



Really Useful Guides

# Genesis 1–11

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Rebecca S. Watson

Series editor: Simon P. Stocks

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## For James

Each Really Useful Guide focuses on a specific biblical book, making it come to life for the reader, enabling them to understand the message and to apply its truth to today's circumstances. Though not a commentary, it gives valuable insight into the book's message. Though not an introduction, it summarises the important aspects of the book to aid reading and application.

This Really Useful Guide to Genesis 1—11 will transform your understanding of the biblical text, and will help you to engage with the message in new ways today, giving confidence in the Bible and increasing faith in God.

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## 1

## Why read Genesis 1—11? A personal reflection

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When I was a child, I was an avid reader of animal stories. *Tarka the Otter*, *Watership Down* and *Duncton Wood* inspired in me a passion for conservation and animal welfare. After immersing myself in James Herriot's books I was determined to become a vet – though after being given James Galway's autobiography, I harboured ambitions to become a flautist. These stories were incredibly powerful, and they did a great deal to shape my outlook on life, even if my veterinary and musical ambitions were in the end to be frustrated by lack of talent and by a focus on other interests.

The stories I enjoyed invited me momentarily to step into the shoes of someone else, so that when I turned the last page or walked out of the cinema, I saw the world a little bit differently. I came away with a changed sense of purpose or priority, or with a better understanding of others' situations. I was moved by the stories of the hidden lives of animals

that conveyed their struggles and the threats posed by human activity in a way that statistics and non-fiction books never could. I was inspired by the dedication of James Galway, and later by *Billy Elliot* and the Olympians in *Chariots of Fire* (not that I was ever foolish enough to imagine I might become a dancer or runner myself). Anything on a romantic or family theme always leaves me with a renewed sense of the primary importance of love and relationships over everything else, and I'm probably a bit nicer for a little while afterwards as a result.

Stories inspire us to action, too. All letters from charities asking for our support engage us with the situation of a particular individual in need, compelling us to empathise with their predicament. The most memorable sermons usually have a story at their heart, which we might remember long after the core message of the sermon itself. Advertisers realise the power of stories, too. John Lewis' Christmas adverts have attracted particular interest not by shouting about products and prices, but by engaging viewers with a personal story about Christmas, usually with a message around what this festival is 'really' about.

The way stories engage the imagination and invite a response has always appealed to me. Some people



like truth to be tied down and concrete, through philosophy and science, through verifiable historical facts and measurable statistics. But I love the way that each time you read a story, you may gain a different perspective on it and discover new insights. Nowhere can you do this more than in Genesis 1–11, which in my view contains some of the most profound religious literature ever written.

Every time I read Genesis 2–3 in particular, I pick up new aspects of the story. It is so simple, yet so rich in what it implies. Take, for example, the reaction of Adam when he's confronted by God after eating the fruit. He says, 'The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate' (3:12). In other words: 'Don't look at me, God. It's your fault, and hers.' I suspect that pretty well sums up my instinctive response when I have done something wrong: it's so easy to lay the blame elsewhere rather than accepting personal responsibility.

I also value the way Genesis 1–11 challenges me as a reader and provokes further questions and thought. I can't remember when I first read these chapters, and if you were raised in a Christian family or were taught Bible stories at school it may be the same for you. One of my most striking memories of Genesis,

though, comes from watching my daughter engaging with the creation accounts. When she was quite young, she came out of Sunday school saying they'd been learning the order of the days of creation, but she was 'no good at it' because she'd misremembered the sequence. A week or two later, she was looking at a children's Bible and began to comment on what 'dominion' might (and should!) mean. She wanted to know what I thought about how the story might fit with what she knew of evolution and gender equality. She was asking questions of the stories and connecting them with her own knowledge, values and experience. I can't say I had all the answers, but Genesis was a brilliant prompt for a conversation that we wouldn't otherwise have had, and it made us both think more deeply about important questions.

It's easy to be stuck, with a story known from childhood, in just remembering and recognising its details and not thinking beyond them. Sadly, church doesn't always help us move beyond that. But simply taking these stories at a surface level rather misses the point. Deeper reading involves understanding, questioning and making connections with other aspects of experience. This is something that Genesis 1–11 positively invites, even if we don't always find clear-cut answers we can all agree on.

As you read each part of Genesis 1–11 for yourself, try to ask yourself what its message might be and how its perspectives on the world might fit with yours. What questions does it raise for you, and what insights can it offer? I hope you will find these chapters as inspiring as I have.

## 2

## What is Genesis 1—11?

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Genesis 1—11 is many things. Most importantly, it's a prologue to the rest of Genesis and to the Bible as a whole. To understand how it works, let's draw a comparison with the gospels. You might be aware that Mark's gospel dives straight into the story of Jesus' ministry. Matthew and Luke, however, wanted to provide a bit of the backstory to Jesus by speaking of his birth and childhood. In the process, they reveal important things about who he was and about what he was to do in his adult life: his mission to the poor, his kingship and death, the message of hope and joy at his birth and so on. John's gospel goes a stage further by beginning with creation itself, describing Jesus as the incarnate Word.

Genesis as a whole has a similar function to the prologues of Matthew, Luke and John. It provides the 'backstory' to the people of Israel. The story of Israel really begins with the exodus out of Egypt (and so with the book of Exodus), but the background to their

origins is provided by Genesis 12—50, with the stories of Abraham and his family, their earliest ancestors. Just as Matthew and Luke offer insights into Jesus' adult life through relating stories of his early years, so the stories of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob already introduce key aspects of God's relationship with Israel: election, covenant, promise and so on. Genesis 1—11, however, is like the prologue in John's gospel. It goes right back to the beginning and shows that, from the first, God's commitment was to the whole world. Like John's gospel, it explores profound questions about God, but it does so through stories. It invites the reader to think, wonder and be challenged about these issues before the story of Israel has even begun.

Genesis 1—11 also serves to set the story of God's relationship with his people within the wider context of his relationship with all of humanity and indeed with creation itself. It makes clear that God is the originator of the whole world, and that when he looked at all that he had made, he saw it was very good. His commitment and interest, therefore, is focused on all of creation. The series of events outlined in Genesis 2—11 show how human sin became a barrier that repeatedly disrupted that relationship until finally God confused the languages of the peoples and scattered them over the face of the earth so that

they could no longer scheme together. The election of Abraham in Genesis 12 is a response to this changed situation, but even then the intention is that through him all the families of the earth (not just Abraham's family) would be blessed. When we turn to the end of the Bible, we see a reversal of Babel in the speaking in 'tongues' at Pentecost, and the New Testament also witnesses to the hope that all tongues will confess Jesus as Lord and that creation itself will be renewed.

This means that although the Bible is mainly about the story of God's chosen people – Israel, Judah, Jesus, the disciples, the early church – God's story is much bigger, for his concern from first to last is with all creation.



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