

IS NOW BONE OF ME
“LET US EAT OF THE FRUIT . . .” -THE SERPENT
“WE MAY EAT OF THE FRUIT . . .” -EVE
“HOW NOT AM I MY BROTHER?” -CAIN
“HOW THOU THOU ART A FAIR WOMAN TO LOOK UP
THE LORD HATH RESTRAINED ME FROM BEARING
HOLD THE FIRE AND THE WOOD BUT WHERE IS
“I WILL GO” -REBEKAH
ME, I RAISE THEE WITH THAT SAME RED POTTAG
“SEE ME THIS DAY BY BIRKRIGHT” -JACOB
THE LORD HATH LOCKED UP MY AFFLICTION
“CHILDREN, OR ELSE I DIE.” -RABBI
“THIS DREAM . . .”

FIRST WORDS FITLY SPOKEN



EDITED BY
CHRIS PARIS AND
H. EVERETT GOSSARD

CONTENTS

FIRST WORDS.....	vii
1 GOD.....	1
2 ADAM.....	7
3 THE SERPENT.....	17
4 EVE.....	23
5 THE MOTIF OF SIBLING RIVALRY.....	29
6 CAIN.....	37
7 ABEL.....	43
8 THE FIRST WORDS OF WORSHIP.....	49
9 UNIVERSAL ETHICS AND THE NOAHIDE LAWS.....	57
10 ABRAM ABRAHAM.....	65
11 MELCHIZEDEK.....	73
12 SARAI.....	81
13 HAGAR.....	91
14 LOT.....	97
15 ABIMELECH.....	103
16 ISHMAEL.....	111

17 ISAAC.....	117
18 THE BETROTHAL TYPE SCENE.....	123
19 ABRAHAM'S MOST TRUSTED SERVANT	131
20 LABAN	137
21 REBEKAH	145
22 ESAU	151
23 JACOB ISRAEL	159
24 RACHEL	167
25 DINAH	171
26 JOSEPH	179
27 JUDAH	187
28 THE GENESIS OF LEADERSHIP	195
29 THE GARMENT MOTIF	203
LAST WORDS.....	211
NOTES.....	215
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	227
CONTRIBUTORS	235

1

GOD

“Let there be light”

Genesis 1:3

David P. Johnson

God is the first character who speaks in Genesis. He uttered two simple words: “*yehi owr*” (“Let there be light,” Genesis 1:3). As this volume’s introduction mentions, Robert Alter noted, “the first reported speech of a character is the defining moment of characterization.”¹ If this narrative-critical observation holds true for God in Genesis, then we should expect God’s opening statement to tell us something important about His nature and role within the book and beyond.

Genesis 1:2 describes the circumstances into which God spoke. God’s creative command exploded into chaos and darkness. As God continued to speak, He distinguished day from night (Genesis 1:4–5). Thus, in the single act of bringing light into preexistent darkness, God introduced order and regularity where before there was obscurity and confusion. But why start in this way? Why light?

If one wishes to appreciate light, it is useful to contemplate a world without it. For human beings, a lightless world would be a nightmare. In complete darkness, avoiding a low hanging branch, estimating the growth of a young wheat crop, cooking a meal over a campfire, gathering a pint of blackberries, and countless other routine tasks become extremely difficult. Humans have long depended on light for navigation, agriculture, communication, danger avoidance, and other activities that ensure long-term survival. Without it, most of us would be quite helpless.

In this connection, many of Jesus’ down-to-earth illustrations in the Gospels would have been meaningless if His popular hearers had not been able to see and learn about the world of nature. The seeds falling into the ground with various results given different kinds of soil, the fallen sparrow, the wild lily, the sheep stuck in a ditch: all of these images called to mind the past experiences of Jesus’ audiences—experiences including significant visual stimuli.

Without light, there is no efficient and effective way to distinguish differences in the natural world. Scientific inquiry without the aid of light would be unimaginably difficult and

severely limited in scope and potential. Genesis begins with God supplying humanity with an essential ingredient for observing and learning about the natural world. It seems a reasonable supposition, then, that God intends for humans to engage in just that kind of discovery.

And yet, as we learn about the creation and as we pursue knowledge and truth, we must bear in mind that we depend on the Creator to light our way. Human reasoning can only take us so far. To apprehend ultimate truth, including saving knowledge of God and His purposes for humanity, we require divine revelation. God has provided this revelation to us through His Word, in the Incarnation, and by means of the Holy Spirit’s ongoing guidance.

Within the context of the creation account, God fills the earth with natural light. The light of the sun allows humans to see the pines and alders, warblers and ostriches, leopards and elephants, roses and lilies, the moon, the stars, and one another. And yet as Genesis continues, the character of God is not developed as a provider of natural light, but as a revealer of spiritual light. The provision of natural light in Genesis 1 foreshadows the way God will reveal to the book’s human characters how to please Him, how to avoid judgment, how to fulfill their roles within His larger plan, how to obtain promised future blessings, and even insights regarding His identity and character. This phenomenon is demonstrated well by God’s words and their functions in Genesis.

