

[Torah Crash Course]

[Speakers in the audio file: Tim Mackie]

[Musical Introduction (0:00—0:07)]

Everybody, I'm Tim Mackie and this is my podcast, "Exploring My Strange Bible." I am a card-carrying Bible history and language nerd who thinks that Jesus of Nazareth is utterly amazing and worth following with everything that you have. On this podcast, I'm putting together the last 20 years' worth of lectures and sermons where I've been exploring the strange and wonderful story of the Bible and how it invites us into the mission of Jesus and the journey of faith. I hope this can all be helpful for you too. I also help start this thing called the Bible Project. We make animated videos and podcasts and classes about all kinds of topics in Bible and theology. You can find all those resources at BibleProject.com. With all that said, let's dive into the episode for this week.

[Musical Break (0:52—0:59)]

All right, well, this is going to be the first of a three-part series called the "Torah Crash Course." It represents one, long evening of lectures that I did when I was a teaching pastor at Door of Hope, many years ago. My desire to do this "Torah Crash Course" came out of a conviction that grew, over a number of years of teaching the Bible and pastoral ministry. I came across, so often, people having deep misunderstandings of Jesus and what he was all about. I found that those misunderstandings were typically rooted, not just in misunderstanding him, but not understanding the larger story that Jesus was a part of, and that Jesus saw himself contributing to, and fulfilling and bringing to its climactic fulfillment.

And so it's kind of like, if you were to *not* watch the very first *Star Wars*, episode four, "A New Hope," and you were just to dive in and, very first, watch episode five, "Empire Strikes Back." You know, you could, like, follow what's going on and you could track with the plotline of the movie. And you would come to, like, Han Solo—anyway; he's a likable character—but you would be wondering like, clearly, like, he and Leah and Luke Skywalker, like, "all these people have some prehistory that I'm not being told;" right? You're lacking some pre-story that makes sense of why these characters are doing what they're doing and saying what they're saying.

And something similar is going on with picking up the New Testament and reading the stories about Jesus and the Gospels. You can dive right in and figure out Jesus is awesome and this is really cool, but you're constantly going to be asking yourself, "Why are they talking about these older Scriptures, the Old Testament so much? Quoting from

them? Why did Jesus do that? Why did he say that to those people?" And this is the same kinds of things. And it's so much easier to misunderstand when you don't have the backstory. And so this set of lectures was really my effort to condense the first five foundational books of Jesus's Bible, because they introduce the core story and the plot conflict, and the promise that Jesus sees himself as contributing to, and bringing to its fulfillment.

And so there you go. It's just a conviction that I came to form: "If I want to follow Jesus, I need to understand the story that he thinks he's a part of." And that story is found in the first five books of the Bible. This first lecture is a little bit longer. It just explores the book of Genesis and how it sets you up for understanding the whole of the biblical storyline to follow. And the following lectures, we'll do the rest of the Torah, but this first lecture is just on Genesis. Hope it's helpful for you.

[Musical Break (3:41—3:47)]

How many of you have seen those things called "photomosaics" before? They're big pictures, made up of hundreds and thousands of tiny, little pictures. You can go to, like, websites and make your own, just put in your own pictures or whatever. Anyway, so—but, they're useful. They provide a useful illustration of why these books of the Bible, that we're going to dive into tonight, are so difficult to read.

So, you know, I don't know what your relationship is with the Bible, and especially with these first five books of the Bible. My guess is that we could all get in a circle and have a therapeutic sharing time. Most of us would probably end up confessing, at some point, that our relationship to the Bible, and especially these books of the Bible, is, like, the way I put it—it's kind of like the way you relate to your "weird uncle." Because he's family, so, you know, you're supposed to, like, hang out with him at obligated times, you know, holidays or whatever. But it's awkward and it's strange and you don't really like talking to him because he's weird, you know?

And so you're like, "there's like, half of Exodus; Leviticus:--it's like the weird uncle in the Bible, you know? Like, what do you do with a book like that? Or numbers? What do you do with a book titled, "Numbers"? Who wants to read that? You know, "Deuteronomy." So I think that's, somewhat, the relationship that we have.

