The Story – Week One

“The Beginning of Life as We Know It”

 Wouldn’t it be exciting to find an ancient map to a long lost treasure?

 I’ve been to Arizona a couple of times. On my first visit, I learned about the famous “Lost Dutchman Mine” – reputedly the richest gold mine in the world – hidden away in the Superstition Mountains just east of Phoenix. On my second visit, I went searching for it.

 Between those two visits, I read dozens of articles and books on the Dutchman, Jacob Waltz, and his legendary lost mine. Interestingly, there are an *abundance* of maps to a site that has eluded discovery for more than a century. Several are obvious fakes; sold to gullible tourists. A few of the older ones seem authentic. Some of them are written in Spanish – and *all* of them refer to lost trails and forgotten landmarks. In the 1800’s, the “Military Trail,” “Spanish Racetrack” and “Apache Leap” were well known places. Today, they’re all but forgotten.

 The “Horse Map,” carved into a stone, was allegedly created by a Mexican family who worked the mine *before* it was taken over by Jacob Waltz. To interpret it, you need some familiarity with Spanish, the Superstitions, and 19th century map symbols. Experts say a “circled dot” is an old-time symbol for gold. What’s with the horse? It’s a nice sketch – better than anything I could draw – but it’s not just a mare, it’s a map. Do the head, shoulders and back correspond to the profile of a mountain ridge? Do the legs illustrate four canyons leading out of a valley? Does the tail represent the stream referred to in the clue: “I pasture north of the river?”

Rookie prospectors try to orient this map with modern topographical maps and satellite pictures of the Superstition Mountain wilderness area. When one of them shouts “Eureka!” because they’ve spotted geographic features that correspond closely to some of the curves on the Horse Map, the veteran Dutch hunters just chuckle. They understand that *if the Horse Map is authentic, the people who drew this map did not have access to topographical maps and satellite imagery of their landscape.*  The early inhabitants of Arizona saw the mountains differently – not from the sky, but from the ground. If there *are* horse-shaped features to be (re)discovered, you won’t find them on a map – you’ll have to go out there and search for them on foot.

The point is simple: if you want to understand an old map, then you need to learn how people understood their world in olden times. What’s true for maps is true for literature – like the book of Genesis. The Horse Map was created less than 200 years ago, around 750 miles from Ripon. Genesis was composed more than 4,000 years ago, about 7,500 miles from Ripon. It stands to reason that interpreting Genesis, correctly, will require some careful thinking.

 When we approach the first chapter of Genesis, we need to remember two things:

1. The ancient Hebrew understanding of the world was very different than ours.
2. The ancient Hebrew understanding of the world was very similar to their neighbors.

Regarding the differences between the ancient and modern understanding of the world, consider what John Walton has written in his book: The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate:

The Israelites did not know that the stars were suns; they did not know that the earth was spherical and moving through space; they did not know that the sun was much further away than the moon, or even further than birds flying in the air. They believed the sky was material (not vaporous), solid enough to support the residence of deity as well as to hold back waters. In these ways, and many others, they thought about the cosmos in much the same way that anyone in the ancient world thought, and not at all like anyone thinks today.

 Ancient cultures were not greatly interested in the material origins of the universe and all the “stuff” it contains. Their questions about the cosmos were related to its function, not its form. They all agreed that the cosmos functioned like a great temple – created and inhabited by a deity – and so their questions went like this:

* “How can people survive in a place that belongs to the gods?”
* “How can we keep the gods happy – so they’ll make it rain (and not hail) on our crops?”
* “What does our god require to grant us victory over our enemies – and their gods?”

 It all boiled down to this: ancient people saw the cosmos as a tenuously ordered system that frequently teetered on the edge of absolute chaos. They wanted to understand how things functioned so that they could fulfill their role in the cosmic system. They didn’t want to disrupt the balance, they wanted to preserve it. This meant they needed to keep the gods happy. If they did (the thinking went), their gods would look out for them – protecting their health, their harvests and their civil hierarchy. The problem was that the gods were fickle, capricious and often caught up in cosmic rivalries with each other. It was hard keeping the gods happy.

 The opening chapters of Genesis affirm the idea that the cosmos is a system, but they challenge the assumption that everything will go into full-tilt chaos unless the pitiful humans manage to coerce the capricious deities into behaving themselves. Quite the contrary, Genesis informs us that there is One Creator – the Lord God Almighty – *He* brought the cosmic system into harmony and *we* messed it up!

