The Drama of Scripture
Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story

Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen
To Doug Loney, for his sacrifice and gift of writing

To Al Wolters, for his formative influence on both of us

To Gordon Wenham, for his faithful biblical scholarship over many years
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Preface

This book had its beginnings in a meeting of Mike Goheen and Craig Bartholomew in Birmingham, England, in the summer of 2000. Needing a text for the biblical theology course he taught, Mike approached Craig (a biblical scholar) to write one. Craig proposed that the two of them work together on the book, to keep it sensitive to biblical scholarship (Craig's strength) as well as missiology and worldview studies (Mike's focus). It has been said that if you want to ruin a friendship, you should write a book together! We're happy to report that as we have come to the end of this project we are still good friends. In fact, the project has been mutually enriching.

The Drama of Scripture is written with first-year university students in mind. It is designed as a text for an introductory course in biblical theology taught at Redeemer University College in Ancaster, Ontario, Canada. As a Christian university, Redeemer is committed to distinctively Christian scholarship that is shaped by the Bible. We want our students first to understand the true nature of Scripture: it is God's story, the true story of the world. Only when it is understood for what it is can it become the foundation for human life, including the life of the scholar. Our second goal for students is that they learn to articulate a thoroughly biblical worldview by systematically developing the most comprehensive categories of the Bible's story line: creation, sin, and redemption. This book is written to meet the first goal, sets the basis for the second goal, and quite naturally leads to it.

The Drama of Scripture tells the biblical story of redemption as a unified, coherent narrative of God's ongoing work within his kingdom. After God created the world and human rebellion marred it, God set out to restore what he had made: “God did not turn his back on a world bent
on destruction; he turned his face toward it in love. He set out on the long road of redemption to restore the lost as his people and the world as his kingdom.” The Bible narrates the story of God’s journey on that long road of redemption. It is a unified and progressively unfolding drama of God’s action in history for the salvation of the whole world. The Bible is not a mere jumble of history, poetry, lessons in morality and theology, comforting promises, guiding principles and commands; instead, it is fundamentally coherent. Every part of the Bible—each event, book, character, command, prophecy, and poem—must be understood in the context of the one story line.2

Many of us have read the Bible as if it were merely a mosaic of little bits—theological bits, moral bits, historical-critical bits, sermon bits, devotional bits. But when we read the Bible in such a fragmented way, we ignore its divine author’s intention to shape our lives through its story. All human communities live out of some story that provides a context for understanding the meaning of history and gives shape and direction to their lives. If we allow the Bible to become fragmented, it is in danger of being absorbed into whatever other story is shaping our culture, and it will thus cease to shape our lives as it should. Idolatry has twisted the dominant cultural story of the secular Western world. If as believers we allow this story (rather than the Bible) to become the foundation of our thought and action, then our lives will manifest not the truths of Scripture, but the lies of an idolatrous culture. Hence, the unity of Scripture is no minor matter: a fragmented Bible may actually produce theologically orthodox, morally upright, warmly pious idol worshippers!

If our lives are to be shaped by the story of Scripture, we need to understand two things well: the biblical story is a compelling unity on which we may depend, and each of us has a place within that story. This book is the telling of that story. We invite readers to make it their story, to find their place in it, and to indwell it as the true story of our world.

There are three important emphases in this book. First, we stress the comprehensive scope of God’s redemptive work in creation. The biblical story does not move toward the destruction of the world and our own “rescue” to heaven. Instead, it culminates in the restoration of the entire creation to its original goodness. The comprehensive scope of creation, sin, and redemption is evident throughout the biblical story and is central to a faithful biblical worldview.

Second, we emphasize the believer’s own place within the biblical story. Some refer to four questions as foundational to a biblical worldview: “Who am I?” “Where am I?” “What’s wrong?” “What’s the solution?” Tom (N. T.) Wright adds an important fifth question: “What time is it?” He thus asks us, “Where do we belong in this story? How does it shape our
lives in the present?” As part of our telling of the Bible’s grand story, we will explore the biblical answers to these five questions.

Third, we highlight the centrality of *mission* within the biblical story. The Bible narrates God’s mission to restore the creation. Israel’s mission flows from this: God chose a people to again embody God’s creational purposes for humanity and so be a light to the nations, and the Old Testament narrates the history of Israel’s response to their divine calling. Jesus comes on the scene and in his mission takes upon himself Israel’s missionary vocation. He embodies God’s purpose for humanity and accomplishes the victory over sin, opening the way to a new world. When his earthly ministry is over, he leaves his church with the mandate to continue in that same mission. In our own time, standing as we do between Pentecost and the return of Jesus, our central task as God’s people is to witness to the rule of Jesus Christ over all of life.

We have also borrowed from Tom Wright his helpful metaphor of the Bible as a drama. But whereas Wright speaks of five acts (creation, sin, Israel, Christ, church), we tell the story in terms of six acts. We add the coming of the new creation as the final, unique element of the biblical drama. We have also added a prologue. This prologue addresses in a preliminary way what it means to say that human life is shaped by a story.

If you are using this text for a course or Bible study, you can access resources on our website www.biblicaltheology.ca that will enhance your use of this book: a course syllabus, PowerPoint slides, a reading schedule for a thirteen-week course, supplementary reading, and more.

Projects of this scope and kind always involve contributions from many people besides the authors, and there are several to whom we here express our gratitude. First, we thank the many students at Redeemer University College who read the manuscript at various stages and offered critical comment, especially Elizabeth Buist, Elizabeth Klapwyk, Ian Van Leeuwen, and Dylon Nofziger. We appreciate the help Dawn Berkelaar provided in a small section of the book. For the diagrams and drawings in the book, we are grateful for Ben Goheen’s artistic talent. Fred Hughes, formerly head of the School of Theology and Religion at the University of Gloucestershire, has been supportive of this project from its inception, has read the entire manuscript of an earlier version, and has offered many helpful suggestions. He also opened up the opportunity for Mike and Craig to work together, inviting Mike as a visiting scholar to the International Centre for Biblical Interpretation at the University of Gloucestershire during the summer of 2002, when we wrote most of the manuscript. We are also thankful for the support of Redeemer University College, which from the beginning of the project has offered
support and assistance of many kinds. We are indebted to our friends and colleagues Gene Haas and Al Wolters in the Religion and Theology Department at Redeemer, and Wayne Kobes in the Theology Department at Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa. Both Gene and Wayne also teach first-year biblical theology courses and have been helpful with their advice. Al has been a mentor to both authors, and we have greatly appreciated his wise counsel and unflagging support.