And part of it is because it's big—many hundreds of pages in our Bibles. And secondly, it's just this amalgamation of, just, seemingly—there's some bright spots, you know, like, "Oh, yeah, Noah and animals, and Moses and Abraham." And then there's just all the other hundreds and hundreds of pages full of people and places and lists of names. You know what, you guys know what I'm talking about here. It's like wandering into a "jungle." Or it's like looking at a photomosaic.

And now he's going to say, about these five books of the Bible, that they are about him, that they point forward to him. And I think part of the reason why we might read that and we say, "Well, that's great. He can say that because he's Jesus, but I sure don't know

what he's talking about." So, and I think for the most part, that's because the way that we are taught to read, or the habits of reading that we have for any book of the Bible, but especially these first five books is like this. And so we think of the books of the Bible—I mean, I don't know how we think of them—I think a lot of us kind of think it is well, it's like a "collection" or "hodgepodge." I think many of us read the Bible, kind of, lucky-dipping style. We're just like, "I'll try this page today." Boom. Like, "What am I going to find here? Oh, it's a weird story about a guy murdering a whole village. That's weird. I don't like that. Let me turn to the story about Jesus." You know, that's the way, how it works, because we're so close-in. We don't ever back up and see the order.

And so our approach to these books of the Bible is just—a little phrase that I find helpful to remember different ways of reading the Bible, it's just a little tool called "big story, little story." And essentially the entire Bible—a third of it is narratives—and the narrative books of the Bible are collections of little stories, hundreds and hundreds of little stories that have been very intentionally woven together to make a much larger plot line that's working itself out from cover to cover. And the meaning of any little, individual story, you can appreciate it just by reading a little story about Abraham and Isaac, or a guy killing a village or something, or whatever. You can read that and maybe appreciate it in its own light; you might be puzzled, but the key, really, is in backing up, and seeing how this story fits into the story that comes before it and after it, and how that group of stories fits to the group of stories before it. And all of a sudden, you start to see intelligent life, in the way that the stories—you start to see an epic tale that someone has had their hands on, and weaving together this grand tale, and all of the themes within it.

And so that's kind of what we're going to do tonight. We're going to be reading a bunch of individual little passages, but mostly we're going to float 30,000 feet over the "big story"—and we're going to trace, what I call, kind of, four big "movements" in the story of the Torah, these first five books of the Bible. And we'll kind of float, and then we'll "land in" on the passage that gives us light on core themes of the story. Then we're going to back up and float 30,000 feet.

This is from Luke, chapter 24. One of the resurrection stories from the gospel of Luke. So Jesus has already disappeared from the tomb. The disciples come and they find the tomb empty. He's not there. And then, all of a sudden, there are these stories of saying that he "appeared to us, as like a human; he's alive" and so on. So this is, this is one of them. Luke chapter 24, verse 36, "While they," the disciples, "while they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them." How did he get there? Just, all of a sudden, he's there. Strange, strange part of the story. "And he said to them, '*Shalom*. Peace. Peace to you guys.' They were startled and frightened because they thought they were seeing a ghost. And he said to them, 'Why are you troubled? Why do doubts rise in your mind? Look at my hands and my feet. It's I myself. Touch me and see. A ghost doesn't have flesh and bones as you see that I have.' When he said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. And while they still didn't believe it, because of joy and amazement, he asked them, 'I'm hungry. You guys, you have anything to eat?'" It's a great little part of the story there.

So one of their remembrances is, they're freaking out and Jesus is like, "Man, I'm hungry. It was a long three days." So, such a strange—and they give him a piece of

broiled fish, and he took it and he's eating in their presence. You can picture the scene, right? Have you ever been the only one eating at a table full of people before? You know how that's awkward. So I think, how awkward this scene was, right? Because he was alive and then dead.

“He said to them, ‘Listen, this is what I told you, guys, when I was still with you. Everything that's written about me in the law of Moses”—which is a reference to the first five books of the Bible—“the prophets,” prophets of the Hebrew Bible, “and the Psalms, everything had to go just the way those books of the Bible said it would.’ Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. And he told them, ‘Listen, this is what was written: that the Messiah will suffer, rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached, in his name, to all of the nations, beginning at Jerusalem.” That's Jesus's *Cliff's Notes* of the Old Testament.