 The functional concerns of the ancient people – i.e., how are humans supposed to live in *His* world – are kept in view. Specifically, the purpose of human life is radically reframed: *instead of scurrying about in fear, trying desperately to maintain alliances among rival deities so that the cosmos doesn’t slide back into primordial chaos, we see that human beings were created in God’s image and given the high privilege of overseeing His creation as commissioned ambassadors.*

 We read in Genesis 1:26-28

Then God said, “Let us make man in Our image, in Our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

 What does it mean that God created man “in His own image”?

 We’ll consider that important question in a moment, but first we need to ask: what does it mean that God “creates”?

 The Hebrew word for create, *bara,* בָּרָא, has a specific meaning: *to bring something into existence.* It occurs about fifty times in the Old Testament. In each of those instances, God is *always* the subject (the One who is doing the creative work), usually directly, sometimes inferred. What this means is that the kind of creative activity described in Genesis one is very unique – it’s something that God does.

 This list of things that God creates is summarized from John Walton’s book:

* 10 occurrences: the cosmos (or new cosmos) – i.e., “heaven and earth”
* 10 occurrences: people in general (i.e., man, mankind, humanity)
* 10 occurrences: phenomena (i.e., “darkness” or “disaster”)
* 6 occurrences: specific groups of people (i.e., “Israel”)
* 5 occurrences: specific types of people (i.e., “called by My name”)
* 3 occurrences: (i.e., “starry host,” “streams in the desert”)
* 2 occurrences: creatures (those of the sea, those of the earth)
* 1 occurrence: a personal condition (David’s prayer: “create in me a pure heart”)

 When you look over this list, you’ll note that *everything* God creates in Scripture has an associated *function.* The starry host, for example, was created “for signs and for seasons and for days and years” (Genesis 1:14). God’s promise to create streams in the desert looks forward to renewal and restoration of creation. God created Israel to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation that would represent Him to the surrounding nations. God created darkness and disaster to discipline those who rebelled against Him. David prayed, “Create in me a pure heart, O God” when he was seeking to be restored after experiencing discipline for his grave sin with Bathsheba.

 So if we want to understand what it means to be created “in the image of God,” we need to look at our *function,* not our *form.* After creating the first humans, God commissioned them with these words “be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

 John Walton explains:

Among all the functional elements referred to in Genesis 1:26-30, the image of God is the most important and is the focus of the section. All the rest of creation functions in relationship to humankind, and humankind serves the rest of creation as God’s vice regent. Among the many things that the image of God may signify and imply, one of them, and probably the main one, is that people are delegated a godlike role (function) in the world where He places them.

 To be more precise, we could say that mankind was given a *priestly* role in creation. Adam wasn’t installed as a “mini-god” over the earth; he was appointed as God’s representative. In the Ancient Near East, it was a common practice for great kings to set up “images” of themselves on the frontiers of distant lands – as a way of demonstrating the “presence” of their authority and rule. In his book The Temple and The Church’s Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God, G.K. Beale explains the association:

After conquering a new territory, the Assyrian king Shalmanesar “fashioned a mighty image of [his] majesty” that was “set up” on a black obelisk, and then he virtually equates his “image” with that of the “glory of Assur” his god. Likewise, Adam was created as the image of the divine king to indicate that earth was ruled over by Yahweh. In light of Genesis 1:26-30 [the commission for Adam and Eve to “fill the earth and subdue it”], this meant the presence of God, which was initially to be limited to the garden temple of Eden, was to be extended throughout the whole earth by His image bearers, as they themselves represented and reflected His glorious presence and attributes.

 Throughout this book, Beale presents a compelling argument that Eden was the first sanctuary (e.g., temple of God’s divine presence). His points are summarized in A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New, his observations are worth reviewing at length here:

First, the temple later in the OT was the unique place of God’s presence, where Israel had to go to experience that presence. Israel’s temple was the place where the priest experienced God’s unique presence, and Eden was the place where Adam walked and talked with God. The same Hebrew word form used for God’s “walking back and forth” in the garden (Gen. 3:8) also describes God’s presence in the tabernacle (Lev. 26:12; Deut. 23:14; 2 Sam. 7:6-7; Ezek. 28:14).