In the United Kingdom Alan Dyer and Mark Birchall were always supportive of this project and made many helpful comments as they read the manuscript more than once. Sadly, about the time we handed the manuscript over to the publisher, Mark went to be with the Lord. He will be sorely missed. In South Africa Wayne Barkhuizen made helpful comments on the manuscript.

Jim Kinney, director of Baker Academic, has been very helpful and encouraging. He and some of his colleagues read an early draft and offered insightful criticism and counsel that significantly shaped the final manuscript. Undoubtedly, the one to whom we are most indebted is Doug Loney, our colleague at Redeemer, Dean of Arts and Humanities and a member of the English Department. Doug has given to this project much time and skill as a writer, taking our manuscript in its two different writing styles and turning it into what we believe to be a lively and coherent text. We also thank Doug’s wife, Karey, and Mike’s wife, Marnie, for their patience and support. We dedicate this book to our Redeemer colleagues, Doug Loney and Al Wolters, and to Gordon Wenham of the University of Gloucestershire, whose faithful work in Old Testament studies over many years has been a blessing to us both.
Prologue
The Bible as a Grand Story

Have a close look at this picture. What do you think is happening?

A fox compliments a crow: “My you have a lovely voice; won’t you sing me a song?”

What is the meaning of this event?

Figure 1 Fox and Crow
If you have a vivid imagination, you are able to concoct some story about the fox and the crow, or perhaps more than one story. But all careful readers know that unless the event sketched in this picture can be placed in the context of the story it comes from, it is hard for any reader to be sure what meaning its author (and artist) intends.

Now look at the image again, with some additional information filled in:

The crow sits perched high in a tree with a piece of meat. There is a famine in the forest and all the animals use different strategies in an attempt to get the meat. The fox compliments the crow. It opens its mouth; the meat falls out and the fox runs away with it.

Don’t be deceived by flattery!

You can understand what happens between this fox and this crow only if you have some knowledge of the whole story surrounding this episode. When it is revealed that there is a famine in the forest, and that crafty animals like the fox use all sorts of devious strategies to get hold of food, then you begin to see why the fox might be flattering the crow. First you need to know something of the beginning, the middle, and the end of a story. Only then can you understand any one episode in it. This is true not only of fictional stories like this one but also of life: we need some sense of the “big story” of the world before the meaning of any event in our lives makes sense.
This brings us to another example, a story that is perhaps closer to our own experience of life than a fable about wheedling foxes and operatic crows:

![Figure 3 Percy and Abby](image)

Percival and Abigail, a young man and woman, find themselves at the same table during an after-the-service social for newcomers to the church. Over coffee and the egg-salad sandwiches, they begin to talk of this and that. Eventually the others at their table have wandered away, and someone has rather pointedly removed their coffee cups and begun to stack chairs. But Percy and Abby barely notice these things. Each is beginning to think that it might be worthwhile to get to know this other person just a little better. So they arrange to meet again, at a quiet café, for dessert and (of course) more coffee. But their real reason for meeting there is that it’s a much better place for private conversation than that crowded church hall. (Out of respect for this young couple’s privacy, we have decided not to include another cartoon here.)

As the conversation picks up again, Abigail and Percival gradually find themselves telling each other bits and pieces of—what? Yes, of course: they begin to tell the stories of their lives. How he is the youngest of four and the only boy, spoiled rotten by three doting sisters. How she was born in New Delhi, while her parents were serving at the consulate, and spent her high school years in four different countries. Little by little, they lay down the broad strokes of the plot and begin to fill in the details: Percy’s hardly been two hundred miles from the family farm (though he longs to travel). Abby speaks four languages and can understand a couple more. His childhood holidays were spent with a boatload of cousins at his grandparents’ cottage in Muskoka. She once celebrated New Year’s Day by snorkeling in Mauri Bay (South Africa). And so on, and on, through the memories of childhood faiths and fears, first summer jobs, education plans, and hopes for the future.
The only proper answer to “Tell me about yourself” is to tell a story or a series of stories. By sharing these personal narratives, we come to know one another. We want to understand not only who that other person is now, at this moment, but also how he or she came to be so. What are the experiences, ideas, and people that have shaped their lives? Their personal stories give the context and explain much about their lives. Yet as they continue their conversation, they might ask: Are we left with our own personal stories to make sense of our lives? Or is there a true story that is bigger than both of us, through which we can understand the world and find meaning for our lives? Are our personal stories—apart or together—parts of a more comprehensive story?

In order to understand our world, to make sense of our lives, and to make our most important decisions about how we ought to be living, we depend upon some story. In fact, among some philosophers, theologians, and biblical scholars, there is growing recognition that “a story . . . is . . . the best way of talking about the way the world actually is.” Just as it is hard to make sense of the first picture without the story line, so it is with our lives’ isolated details. Percy needs to know something about Abby’s background in order to understand what is important to her. Likewise, we need a large background story if we are to understand ourselves and the world in which we find ourselves. Individual experiences make sense and acquire meaning only when seen within the context or frame of some story we believe to be the true story of the world: each episode of our life stories finds its place there.

This does not mean that every story is as important as any other. There are a great variety of stories. Some merely entertain us; others teach what is right and good or warn us of danger and evil. But there are also stories that are basic or foundational: they provide us with an understanding of our whole world and of our own place within it. Such comprehensive stories give us the meaning of universal history. These have been called “grand narratives,” “grand stories,” or “metanarratives.” Each of us (whether we’re conscious of it or not) has one. To frame and give shape and meaning to our experience of life, all of us depend upon some particular story.

Lesslie Newbigin worked as a missionary in India for many years and has written extensively about the significance of these grand narratives for understanding our lives. He draws the connection between story and understanding: “The way we understand human life depends on what conception we have of the human story. What is the real story of which my life story is part?” Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre agrees, affirming that our life decisions are shaped and ordered by our sense of how they fit within this larger context: “I can only answer the question, ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question, ‘Of what story do
I find myself a part?'" Both of these thinkers rightly assume that there is more than one basic story competing in our culture for acceptance and use in making sense of our lives today.