And we're like, “What? Where? What are you talking about?” Right? He says, “You're witnesses of these things. I'm going to send you what my father has promised, but stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.” What's that a reference to? So it's a reference to the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, in Acts chapter two. So twice, he is able to bring, in a very nonchalant way, just says, “Listen. I mean, we had these conversations before. I told you that the Law of Moses—the Prophets, the Psalms—they were telling a story that was forward-pointing towards everything that just happened in, you know, the last couple of years and the last week.” He just assumes that. Here's why, as a community of Jesus, we read these books of the Bible and why we read the Old Testament.

I joked about this at the last Friday Night Live, but it's true. I think as Christians, reading the Old Testament is very often, it's a “labor of love” for Jesus. Because these are not easy books to read, I don't think. I sure hope you don't think so because I think you're not telling the truth, because they're not easy books to read. And I actually don't think I would choose to read them if they just like, if I just found them randomly on the sidewalk or something like that.

So why has the Church, the community of Jesus, from the very beginning held tightly these books of the Old Testament Scriptures, and specifically, these first five books? It comes out of this conviction right here, that they illuminate who Jesus is. They tell a story without which we can't truly grasp the significance of Jesus. And so, I think why that's difficult for us, is because we're reading “up close” all of the time. And we're like, you know, like, “ark and animals; that's cool.” Like, “how does this little picture, how does this little individual story point to Jesus”? And as we're going to see, there are some really amazing individual little passages that clearly point forward to the coming of the Messiah, and such, like that. But actually most of the passages in the Torah, these first five books, don't do that, but that doesn't mean they aren't about Jesus. It means they play one little, role in the developing storyline that's pointing forward to him.

So another analogy would be like, think of, like, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, or something like that. Who is the main, driving character in all of the stories of Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*? So Aslan. Is Aslan in every scene of every story in the *Chronicles of Narnia*? No, and actually, there's a handful of them where he doesn't appear until very late in the

story, where he's very much "behind the scenes." Like, *Horse and His Boy? Boy and His Horse. Horse and His Boy*—Aslan's very much hidden, for very long in the book. But the stories are entirely about Aslan, aren't they? And his relationship to the characters in the story in the world. But he's not on every page explicitly; but the entire story is about him. And I think that's, that's what Jesus has in mind here.

And so this is why; we're going to "float," and essentially we're going to look at what I call "the architecture" of these first, five books of the Bible. It's really "30,000 feet" and you start to see someone deliberately has taken these hundreds of little stories and arranged them, and working out themes, that all of them find their resolution, and meet their fulfillment, in Jesus.

So that's kind of where we're going. That's our rationale for what we're doing with the Pentateuch, or the Torah. So when Jesus said "the law of Moses," that word "law" refers to the Hebrew word *torah*, which literally means "teaching" or "instruction." And so "teaching" or "instruction" can take many different forms. It can take, like, in the book of Proverbs, the Proverbs are often referred to as *torah*, teaching or instruction. And so we just think of, like, "laws" or reading a law book, or something like that. But the word *torah* just, itself, means "teaching" or "instruction," which really is what this entire story is doing. It's instructing us, teaching us about what kind of world we're in, who we are, and what God is up to in the world.

So that's its Hebrew name. That's the way these five books are referred to in Jewish tradition. In Christian tradition, they're called "the Pentateuch," which is just a phrase meaning "five *teuchs*." I have no idea what a "*teuch*" is. I should look that up, but five "*teuchs*." So it's a five-part book.

So if it's a grand story, where should we begin? In the beginning. We're going to take the story of the Torah, looking at the four main movements of the story. So you've got two on one page, the other two on the other side. We're going to tackle the first two. So the big, main movements here are: Genesis chapters one through 11; 12 through 50; and then Exodus one through 15. This is a collection of stories about Israel being redeemed out of slavery in Egypt. This is a collection of stories about a really dysfunctional family; they all come from a guy named Abraham, who's introduced to us here in chapter 12, and the three generations of his family. This is a collection of stories about all of humanity and how screwed up we all are.

