating, it shows God putting everything in its place.

A key phrase is found in verse 2: “formless and void.” The Hebrew term is *tohubohu*, which, believe it or not, has actually found its way into English dictionaries. It means something utterly chaotic. (I am thinking of making up a plaque and hanging it on the door of a certain child.) *Tohu* means “formless” and *bohu* means “void.” When we look at the six days of creation in Genesis 1, we can see that in the first three days, God provides form to what is

⁴Israel’s God is known by a variety of names in the Old Testament, but the two most common are God (the Hebrew word is *Elohim*) and Yahweh. The name Yahweh is worth a closer look. The Hebrew word is made up of only four consonants, YHWH (which is why it is called the tetragrammaton, Greek for “four letters”). No one actually knows how the name was pronounced, but the vowels /a/ and /e/ are added for convenience. In most English translations, the name is translated LORD (note the small capital letters). I guess this will have to do, but “LORD” obscures the fact that “Yahweh” is a *name* by which Israel’s God was known as distinct from all the other named gods of the ancient world. This is why I prefer to use the name “Yahweh” throughout (unless quoting an English version), although I will also refer to Israel’s God as “God.”

formless; the next three days, he fills the voids. In the chart below, note how day 1 corresponds to day 4, day 2 to day 5, and day 3 to day 6.

Form out of Formlessness		Filling the Void
Day 1 light and darkness separated		Day 4 sun, moon, stars
Day 2 dome to separate the waters		Day 5 sea creatures and birds (also vegetation)
Day 3 land and sea separated		Day 6 land creatures and humanity
	Day 7 Rest	

So in Genesis 1, God straightens things up (form) in days 1–3, and then makes things to fill those spaces (void) in days 4–6. And everything is good, especially human beings. That is why the sixth day is deemed “*very good*.”

This notion of “order out of chaos” is extremely important for understanding the Old Testament story. God is setting boundaries: the sea goes here, the land goes there; birds live here, crawling things live there. But the biggest boundary is between God and humans.

This is the third lesson to be learned from Genesis 1. God made humanity not simply “good” (without sin), but the crowning achievement of his creative work. Of all God’s creation, only humanity is made in the image and likeness of God to rule over everything (Genesis 1:26).

This is too important to pass by quickly: humanity is special to God. In other ancient creation stories, we see gods fighting the forces of chaos and taming them. But in those stories, humans are created to do the work the gods don’t want to do, or to serve the gods as slaves, or just because the gods got bored. In the Bible, humans are God’s earthly *representatives*.

It is not exaggerating the message of Genesis 1 to say that humans, in their role of leadership over creation, are god-like beings on earth. This is another theme that recurs in the Bible, and especially in the New Testament. Think for a moment of Jesus, the *Son of God*, who said things such as “if you have seen me, you have seen the Father” (John 14:9), and whom Paul calls the “last Adam” (I Corinthians 15:45) after the “pattern” of the first Adam (Romans 5:14). Jesus is what Adam was supposed to have been: God’s perfect representative on earth.

This brings us to what is typically called “the Fall” (Genesis 3). The story is one of doubting what God says and acting contrary to it. There is a serpent of some sort (who apparently began with legs; Genesis 3:14), a temptation that centers on whether or not God is keeping something good from the first humans, and an unidentified piece of fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The punishment for acting contrary to God’s words is swift and includes Eve’s pain in childbirth, the struggle of daily work, and most important, the banishment of Adam and Eve from the Garden.

But there is more to this story than we sometimes appreciate. In the Fall, something very important was lost, and the rest of the Bible tells the story of the lengths to which God goes to get it back. Not until Revelation 22 is the mission finally, fully accomplished.

So what was lost?

We should try to think of the Fall not simply as “God made a rule but humans disobeyed.” The problem runs much deeper than that. There is nothing wrong with knowing good and evil. In fact, you might think that God would actually *want* Adam and Eve to eat of this tree. But what is at issue here is *how* the first humans decide to gain this knowledge. Rather than doing it God’s way, by eating of the fruit of the tree of good and evil, the first humans took matters into their own hands and *tried to be like God* in their own way. In other words, they tried to break down the boundary God had erected, part of the order he made out of chaos.

In eating the fruit, humans became agents of chaos in disrespecting the boundary God had established. They were not simply

being naughty: they were acting contrary to the creation order. Taking the fruit was like pulling at the loose end of a knitted sweater and watching the whole thing unravel. This is at the root of human woes: forgetting the place that God has made for us. We are the *height* of his *creation*. He even wants us to be like him, knowing good from evil. But it has to be done his way, through obedience to him. We are *not* the *Creator*.

Chapters 4–11 perform a number of functions, but the most central is to show the spreading effects of chapter 3. Genesis 1–11 is broad in scope, looking at the human condition in general.

The story of Cain and Abel is the story of the first crime: murder. Chaos threatens to disorder God’s creation. Humanity is created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26–27), but here jealousy and murder—indeed, fratricide—come on the scene quickly. First we see the proper boundaries between God and humanity disrupted by Adam and Eve. Now the proper boundaries between humans are trampled. By the time you get to the fourth chapter of Genesis, things have devolved in a way that you could never have anticipated from Genesis 1–2.

The stories of the Flood and Tower of Babel (Genesis 6–9 and 11) show how humanity has failed to live up to its design as image-bearer of God (“every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time,” Genesis 6:5). The Flood should be seen as a “reversal of creation,” a reintroduction of chaos, followed by a “second creation.” God sees how bad things have gotten and is determined to start over with Noah and his family. So what does God do? He unleashes the waters above and below, the very waters that had been kept in their proper place in Genesis 1. He allows chaos to undo the order he has established. Humans are no longer kept safe from the chaos; instead the powers of chaos are used to kill humans, the crowning achievement of God’s creation. Things are unraveling in a very unsettling way.⁵

⁵To glance ahead, this is not the only time we will see a “creation reversal” in the Bible. In Exodus, several of the ten plagues are further examples of God unleashing creation and crossing boundaries: frogs hopping all over the homes

Noah and his family are saved, but old habits die hard. No sooner do they get off the boat than the shenanigans begin again (see Genesis 9:18–29) and their relationships began to break down. But from this dysfunctional family the world is repopulated, which leads to the Tower of Babel story, an attempt to “reach to the heavens” (Genesis 11:4). To use the language of “order,” the Tower of Babel is another attempt to obliterate the line between humanity and God.

God’s creation, his order out of chaos, was still threatened by disorder. What began with Adam and Eve and the forbidden fruit has had swift and far-reaching repercussions. You might say that “chaos” has never quite been fully set in order.

The remainder of the Bible tells us what God intends to do about that.



of men, darkness where there was light. In the crossing of the Red Sea, sea and land are separated (as they are in creation), but when the Egyptians try to pass through, the waters held at bay come crashing down (as in the Flood). In the New Testament, Jesus is a force of new creation, as seen at the very outset of John’s Gospel (“In the beginning was the Word”). As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5, anyone in Christ is a “new creation.”