*Which* story a person lives out of makes a huge difference in how one interprets events in life. Take the example of divorce. Even where divorce is necessary and the right thing for a person to do, Christians will always see divorce as coming far short of the ideal that God intends for a man and a woman united in marriage. Hence, it is a tragedy. Divorce does not fit the biblical story of how our lives are meant to be lived with one another and before God. But this point of view differs sharply from that held by many people in our culture. Because of the individualism and consumerism central to the Western cultural story, divorce is often portrayed as something rather positive: no tragedy, but rather a courageous step of personal growth. We can see that these two views of divorce do not stem from a trivial disagreement. Their roots go to the foundation of the respective stories that have given the differing views their shape and substance.

While Newbigin lived and worked among the Hindus and Muslims of India, he was wrestling with the meaning of the fundamental stories shared in those cultures and of how those stories might relate to Christianity. And similarly, when he retired and returned to England, Newbigin struggled earnestly to comprehend just what life story was embodied within his own (Western, European) culture, and how it too might relate to the other comprehensive story to which he was committed—the Bible. What he came to see was that the basic story assumed in much of modern Western culture is humanistic and has its roots in the European Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The belief that human reason is the measure of all things and that “knowledge is power” permeated European society. People believed that through science and technology alone, and utterly apart from God, humankind could build a perfect world.

Newbigin adamantly maintains that this comprehensive story is unhelpful and untrue. Because it has become the foundation for human life, it also is dangerous. It is a false story, in stark contradiction to the truth of the biblical story. Ever since the Enlightenment, human thought and life in the Western world have been conforming themselves to this false view, often leading to disastrous effects. But as Alasdair MacIntyre urges us to recognize, we do have a choice. The modern Western worldview is not the only such grand story available. There is another, better, and truer way in which to see our world.

To be human means to embrace some such basic story through which we understand our world and chart our course through it. This does not mean that individuals are necessarily conscious of the story they
are living out of or of the molding effect that such a story has had on their thought and actions. For instance, many college and university students of our time are living sexually promiscuous lives. They may live this way without thinking much about why they do so. Hence, they are not at all likely to see that the story within which such conduct is approved is heavily indebted to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Sigmund Freud, and other such thinkers of past centuries. Their views of marriage and the human person underlie the changes in attitude toward sexuality that took place in the 1960s and onward.

Everyone has a basic story. How are we to relate the biblical story and the humanistic story of Western culture? In its different versions, the modern Western story has been so dominant and has so strongly asserted its right to be the story that it is often assumed that we should use it for understanding the grand narrative of Scripture. But biblical Christianity claims that the Bible alone tells the true story of our world.

Newbigin rightly discerns how much is at stake here: “The question is whether the faith that finds its focus in Jesus is the faith with which we seek to understand the whole of history, or whether we limit this faith to a private world of religion and hand over the public history of the world to other principles of explanation.” Does it really make any difference whether we use the modern Western story as the basis from which to understand the scriptural story or whether we try to understand the Western story from within the biblical story? It makes a profound difference! No building can have more than one foundation. We can have no more than one fundamental story as the basis for what we think and how we act. Once you make one story part of another, the nature of the first as “basic” is destroyed. The whole point of a basic story or grand narrative is to make sense of life as a whole, and such grand narratives cannot easily be mixed up with each other. Basic stories are in principle normative—they define starting points, ways of seeing what is true—and they are comprehensive, since they give an account of the whole. As N. T. Wright says: “The whole point of Christianity is that it offers a story which is the story of the whole world. It is public truth.”

Think, for example, of the question about what it means to be human. This is a really important issue, which all stories address. In the twenty-first century, many of us struggle with issues regarding who we are, and there is a lot at stake in getting the answer right. Again and again we hear one answer to this question from many different directions and in many voices: “You are no more than a random product of time and chance.” But this answer comes out of a story that denies the very existence of God. The answer from the biblical story is completely and utterly different, as we will see. From the Bible we learn that we are God's handiwork and the highpoint of his creation, being made in his
image. As we seek the truth about who we are, we must decide which of these basic stories is true. Clearly they cannot both be true. They offer seriously different answers to the most important questions we have, and we must choose between them.

We believe N. T. Wright is correct in saying that the Bible offers a story that is the true story of the whole world. Therefore, faith in Jesus should be the means through which a Christian seeks to understand all of life and the whole of history. This is not just because the scriptural story is comprehensive, or because it happens to be the story that we have inherited, or because it is the story that works for us. We must take the Christian story seriously in this way because it is true and tells us truthfully the story of the whole of history, beginning with the creation and ending with the new creation. This is the way the world is, and Christians should make sure that the story of the Bible is basic in their lives. But what exactly is the biblical story, and how do we grasp it?

There are numerous ways in which to encounter the Christian story. Church liturgy (whether of the free charismatic type or of the more traditional sort) reminds us constantly of the story that should shape our lives. Hymns and choruses celebrate it. The creeds rehearse it as we confess our faith in God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Sermons explain its importance to our lives from week to week. But the authoritative source for the Christian story is the Bible itself.

Orthodox Christianity has always maintained that Scripture is the norm for faith and life, the great rule and source of guidance. All of the great Christian confessions certainly say that this is so. What Christians do not always agree about is how Scripture functions to direct faith and life. Sometimes Christians have treated the Bible as if it were a systematic list of propositions like the Westminster or Belgic Confessions. But though the Bible is the ultimate source of these great documents, it clearly is not written in the same way, as a series of propositional truths, nor does it have the same purpose. Over the past few decades, one of the most exciting developments in biblical studies has been the growing recognition among some scholars that the Bible has the shape of a story, that it is "an immense, sprawling, capacious narrative." It functions as the authoritative Word of God for us when it becomes the one basic story through which we understand our own experience and thought, and the foundation upon which we base our decisions and our actions.

In other words, the Bible provides us with the basic story that we need in order to understand our world and to live in it as God's people. We know that it is one thing to confess the Bible to be the Word of God, but often quite another thing to know how to read the Bible in a way that lets it influence the whole of our lives. There can easily be a gap
between what we say we believe and how we live. If God has deliberately
given us the Bible in the shape of a story, then only as we attend to it as
story and actively appropriate it as our story will we feel the full impact
of its authority and illumination in our lives.