How do all of these relate, even? Just stop and think about that. So you have a story that begins with the origins of everything, and then tells a story about "all humanity." And then, all of a sudden, just like, whiplash, you know? We're tracking thousands of years, and, "all of humanity" here. And then it's just, like, the camera zooms in, then this time slows down, and we just focus on one guy and his family. Why would you tell a story that way? You know what I'm saying? So somehow—even just looking here, whatever the connection is—what's happening with this single family right here, the family of Abraham is, is somehow linked to "the faith of all of humanity." That makes sense here. We're just thinking intelligently about how you would tell a story.

Why would you tell a story—this is actually quite presumptuous. This would be like saying, telling a story where you tell the founding of the United States, or something, like, the Revolutionary War, “and then Tim Mackie was born.” That’s the next phrase or two. And that’s actually quite presumptuous because what are you doing? In the way you’re telling the story? You’re assuming the birth of this individual in the story is somehow linked to the faith of a whole nation and every—do you see what I’m saying here? Reflecting on the three big chunks—on these first two, main movements of the story—gets you into the flavor. And then, all of a sudden, then God rescuing this family out of Egypt isn’t just “a story” about something God did “way back then,” this is a story about what God is doing to rescue, or do something, that’s going to affect all of humanity, and so on. It becomes a very epic drama.

So we’re introduced, first, to the stories of God making everything. So page one of the Bible. “30,000 feet,” you guys. “Big picture.” You guys ready? “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” Now, dear reader, what does the word “earth” refer to right here? Does it refer to “the globe”? No. So it was written by an author 3,000 years ago. So “earth” means “land under my feet.” “Heaven” means “what’s up there.” And “in the beginning” is a very ambiguous term. We think of beginning as a “point in time” through which, you know, nothing before is envisioned, and then you have a sequence of events that follows after it. Ancient Hebrew has a word for this, but it’s not the word used right here. The word used right here is *reshit*. Essentially, *reshit* is a way of talking about an “undetermined period of time in the past.” It’s totally ambiguous. That’s not the point of using this word. The point is that it’s “the undetermined period of time in the past, where foundational events took place—now, let’s get the story going.”

So in other words, the first sentence of the Bible is actually quite ambiguous about most of the things that readers go to Genesis one looking for—which is, like, “how long” and “when” and “how exactly,” or whatever. And the author just says, “yeah, way back when, you know, before, God made what’s up there and what’s down here. And there you go; the universe exists now.” What’s included in “everything that’s up there” and “everything that’s down here”? Everything that’s “up there” and everything that’s “down here.” So now it’s all here, but it’s like a big, “desert wasteland.”

“Now ‘what’s down here,’ the land, was ‘formless and empty.’” Does anyone remember that Hebrew phrase? *Tohu va vohu*. Yeah, so, there you go. So “wild and waste” is my favorite English rendering that preserves the rhyme. And so these are words that refer to a “desert wasteland” elsewhere when the words get used. And so you have this idea that the creation—everything exists, but it lacks order. It lacks meaning and purpose. It’s just in this neutral state, and humans can’t live in *tohu va vohu*. And that’s what God’s priming this whole world for here.

And so—the is so cool, “In the beginning, God makes everything.” Happy face, sad face? “Yay, this is awesome. What a great story so far.” Now, “what’s down here is *tohu va vohu*.” Happy face, sad face? Yeah, or at least, like, “neutral face.” It’s like, “Oh, well, this is not going to work, right?” So, because—“and darkness is over the surface of the deep.” Happy face, sad face? “No, no, darkness; humans can’t flourish in darkness.” “But the Spirit of God is there, hovering in those dark waters.” Happy face? Yes. It’s like

a roller coaster already, you know what I mean? So, like, “Yes, this is awesome. Oh, no, what's going to happen? Yes!”