Second, Genesis 2:15 says God placed Adam in the garden “to cultivate it and keep it.” The two Hebrew words for “cultivate” and “keep” usually are translated “serve” and “guard.” When these two words occur together later in the OT, without exception they have this meaning and refer either to Israelites serving and guarding/obeying God’s word or, more often, to priests who serve in God’s temple and guard the temple from unclean things entering it (Num. 3:7-8; 8:25-26; 18:5-6; 1 Chron. 23:32; Ezek. 44:14).

Therefore, Adam was [created] to be the first priest to serve in and guard God’s temple. When Adam fails to guard the temple, by sinning and admitting an unclean serpent to defile the temple, he loses his priestly role, and the two cherubim take over the responsibility of guarding the garden temple: God “stationed the cherubim…to guard the way to the tree of life.” (Gen. 3:24) Their role became memorialized in Israel’s later temple when God commanded Moses to make two statues of angelic figures and station them on either side of the ark of the covenant in the holy of holies in the temple. Like the cherubim, Israel’s priests were to “keep watch” (the same word as “guard” in Genesis 2:15) over the temple (Neh. 12:45) as “gatekeepers” (2 Chron. 23:19; Neh. 12:45).

All these observations together point to the likelihood that the garden of Eden was the first sanctuary in sacred history. Not only was Adam to guard this sanctuary, but also he was to subdue the earth, according to Gen. 1:28. As he was to begin to rule over the earth, he was to extend the geographical boundaries of the garden until Eden extended throughout and covered the whole earth. This meant that the presence of God that was limited to Eden was to be extended throughout the whole earth. God’s presence was to “fill” the entire earth.

 At this point, Beale quotes John Walton:

If people were going to fill the earth, we must conclude that they were not intended to stay in the garden in a static situation. Yet moving out of the garden would appear a hardship since the land outside the garden was not as hospitable as that inside the garden (otherwise, the garden would not be distinguishable). Perhaps, then, we should surmise that people were gradually supposed to extend the garden as they went about subduing and ruling. Extending the garden would…extend sacred space (since that is what the garden represented).

 Beale continues:

The intention seems to be that Adam was to widen the boundaries of the garden in ever-increasing circles by extending the order of the garden sanctuary into the inhospitable outer spaces. The outward expansion would include the goal of spreading the glorious presence of God. This would be accomplished especially by Adam’s progeny born in his image and thus reflecting God’s image and the light of His presence, as they continued to obey the mandate given to their parents and went out to subdue the outer country until the Eden sanctuary covered the earth.

 And he concludes on a sad note:

As we know, Adam was not faithful and obedient in subduing the earth and extending the garden sanctuary, so that not only was the garden-temple not extended throughout the earth, but also Adam himself was cast out of the garden and no longer enjoyed God’s presence and lost his function as God’s priest in the temple.

 Recalling that the ancient Hebrew word for “create” was loaded with meanings related to functional existence, it stands to reason that God’s warning to Adam about consuming fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil – “for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die” – was tragically fulfilled on the day when Adam “lost his function as God’s priest.”

 In the worldview of the Ancient Near East, the “creative” work of God involved ordering and assigning function. The creation of mankind, therefore, refers not simply to their physical formation (Adam from the earth, Eve from Adam), but to their vocational function: they were appointed as royalty and anointed as priests. As a result of sin, they were stripped of their noble functions – banished from the garden sanctuary and left to dwell in the world they’d failed to bring under God’s perfect reign. This is death, in a functional sense.

 This understanding of death is understood in the parable of the prodigal son; the father expresses his joy at his wayward son’s return in these words: “This son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found!” (Luke 15:24)

 Was the prodigal son *literally* dead when we was in the distant country, squandering his inheritance and indulging in riotous living? No, technically, he was physically alive. But was he living the life he was meant to live – dwelling on his father’s land, working in his father’s fields, and enjoying his father’s presence? No, that’s not the life he was living. So in that important sense, the son was dead.

 Exiled from the Father’s land, without access to the Father’s harvest, and – above all – cut off from the Father’s presence, *Adam and Eve were functionally dead.* Unlike the younger brother in Jesus’ parable, they were not able to “come to their senses” and “return to their father’s home.” If the relationship between God and humanity was to continue, God would have to come to them.