There thus is a lot at stake in how we understand the Bible to be
speaking to us. If we view it as a single unfolding story, it can be
tremendously exciting. Such a story invites us—compels us—to get
involved. Think again here of Abby and Percy, two young people telling
each other their personal narratives to see if there might be room for
each of them within the other’s life story. If things work out for these
two, they will discover a greater and more basic story. Their lives as
individuals will take on new significance as parts of one whole life
lived together in God’s story. As we enter deeply into the story of the
Bible, God will be revealed to us. We will also find ourselves called to
share in the mission of God and his purposes with the creation. In this
book our aim is to attend closely to the Bible as an unfolding story
and to see what such a reading of the Bible yields. After all, the Bible
claims to be nothing less than God’s own true story of our world, and
it calls us to appropriate this story for ourselves.

Is the Bible a Single Unfolding Story?

You may have heard the old Hindu fable in which six blind men
encounter an elephant for the first time. Each takes his turn in dif-
ferently describing it to the others: the beast is like a wall, a snake,
a spear, a fan, a rope, or a tree. Though there is only one elephant,
each man has a completely different experience of it, depending on
whether he happened to approach the beast by touching its side, trunk,
tusk, ear, tail, or leg. The story reminds us that it is often difficult
to be sure that our isolated experience has given us the complete
picture of anything complicated. Trying to grasp the overall scope
and shape of the Bible can be a bit like that. Depending on where
we first touch the Scriptures, it may not be immediately apparent
that the whole of it has the shape of a story. Thus, the reader who
dips into the New Testament at 1 Corinthians finds herself reading a
letter from a missionary to a struggling young church and wonder-
ing, How is this a part of the grand story? Or take the poetry of the
Psalms or the fantastic images in Revelation: Where and how do they
fit in the grand story?

It may be helpful to think of the Bible—as large and varied a book
as it obviously is—not as if it were an elephant, but something bigger
still: a huge building, a cathedral.

Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, The Drama of Scripture
If you have ever visited one of these magnificent churches, like the National Cathedral in Washington (D.C.), Notre Dame in Montreal (or its more famous older sister in Paris), or St. Paul’s in London, you know that you can spend days exploring one of them. There are many different angles from which one can approach a cathedral. Inside are fascinating side chapels and main chapels to explore, full of stained glass, paintings, statuary, and other treasures. What at first seems to be one huge room turns out to be a multitude of rooms and corridors, towers and balconies, stairs and hidden passages. And this is only what the public sees. If you secure permission from the dean, the head of the cathedral, to explore the whole of the great church, you discover all sorts of additional ways in and out of the building and many different vantage points from which to see it.

Imagine that the Bible, with its sixty-six books, written by dozens of human authors over the course of more than a thousand years, is a grand cathedral with many rooms and levels and a variety of entrances. You can, for example, enter the Bible through one of the Gospels. Indeed, many people are encouraged to start reading the Bible with the Gospel of Mark or the Gospel of John. Many Christians begin to explore the Old Testament relatively late in their journey of faith. Few find themselves drawn again and again to the genealogies at the start of Chronicles or the long lists of dietary laws in Leviticus.

If you want to gather a sense of the cathedral as a whole, you face an important question: Where is the main entrance, the place from which...
you can orient yourself to the whole? A traditional cathedral usually has a main entrance through the west door, from which one can look down the long nave to the eastern end of the building, where the altar stands. In the West such churches were always built with the altar eastward, toward Jerusalem (which originated the word “oriented,” now also more generally meaning “given a sense of direction”). The “cathedral” of the Bible has many themes. People have proposed various overarching themes of the Bible, and these are different doors from which we can gain a perspective on God’s whole stunning revelation.

In our opinion, “covenant” (in the Old Testament) and “the kingdom of God” (in the New Testament) present a strong claim to be the main door through which we can begin to enter the Bible and to see it as one whole and vast structure. In the Old Testament, God establishes a covenant with Noah, Abraham, Israel, and King David; in Jeremiah, God speaks of a new covenant that he will make in the future. In the Gospels, it is clear that the main theme in Jesus’ extensive teaching ministry is the kingdom of God. Mark (1:14–15) thus sums up Jesus’ ministry: “After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. ‘The time has come,’ he said. ‘The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!’ ” Taking covenant and kingdom to be the main entrance into the Bible does not deny that there are other entrances. Readers have suggested many other entrances as the best ones from which to gain a view of the whole: entrances such as “promise” and “presence.” All these are helpful, but they are a bit like side chapels or side entrances rather than the main entrance. We certainly glimpse a view of the cathedral from them, but we do not gather that same overview of the whole that we obtain from covenant and kingdom.

You may ask, Are covenant and kingdom the same entrance or two different ones? This is an important question. The kingdom of God, as we explain below, is all about the reign of God over his people and eventually over all of creation. Covenant is particularly about the special relationship that God makes with his people as he works out his plans in history. In fact, covenants were relationships established by kings with their subject peoples. When God’s people enter into a covenant relationship with him, they are obligated to be his subject people and to live under his reign. As we soon see, covenant also insists that we take seriously God’s purposes with the whole of creation. Thus, covenant and kingdom are like two sides of the same coin, evoking the same reality in slightly different ways.

After all our study, we find covenant and kingdom to be the double door of the same main entrance to the scriptural cathedral, evoking the same reality. That is why we have used “kingdom” to structure this book. Both alert us to God as the great king over all, who wants
to have a people living under his reign and spreading the fragrance of
his presence all over his creation. Both also alert us to the fact that this
has always been God’s plan from the beginning, but that things went
badly wrong. Now God is doing remedial work to restore his project
and pursue his original and persistent intentions. In the covenants
of the Old Testament, the focus is narrowly upon Israel and yet always for
Israel to be a light to the nations. In the New Testament, “the kingdom
of God” clearly has all the nations and the whole creation in view. Either
way, as we enter the Bible through this main double door, covenant
and kingdom alert us to the importance of the story line of the Bible.
It starts with creation and moves on from there. This entrance gives us
the right perspective for understanding what God is up to and what he
is saying to us today.