The word, “spirit” is just tying together a bunch of themes that are going to reappear later. Some of you might know this. The word “spirit” in Hebrew? It's the word *ruach*; a “clearing your throat” word, *ruach*. And so, “spirit” is a fine translation. *Ruach* is a much broader concept in Hebrew, because it can be used of “breath” or “wind” or a person's “wind.” He's not talking about their gas, right? But about their *ruach*. And so, it's actually very simple. So, some of you have done this with me before. Put your hand in front of your mouth, I guess. Put your hand up here, and I don't say, I don't say, “Whatever. Whatever, whatever.” Can you feel that on your hand? That's your *ruach* that you feel against your hand. That's your *ruach*.

So, what do you release when you speak? *Ruach*. So, *ruach*—it's a sign of life. It's like your vital, “life energy.” It's a sign that you're a living, energetic being and so on. And *ruach* comes in and comes out. The biblical poets talk about *ruach* as a gift—all, everybody, animals, humans—*ruach* is a gift from God. And so, God's *ruach* is there—it's a way of talking about his personal presence there, hovering in the midst of this darkness.

His *ruach* is there. And what's the first thing that this God does, to begin to bring order and meaning and beauty out of the dark, watery chaos? He “speaks,” which is an utterance of the *ruach*. So, the images are all tied together here. And also—notice this isn't lost on the guy who wrote John chapter 1, because in the beginning, you have God creating through the presence of his Spirit, which is intimately connected to the speaking of his word. Come on. You have God and his spirit and his word, which is precisely the Gospel of John's way of talking about the God who is “three in one.” He gets even that vocabulary from these first verses of the Bible here.

And so, God's *ruach* is released out, into the dark, watery chaos and, all of a sudden, things start taking shape. And so again, “30,000 feet.” We're just going to assume that the rest of Genesis 1, all the debates about “how” and “how long” and “exactly,” we're just going to skip over that because we're “flying 30,000 feet.” But God takes this *tohu va vohu* and he turns it into a beautiful garden. Go to verse 26 with me. This is the next key part of the story.

“Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image,’”—not to, get this, the Hebrew word for man is the word *adam*, *adam*, or *adam*. “‘Let us make *adam* in our image, in our likeness and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over the livestock, over all the earth, over all the creatures that move along the ground.’ So God created *Adam* in his own image. In the image of God, he created him”—that is, humanity viewed as a whole—“male and female, he created them,” that is humanity viewed as, male and female, I guess that's rather evident, isn't it? “God blessed them and he said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number, fill the whole earth and subdue it, rule over the fish of the sea, the birds, the air, over every living creature that moves on the ground.’”

Okay, so there's a lot of different things going on here, but what stands out to you? What makes these creatures unique? So "the image," right? "The image," this is a fascinating word, the word *tselem*, *tselem*. There's a Hebrew letter that's our letters "ts" together, "ts." Isn't that interesting? The word *tselem* refers to "statue." This is one of the most common words in the Hebrew Bible to talk about "idols," when Israel is not supposed to make or bow down to "idols," in the worship of other gods. So this is so interesting, because, is Israel is supposed to make a *tselem* to represent Yahweh, their God? No. Can Yahweh make a *tselem* of himself? Apparently. Here's a room full of them right here. This a very powerful statement being made here. Most people tend to think, "Well, what is it? Is there some unique trait about humans, you know, like rationality or reason or relationship or love or something?"

And there's only actually two things unpacked in the story right here of what constitutes "the image." First of all, look at the first, back at verse 26. What's the first thing that's said after God says, "Let's make the humanity in the image and in the likeness—to rule and reign." So the idea is that these are little, physical representatives of the royal Creator. And if God's will and rule is going to happen here on earth, God is willing, choosing to have his rule and will be accomplished in the world through these creatures. I mean, really the idea is that these are, we can use different words, like "co-rulers," or, he's going to go on and tell them to take all of the raw potential now, in this incredible planet Earth, and assert their will over it in a way that makes it flourish even more, and so on. The image from chapter two will be "gardeners."