 And that’s exactly what we see happening in the opening chapters of Genesis.

 Even as He disciplines their disobedience, God speaks a word of hope to Adam and Eve. God’s spoke of a future descendent who would reverse their fortunes – a child of Eve who would “crush [the] head” of the serpent (Gen. 3:15).

 As God continues his involvement with Adam, Eve and their generations of descendants, two things become clear:

* First, we see that sin spreads from a single choice in the garden to a universal condition that is influencing all mankind. Even while God is interacting with humanity and seeking to teach them His ways, we see increasing depravity and escalating cycles of violence.
* Second, we see that God refuses to give up. Graciously, He continues to seek out and sustain a remnant of humanity, to whom He repeats the original commission that was given to Adam and Eve:
	+ Genesis 1:28 God blessed them; and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”
	+ Genesis 9:1,7 And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth…Be fruitful and multiply; populate the earth abundantly and multiply in it.”

 Next week, as this series continues, we’ll see that God’s call to Abraham *continues* this theme, and thus confirms that Israel was created as the means through which God would continue His plan to fulfill His good purposes for humanity – and all creation. (We’ll have to wait until later in the series to see how Jesus recapitulates the story of Adam and reframes the meaning of “God’s place” and “God’s people.”) Looking ahead to next week’s reading in *The Story,* listen for the echoes of God’s commission to Adam and Eve in His call to Abraham:

* + Genesis 12:2-3 “I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing; and I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.
	+ Genesis 17:2,6,8 “I will establish My covenant between Me and you, and I will multiply you exceedingly…I will make you exceedingly fruitful…I will give to you and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan.

 If we want to read Genesis correctly, we need to appreciate the perspective of the *first hearers* of this ancient text. According to the Scriptures, the original audience was the ancient Hebrews that were liberated from slavery in Egypt. These people understood themselves, correctly, as “the descendants” who had been promised to Abraham. Indeed, we read in Genesis 47:27 that “Israel lived in the land of Egypt, in Goshen, and they acquired property in it and were fruitful and became very numerous.”

 The early Israelites also understood themselves, correctly, to be descended from the line of God-picked people through whom He was carrying out a plan to set things right. And they understood themselves, correctly, to have inherited Adam’s vocation: they were created – as a nation – to bear the image of God. In Exodus 19:3-8 (we’re looking ahead a few weeks in *The Story*) we glimpse a high point in Israel’s history – when they are accepting the privilege *and responsibility* of representing God as a “nation of priests”:

Then Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him from the mountain and said, “This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: ‘You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to Myself. Now if you obey Me fully and keep My covenant, then out of all nations you will be My treasured possession. Although the whole earth is Mine, you will be for Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites.”

So Moses went back and summoned the elders of the people and set before them all the words the Lord had commanded him to speak. The people all responded together, “We will do everything the Lord has said.” So Moses brought their answer back to the Lord.

 The story of Adam and Eve would’ve had *unique* and *practical* significance to this original audience of listeners. They would’ve heard it as a parable of warning. Adam was created from the dust, placed within the garden sanctuary, and commissioned to a sacred task; when he failed at that task, he was exiled from Eden – driven into the wilderness. Many generations later, Israel – as a people – were being taken from the dust of their slavery (it’s been suggested that the word “Hebrews” is derived from an ancient Egyptian slang for slaves, which meant “dusty ones”) and brought into a beautiful, fertile land. They, too, were being commissioned to a sacred task, and they, too, were being warned that if they failed to carry out that task faithfully, then they, too, would be exiled – a fate that represents “death” to a nation.

 What is the significance of Genesis to readers today? As Christians, we are invited to listen to these stories as *our* stories. We read in Galatians 3:7-9 that

“those who believe are children of Abraham. The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: ‘All nations will be blessed through you.’ So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.”

 As Christians, we are invited to learn from the stories of those who went before us. The New Testament urges us to interpret the Old Testament in this way: “These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come.” (1 Corinthians 10:11) That’s what we’re out to do in *The Story* series!

 Next week, we’ll “walk a mile” (or more!) in the shoes of Abraham, the great “father” of Israel – and of “all who believe.” Genesis 12 is a turning point in *The Story:* the pace of narration slows down and the lessons become easier for us to grasp. As we follow Abraham’s journey, we’ll discover what it means to “walk by faith” on a “spiritual journey.”