We may not start reading the Bible in Genesis, and we may hardly
ever spend loads of time in the genealogies of Chronicles and the laws
of Leviticus and Numbers. But if we enter the Bible through covenant
and kingdom, we soon find ourselves asking questions like these:

How does God’s covenant with Abraham relate to his purposes for
his whole creation?
If Jesus is our king, what about the rest of creation?
If this is God’s world, what went wrong with it? How come he lost
control over it?
How does the church fit in to God’s kingdom purposes for his whole
creation?

The only way to answer these questions is to go back to the beginning
of the Bible and read the story as it unfolds in its various acts, starting
with “In the beginning . . .” And that is what we are going to do in this
book. So yes, provided we do not understand the matter simplistically,
the Bible certainly is a single unfolding story. And in this book we are
going to tell that story.

The Biblical Drama

In the second century BC the dramatist Terence began writing plays
in five distinct “acts” for performance in Roman theatres. Ever since,
the Western tradition of dramatic storytelling has come to acknowledge
this five-act structure as particularly suited to the careful unfolding of a
long and important story. The five acts are generally organized this way:
(1) The first act gives us essential background information, introduces
the important characters, and establishes the stable situation that will be disrupted by the events about to unfold. (2) The first action begins, usually with the introduction of a significant conflict. The middle of the play (3) is where the main action of the drama takes place. Here the initial conflict intensifies and grows ever more complicated until (4) the climax, or the point of highest tension, after which that conflict must be resolved, one way or another. After the climax comes (5) the resolution, in which the implications of the climactic act are worked out for all the characters of the drama, and stability is restored.

This is the structure that Wright has in mind when he describes the biblical story as being like a five-act play, of which a large part of the fifth act is missing. It is for the actors (us) to improvise a suitable second scene in act 5, preparing for the conclusion God has revealed, toward which our play must move.

Wright’s application of the five-act structure of drama to the dramatic story of the Bible is enormously helpful, and that is why we have (mostly) adopted that structure for our own retelling of the biblical story. Act 1, which you are about to read, gives essential information about God, humanity, and the world. It describes a stable situation, a very good creation. The human actors begin their work in the garden, and history begins. In act 2 the conflict is introduced as we encounter a mysterious enemy to God’s plan. Here the fundamental problem in our world has its origin. In act 3, the conflict (between human sin and God’s good purposes for the creation) intensifies and complications arise. Act 4 is the story of how the history of God’s gracious dealings with his rebellious creatures comes to a climax in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In act 5 we see the implications of Christ’s great act of redemption worked out in the lives of his community.

And here is where, in this book, we depart from the five-act tradition (and from Wright’s model). It is clear that the biblical story does not simply end at the conclusion of the fifth act. Nor is the outworking of act 5 a smooth resolution. While the resolution has taken place in Christ, the conflict continues and actually intensifies. God’s purpose is nothing less than to reconcile the whole of creation to himself, a purpose accomplished once and for all in the death and resurrection of his Son some two thousand years ago. We have God’s own tremendous promise that his grand purpose for his creation is ongoing and not yet finished in our world. There is much more to come in God’s story. He has prepared another act, which is yet to be revealed, an act unlike anything we have seen or imagined thus far, and upon which the curtain of history will never close. So we have included this act 6 in our telling of the biblical story. Using the kingdom of God as our overarching theme...
Prologue

and the six-act structure, we have identified the following main acts in the biblical drama:

Act 1  God Establishes His Kingdom: Creation
Act 2  Rebellion in the Kingdom: Fall
Act 3  The King Chooses Israel: Redemption Initiated
    Scene 1  A People for the King
    Scene 2  A Land for His People
Interlude  A Kingdom Story Waiting for an Ending: The Intertestamental Period
Act 4  The Coming of the King: Redemption Accomplished
Act 5  Spreading the News of the King: The Mission of the Church
    Scene 1  From Jerusalem to Rome
    Scene 2  And into All the World
Act 6  The Return of the King: Redemption Completed
The first five books of the Bible are called the Torah or Law of Moses. Though this does not necessarily mean that Moses wrote every word, most of it came through him, and he is certainly the central figure in the story they tell. The second book, Exodus, tells of Moses' birth and his emergence as the leader through whom God works to bring the Israelites out of Egypt. After that, Moses is in almost every chapter till the end of Deuteronomy. But that accounts for only four of the five books. Where did the first one come from, and why is it included as part of the Law of Moses when it tells a story that happened long before Moses himself was born?

Who Is the “LORD God”?  

It probably doesn’t matter too much to you that “Michael” is a Hebrew name meaning “(He) who is like God” or that “Craig” is a Gaelic word that means “a rocky outcrop.” In our culture, though names are important, we do not often attach special meaning to them. But in the Old Testament world we are preparing to visit in act 1, the meaning of names is often quite significant. And no names are more important than those identifying God in Genesis and the other Old Testament books.

Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, The Drama of Scripture  
In Genesis 1, the Hebrew word *Elohim* (translated simply as “God” in our English Bibles) is the general name for God used throughout the ancient Near East. And the Bible says that “God” brings the whole creation into existence out of nothing. But in Genesis 2:4, another name begins to be used. “God” is now called “the Lord God” (*Yahweh Elohim*). This is a highly unusual way of referring to God, and it is meant to reveal some important things about who he is.

Two key passages in the Old Testament (Exodus 3; 6:1–12) shed light on the mysterious name *Yahweh* (or *Jehovah*, as in some older versions of the Bible). These texts tell how God reveals himself to Moses as Yahweh when he calls Moses to lead the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. The name *Yahweh* is the title God chooses to identify himself as the divine Redeemer, the God who rescues his people from slavery and meets with them at Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:4).

When the names *Yahweh* (Lord) and *Elohim* (God) are joined as in Genesis 2:4, it makes the powerful point that the same God who rescues Israel from slavery is the God who has made all things, the Creator of heaven and earth. “Yahweh, the God of the Hebrews, is also the God of all the earth over which his lordship shines forth through the hail and thunder.” The Israelites first come to know God (through Moses) as their Redeemer; only afterward do they learn of his role as the Creator. And it is not so different for us, even though we live so much further along in the biblical story. When we come to know God through the saving work of his Son, Jesus, we are meeting him first as our Savior and Redeemer—but God is still the Creator of all that was or is or shall be: He is the one eternal Lord God, Yahweh Elohim. Thus, the minute we start to witness to our faith and to tell the Christian story (rather than just our own personal story), we are inevitably driven back to the start of it all: the Creation itself. “In the beginning, God . . .”