Unlike the capricious and whimsical deities of much ancient Near Eastern literature, the God of Genesis does not leave humans in the dark as to His requirements for them or remain indifferent to their suffering. God is shown to delight in humans and desire their well-being.² On the other hand, He will not condone evil.³

Divine instruction and warning precede and often prevent human failure and resulting hardship or punishment throughout the book. God warned Adam and Eve not to eat from the forbidden tree (Genesis 2:17). He preserved

Noah and his family by revealing His plans to flood the earth and for allowing time for the ark to be constructed (Genesis 6:13–18). As the eight humans left the ark, God clarified His moral expectations for them, and by extension their descendants (Genesis 8:15–9:17). Abimelech received a warning in a dream to prevent him from sinning unknowingly (Genesis 20:3–7). In another dream, God enjoined Laban not to interfere with Jacob's intentions, implying that to oppose Jacob would be to oppose God (Genesis 31:24). Joseph's interpretation of Pharaoh's dreams prevented much human suffering during an extended famine.

God spoke directly to many of the human characters in the book, clarifying His intentions for their individual lives. He called Abram to leave behind his ancestral heritage and journey to a new land, and God promised to give him many descendants, to bless him, and to make him a blessing to all the peoples of the earth (Genesis 12:1–3). God reiterated this promise to Abram on several occasions and established a covenant with him.⁴ The divine covenant and promises were renewed when God spoke to Abraham's son Isaac, and grandson Jacob.⁵ Just before his death, Joseph recalled God's promises to his forebears and claimed their continued effectiveness for his descendants in future times (Genesis 50:24–25). As the book unfolds, it becomes clear how God uses individual acts of faith and obedience to accomplish His long-term plan. As the one who guides the progression of history itself, God can even overcome disobedience and evil to bring about good outcomes (Genesis 50:20).

The way God enlightens the characters of Genesis is analogous to the way He has revealed truth to humanity throughout history. Indeed, the Book of Genesis itself, like the entire Canon, serves to light our paths as we follow God in the twenty-first century. (See Psalm 119:105.) The stories of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, and Noah convey to us God's truth and encourage us in our walks of faith (Romans 15:4).

It is appropriate that God’s first words in Scripture establish that in our world He plays the role of Light Giver.

Nowadays the content of the Old Testament (sometimes referred to as the Hebrew Bible), valued by three major world religions, is well known throughout most of the world. The book has had an immeasurable influence on Western civilization; and, as Christianity grows in the East and global south, its impact continues to be felt. But the early stages of the Hebrew Bible’s reception are shrouded in mystery. We do not know exactly how it first reached the world beyond that of its writers and early hearers. But we do know that in the Second Temple period, the Pentateuch (and later the rest of the Old Testament) was translated into the *lingua franca*—Greek. This translation made Scripture theoretically accessible to most of the world and allowed it to serve as sacred text of early Christianity as it spread into the Gentile world. The earliest extant reference to the Hebrew Bible by a pagan author is Pseudo Longinus’s reference to Genesis 1:3 around the time of Christ.⁶ How appropriate for that verse to appear at the historical moment when we first see the Hebrew Bible enter and begin to influence the pagan world!

Since the beginning, God has given light and truth to humanity. In the Incarnation, a radical new beginning, the early disciples could discern the same ancient rays emanating from Jesus Christ. What was the message John and the other disciples heard from the incarnate Word in a nutshell? “God is light and in him is no darkness at all” (I John 1:5). Jesus invited His disciples, and He invites whoever is willing even today to follow Him out of darkness. He says, “I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life” (John 8:12, KJV).

Even in our modern world, science struggles to understand and describe light. Scholars debate whether it consists of waves or particles. The best minds work to explain how it can travel so quickly. For the ancients, light was even less comprehensible. For them, as for most of us, light was usually

taken for granted. Light is merely a part of life as we know it. We do not often contemplate a world without light, but neither do we take time to appreciate the many benefits light brings to us. At some level, though, we all realize that life is infinitely better with light than without light.

We have all had the experience of searching for an item in less than optimum light or even in complete darkness. What a relief it is when someone proffers a flashlight or flips a light switch, enabling us to see clearly! It is at times when light is absent from our lives that we feel our need for it most keenly.

Similarly, our lives are incomplete without God's truth and presence. Theologians and biblical scholars have made valiant efforts to explain God and His ways. But despite all our sophisticated exposition, we can never comprehend all that God adds to our lives. We cannot fully understand how our lives would be different without His constant care.

So how do I know for sure that there is a God? I know in the same way I know that my world is better for having light. I know what it was like to live in darkness, and I know how my life has changed since God declared, "Let there be light." The contrast is at once inexplicable and undeniable. God, like light, must first be experienced rather than analyzed. May each of us encounter the God of light, and may we reflect His truth, hope, and love into the shadows.