**A Faith for Israel**

The first scene of any story is worth paying attention to, and the first scene of the biblical story is no exception. The first chapters of Genesis, telling the story of creation, were written for the Israelites long ago in a culture quite different from ours. Though some aspects of the creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2 may seem strange to us, we need to remember that they made perfect sense to the people of Israel when they first heard them. This is so because the writer is using imagery and concepts familiar to his own audience. Once we read the first chapters of Genesis against the backdrop of the ancient world in which they were written, we begin to see the power of the message this story is meant to convey.
Several scholars have pointed out a strong polemical or argumentative aspect to Genesis 1 and 2. The ancient Near East had many competing accounts of how the world came into existence. These stories were common in Egypt when Israel was captive there and in Canaan when Israel began to take it over as its land. It would have been only too easy for the Israelites to adopt the stories of those who lived in the land before them or alongside them and who (after all) supposedly knew the land much better than they did themselves. Many of the gods worshipped by the Canaanites were closely associated with the fertility of the land. The newcomers struggling to learn how to farm there would be tempted to call out to these “gods” rather than to the LORD God.

We know quite a bit about the sort of creation stories circulating in the ancient world. It is fascinating to see how the story told in Genesis 1 and 2 deliberately contradicts certain important elements of them. For example, look at how Genesis 1:16 describes the sun and the moon. The text does not refer to the sun by its normal Hebrew name, but instead merely as “the greater light,” which God made for the day. Similarly, it calls the moon “the lesser light.” Why? Probably because the sun and moon were so often worshipped as gods by the people among whom the Israelites were now living. In the Genesis story readers cannot mistake the sun as a divinity to be worshipped. The Scripture clearly describes the sun as a created thing, an object placed in the heavens for the simple, practical purpose of giving light. The attention is thus all on the One who has created this marvelous light, the One whose power is so great that he can merely say a word, and an entire universe springs into being. No mere “light” in the heavens deserves to be bowed down to. God alone is divine; he alone is to be worshipped. Though the whole of creation is “very good” (Genesis 1:31), it is so because the One who has created it is infinitely superior to anything he has made.

And this transcendent Creator is not like the capricious gods described in the Babylonian creation story (the Enuma Elish), who make humankind merely to serve as the gods’ servants, to wait on them and keep them happy. In Genesis, the God who creates the world sets men and women within it as the crowning touch on what he has brought into being. The creation itself is described as a marvelous home prepared for humankind, a place in which they may live and thrive and enjoy the intimate presence and companionship of the Creator himself.

What Kind of Literature Is Genesis 1?

The creation stories of Genesis thus are argumentative. They claim to tell the truth about the world, flatly contradicting other such stories
commonplace in the ancient world. Israel was constantly tempted to adopt these other stories as the basis of its worldview, in place of faith in the LORD God, who created the heavens and the earth. However, the Genesis creation narrative is more than a polemic. It also aims to teach us positively what faith in God means for how we think about the world he has made and how we live in it. It does this in a story form. And it is precisely this story form that we need to be sensitive to if we are not to misinterpret it.

In order to understand the Genesis story of creation, we must understand something about the kind of writing it is. Scholars themselves have difficulty in describing this. Von Rad sees it as “priestly doctrine” so rich in meaning that “it cannot be easily over-interpreted theologically.”\(^5\) Blocher sees the creation account as an example of carefully crafted wisdom literature.\(^6\) But what scholars do agree on is that the story told in the first chapters of Genesis has been very carefully put together: the evidence of craftsmanship in the telling is clear. Hence, we need to focus as much on the way in which the story is told as upon the details themselves and weigh whether or not these details are meant to be read as a modern historian or scientist would read them. Indeed, this is a difficult question: the story told here is of the mysterious inauguration of history itself. But the broad outlines of the Genesis story are certainly as clear to us as they were to those who first heard it. God is the divine source of all that is. He stands apart from all other things in the special relationship of Creator to creation. The fashioning of humankind by God was intended to be the high point of all his work of making and forming. And God had in mind a very special relationship between himself and this last-formed of all his creatures.

In these chapters we are told the story of creation but not to satisfy our twenty-first-century curiosity concerning the details of how God made the world. For example, we wonder whether God created over a long period of time or caused all that he made to spring into existence instantly. The Genesis story is, however, given so that we might have a true understanding of the world in which we live, of its divine author, and of our own place in it. As John Stek rightly says of the creation accounts in Genesis:

Moses’ . . . intent was to proclaim knowledge of the true God as he manifested himself in his creative works, to proclaim a right understanding of humankind, the world, and history that knowledge of the true God entails—and to proclaim the truth concerning these matters in the face of the false religious notions dominant throughout the world of his day.\(^7\)
Over against pagan religious notions dominant in Egypt and Canaan, Genesis 1 proclaims the truth about God, about humankind, and about the world. When contrasted with the ancient Near Eastern myths, the portrait of God, humanity, and the world becomes clear. This opening act introduces us to the main actors in the play—God and humanity—and the world in which the historical drama will unfold.

### Pagan myths versus Genesis 1

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**Figure 5 Pagan Myths versus Genesis 1**

**The God Who Brings All Things into Being**

Reading the first chapter of Genesis is a bit like what might happen to you at a really great art exhibition. Suppose you are sitting quietly, overwhelmed by the beauty and power of the magnificent paintings. Then someone approaches you and says, “How would you like to meet the artist?” Genesis 1 is an introduction to the Artist. And what an introduction it is! The first three words of the Hebrew Bible may be translated: (1) “in the beginning,” (2) “[he] created,” (3) “God” (acting subject). In three short Hebrew words, we are transported back to the origin of everything, to the mysterious, personal Source of all that is: the eternal, uncreated God. This God, who himself has no beginning and no end, merely speaks a word of command in order to bring into being everything else that exists.

The idea of creation by the word preserves first of all the most radical distinction between Creator and creature. Creation cannot be even remotely considered an emanation from God. It is not somehow an overflow of his being, his divine nature. Instead, it is a product of his personal will. The only continuity between God and his work is his word.

Genesis 1 introduces us to God as the infinite, eternal, uncreated person who by his creative actions brings the whole of creation into existence. The “heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1) refers to the whole of creation. Light and darkness, day and night, sea and sky and land, plants, animals and humankind—all come from this God, from his powerful and good activity of creation. As von Rad says, “The idea of
creation by the word expresses the knowledge that the whole world belongs to God.”

This is truly one of the points through which logic can barely wade, whereas faith can swim. “The place where the Bible begins is one where our own most impassioned waves of thinking break, are thrown back upon themselves, and lose their strength in spray and foam.” In the book of Revelation, one of the great causes for continual worship of God is his work in creation:

You are worthy, our Lord and God,  
to receive glory and honor and power,  
for you created all things,  
and by your will they were created  
and have their being. (Revelation 4:11)  

This hymn of praise in the last book of the Bible is set in the very throne room of heaven. This is appropriate because it echoes a truth about God implied from the beginning of the creation account in Genesis. By causing the creation to come into being by his word of power, God establishes it as his own vast kingdom. He thus establishes himself as the great King over all creation, without limits of any kind, and worthy to receive all glory, honor, and power in the worship of what he has created.

In the ancient Near East people knew all about authority. Among them, the power of even tribal or national rulers was nearly absolute. And in a variety of ways in Genesis 1, God is pictured as the Monarch, the royal one whose sovereignty extends by right and by power over the whole of his creation. The lightest word of a mortal king in the ancient world was to be understood as a command by anyone who heard it. But this immortal King speaks, and by his divine command the whole of creation springs into existence exactly as he intends. As God creates, he names what he creates, and this again is an expression of his sovereignty. “The act of giving a name meant, above all, the exercise of a sovereign right. . . . Thus the naming of this and all subsequent creative works once more expresses graphically God’s claim of lordship over the creatures.”

In Genesis 1, God’s word of command, the repeated phrase “Let there be . . . ,” brings into existence a creation characterized by precision, order, and harmony:

Just as God is the One who sets time in motion and set up the climate, he is likewise responsible for setting up all other aspects of human existence. The availability of water and the ability of the land to grow vegetation; the laws of agriculture and the seasonal cycles; each of God’s creatures,
created with a role to play—all of this was ordered by God and was good, not tyrannical or threatening.¹¹

God’s creation is “good,” and this creaturely goodness merely highlights the Creator’s own incomparable goodness, wisdom, and justice. He alone is the wise King over the great kingdom of all that is.

As King, however, God does not hold himself distant from his creation. He is not the sort of monarch who rules from afar and takes no interest in his territories or his subjects. Having built his kingdom, God reigns over it in a deeply personal way. Genesis 1 and 2 portray God as highly relational. He speaks, not only to give commands, but also to express his own involvement in the making of the cosmos. There is the mysterious phrase “Let us . . .” in Genesis 1:26 (which we take to be God addressing the heavenly council of angels). This draws attention to God’s personhood and his will that there should be other entities distinct from (and yet related to) himself.¹² But most dramatically, when God creates humankind, he blesses them and speaks to them directly: “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it” (Genesis 1:28). There is a personal relationship between the divine King and his human subjects. God has a particular task and invites them to participate in it with him, filling and ordering the world, which he has given them for their home. The personal character of God is shown even more clearly in Genesis 2 and 3. The LORD God (Yahweh Elohim) walks in the garden with Adam and Eve and shows the most intimate, personal concern for them, their needs, and their responsibilities.

Humankind as God’s Image

The highpoint of the Genesis story of creation is the making of humankind (1:26–28). In the Bible, a man or woman is a creature designed and made by God as part of God’s world. However we relate God’s activity of creation to scientific theories,¹³ if we are faithful to what the Bible has to say about who we are, we cannot think of ourselves as merely the random products of time and chance (as do advocates of atheistic evolution). Humankind is creaturely, and according to Genesis (and the rest of the Bible), each human being is a special creature at that.

In Genesis 1 and 2 the teaching about humankind is rich and manifold. Unique among the creatures, which God creates, humankind is personal. God addresses only the man and woman: they enjoy a uniquely personal relationship with God. As Augustine observed long ago in his Confessions, we are made for God, and our hearts are restless until we find our rest in him.¹⁴ This relationship between the creating God and

Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, The Drama of Scripture
his human creatures is stunningly evoked in Genesis 3:8. God is in the habit of “walking in the garden in the cool of the day” and meeting with the man and woman he has put there. Gordon Wenham has observed how Genesis portrays the garden in terms reminiscent of the tabernacle, in which God lives amid his people.¹⁵ Men and women are made for intimate relationship with God, and our earthiness is no obstacle to that relationship. God walks regularly with Adam and Eve in the huge garden he has set aside for them. He discusses with them how this great park is developing, how its plants are growing under their care, and how the animals are getting along.

Modern scholars often refer to two creation stories in Genesis, seeing a distinction between what is told in 1:1–2:4a, and 2:4b–25. This is a bit misleading. Although these two sections are distinct, they are closely related. Genesis 1 looks at humankind in its relationship to the world. Genesis 2 focuses on the man and the woman in their relationships to one another and to God. The two passages use different images and metaphors because they are bringing into focus different aspects of what it means to be human.

In Genesis 1:26–28 God creates humankind in his image, in his likeness. Note that the words “image” and “likeness” make the same point. Though God is the infinite Creator and the humanity merely his finite creation, there is something fundamentally similar between them. “Image” is a metaphor. As we unpack it, we need to bear in mind that its function as a metaphor is to draw our attention to a striking similarity between humans and God while not for a moment denying that we are radically different from God. Earlier we recognized that God as Creator is radically different from everything he has created—including ourselves. But if humankind is created “in God’s image,” then in some way we are like the One who created us. This likeness is clarified in the verses that follow.

In Genesis 1:26, God says, “Let us make man in our image, . . . and let them rule . . . over all the earth.” He then says to the human beings he has created, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over . . .” (1:28). From this it should be clear that the fundamental similarity between God and humanity is humankind’s unique vocation, its calling or commissioning by God himself. Under God, humanity is to rule over the nonhuman parts of creation on land and in sea and air, much as God is the supreme ruler over all. As von Rad explains:

Just as powerful earthly kings, to indicate their claim to dominion, erect an image of themselves in the provinces of their empire where they do not personally appear; so man is placed upon earth in God’s image as God’s
souvern emblem. He is really only God's representative, summoned to
maintain and enforce God's claim to dominion over the earth. The deci-
sive thing about man's similarity to God, therefore, is his function in the
nonhuman world.\textsuperscript{16}

In God's kingdom, which he has set up by creating it, the special role he
has assigned to humanity is that we should serve as his "under-kings,"
vice-regents, or stewards. We are to rule over the creation so that God's
reputation is enhanced within his cosmic kingdom.

Genesis 1:26–28 has become notorious in some environmentalist
circles because of Lynn White's argument that this teaching has been
used to justify much of the environmental destruction characterizing the
modern world.\textsuperscript{17} This passage does understand humankind's vocation as
one of rule or dominion, but it is incorrect to read it as legitimizing a
ruthless mastery over nature and exploitation of it. In God's own crea-
tive work, he acts for the good of what he has made and not for his own
selfish pleasure. For example, he creates a perfect home for humankind.
And at every point in God's work within it, the creation is described as
"good" and "very good." Over this good creation, God calls the human
"ruler" to serve as steward or under-sovereign, to embody God's own
care for, and protection of, his good creation in his own sovereign rule
over the earth. Psalm 8:6 expresses this wonderfully: the glory of human
beings is that God has made them "ruler over the works of [his] hands."
It is impossible to read this as suggesting that humans are free to do
what they like with God's workmanship. Above all things, the human
caretakers are accountable to the divine Creator of the world entrusted
to their care.

To be human means to have huge freedom and responsibility, to
respond to God and to be held accountable for that response. Thus, a
better way of expressing the concept of humankind's "dominion" over
creation may be to say that we are God's royal stewards, put here to
develop the hidden potentials in God's creation so that the whole of it
may celebrate his glory.

Imagine that you are a fifteenth-century sculptor and one day receive
an email from Michelangelo asking if you would be willing to come to
his studio to complete a piece of work he has begun. He mentions that
you are expected to continue his work in such a way that Michelangelo's
own reputation will be enhanced by the finished product! God's call to
us to "have dominion" over his creation entails this sort of compliment
to what we are capable of achieving as his stewards. It also brings a
correspondingly heavy responsibility for what comes out of our steward-
ship. If this is what being "in the image of God" involves, then clearly
our service for God is to be as wide as the creation itself and will in-
clude taking good care of the environment. The passage that begins in Genesis 1:26 is often helpfully referred to as the “cultural or creation mandate.” It enjoins us to bring every type of cultural activity within the service of God. Indeed, there is a dynamic element to “the image of God.” God himself is revealed or “imaged” in his creation precisely as we are busy within the creation, developing its hidden potentials in agriculture, art, music, commerce, politics, scholarship, family life, church, leisure, and so on, in ways that honor God. As we take God’s creative commands of “Let there be...” and develop the potentials in them, we continue to spread the fragrance of his presence throughout the world he has made.

Genesis 1 describes humankind not as tyrants exploiting the earth, but as stewards ruling coram deo, before the presence of God. The nature of our relationship with God is expressed in how we look after his good creation. And we do this not merely as individuals, but as partners.

In Genesis 1, humans are made “male and female.” A gender distinction is built into creation so that God’s image bearers are always male or female, man or woman. That is, we always stand in relationship to one another, as well as in relationship to God. None of us can be fully human on our own: we are always in a variety of relationships. Humans are made for God. Genesis 2 focuses more closely on this and the other relationships in which humans live out their lives by virtue of the way God has made the world. Genesis 2:18–25 tells the story of God’s creation of Eve as a suitable helper and companion for Adam, illustrating once again the special nature of God’s love for his creatures. God expresses his love by providing what is best for the human persons themselves. Adam’s rule over the earth is embodied in his naming of the animals: just as (in Genesis 1) God named the creation as he formed it, so here Adam is permitted to name the animals God has made. Adam thus has one relationship to God and another to the animal world. But Adam is also made for human companionship. This is expressed at the deepest level in his relationship of marriage with Eve, a union whose intimacy is captured in the observation that these two individuals become “one flesh” (2:24).

Adam and Eve’s call to rule the creation manifests itself in Genesis 2 in their responsibility to work in the garden and care for it (2:15). From the description given in Genesis 2:8–14, this “garden” is more like a major national park than one of our household gardens. It is large, with rivers running through it and lots of trees and animals. Adam and Eve thus are the first farmers and conservation officers. Once more we see that to be human is to be in relationship in some way to the creation, as one who works within it, explores its potential, and cares for it. Humans are made for God, and also for one another and for the creation, to be
God Establishes His Kingdom

at work within it. According to Psalm 8, it is our glory to work and so to present the image of God.

The different relationships in which Genesis 1 and 2 envisage humankind can be shown as follows:

Figure 6  A Biblical Understanding of Humanity

The World as God’s Kingdom

Though Christianity has often been accused of being otherworldly, it should be clear by now that the beginning of the biblical story does not encourage anyone to feel detached from, or somehow superior to, this world of space and time and matter. The Bible depicts this created, material world as the very theater of God’s glory, the kingdom over which he reigns. These early chapters of Genesis are very positive about the world. Though it is created (and therefore must never be put on the same level as the uncreated God), it is always described as “good.” Through Genesis 1 the repetition of the word “good” is a reminder that the whole creation comes from God and that in its initial state it beautifully reflects his own design and plan for it. Creation has great diversity: light and darkness, land and sea, rivers and minerals, plants, animals, birds and fish, human beings both male and female. This bounty is part of God’s intention, suggesting a marvelous harmony of created things. Like an orchestra, it produces a symphony of praise to the Creator. There is an order to this diversity; God’s creative word gives it structure.
Genesis also reveals our world as existing within time. God is the one who creates the day and the night, and he names them. In these early chapters little is said about how God intends his creation to develop through time, but clearly he intends for development within what he has made. The man and the woman are to produce children from their one-flesh union, and these future generations will spread out to subdue the earth. The story of Genesis 2:4 begins with the phrase, “This is the account of the heavens and earth . . . ,” suggesting that history is an integral part of creation.¹⁸ The work of Adam and Eve in the marvelous park made by God marks the beginning of a long process by which their children and their descendants are to develop the riches of the creation. Adam and Eve's royal stewardship of Eden is to be a small version of what God intends to happen to the whole creation as history unfolds.