But this is so foundational. I mean, this is something that's really—this is a theme that underlies all of Scripture. I think many of us read the Bible and our view of God is that his will is the only will that's done in the world. I'm getting into debates about the "sovereignty of God" and "human free will" and so on. But this is a pretty foundational statement, right from the beginning. How is God's rule, his kingdom and his will, how is it going to be established here on earth according to verse 26? Through whom? Through human beings. So a practical implication is anytime we say, "Why didn't God..." I think what this narrative is forcing us to say is, "Well, why didn't you..."? You know what I'm saying here? "Why didn't God prevent this from happening?" Well, according to Genesis 1, he's commissioned human beings to be the ones who affect his will in the world. So the real question bounces back to myself.

It's just, sort of this, when we pray for God's "kingdom to come" and his "will be done here on earth as it is in heaven" and so on. You know, often I used to pray that in the mode of, "Well, God, just, like, zap Portland, and save everybody," I think, and I think the way Jesus, the way he taught, you read his teachings, he always turned it around. Whenever people were projecting onto someone else, or something, and he just said, "Well, what are you doing? Where's the state of your heart?" It's this foundational view. Humans are given a very high status here, you know? Rulers, executors of God's will here in the world. And verse 28, I mean, they're supposed to have a great time about it too. How do you bless them? He says to "Have a blast. Just go for it," you know, "reproduce. That's going to be great. Bring out the potential of the earth. Be fruitful and increase," kind of, mark that.

So there's two phrases right here that we're going to mark. The key theme right here is this "image" of bless, and it's linked to this "blessing" and "commissioning" of God to all of humanity, "Go, have the earth; flourish; have a great time; make neighborhoods and music and gardens and farmer's markets and the whole thing," you know? Just, "Go, go." And it's, it all takes place under God's blessing and his favor and his support and so on. So this little phrase, "be fruitful and multiply"? Mark, tuck that one away. It's going to occur again in the Torah quite a bit, but it's all this "divine blessing." And so it occurs right here in chapter one, verse 26.

Chapter two's way of talking about this same exact thing is it, kind of, it reboots the story back to *tohu va vohu*, and there's no farms or gardens or anything. So God plants a garden—go to chapter two, verse seven. Genesis 2 doesn't talk about the image of God. Instead, it uses a number of images to get at the meaning of it. Verse seven, "So the Lord God formed man." It's the image of a potter working with a lump of clay. "He formed man from the dust of the ground and he breathed into his nostrils the breath of life," the *ruach*. "And man became a living creature."

So again, a lot of these narratives, especially early on., if you really press it for—"So, there was, like, invisible 'hands' forming a pile of dirt, or something?" No, that's the wrong question. The question is, "What does this mean?" There's significance about the nature of human beings being given to us right here. So humans are "earth" and "divine breath." They're on the border of heaven and earth. They're connected to the earth—we go *back* to it. We come from it. We live our life on the earth. But, yet, there's something transcendent and divine also about human; "divine" in the sense that we're animated by some sort of "divine energy," something like that, the *ruach*. So this is Genesis two's way of getting at the meaning of "the image." Human beings are little places, in theory, where heaven and earth connect.

And so verse 15, "The Lord God took the man, and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and to care for it." So in Genesis 1, they're called "to rule and help flourish." Here they're called to work like a gardener; work the ground and care for the ground. Like a stewardship, and to care for it. It's a great story, right? And so there's debates about all the details of "how" and "when" and so on, but don't miss, just, the big picture here. This is setting the stage.

So there is a sense in which anybody who found these books on the sidewalk can read these first chapters, and immediately these chapters are making a claim on any human being that's ever lived. Do you see that, there? It doesn't matter who you are, where you live, what millennia you were born in. This story is wrapping its arm around all of—universal history, right here. This is a story about—and for—everybody. And we're being told about "who are we"—this is, kind of like, fundamental worldview questions that most human cultures answer in some way. "Where are we? Who are we? What's wrong? And what's the solution?" This is the baseline-story that every single human culture has some way of getting at and telling. And these stories, this is what these Genesis stories are doing.

So where are we? We're in a world that didn't have to exist. But, by the gift of this really, pretty, creative—whoever—could think of a wombat, you know what I'm saying? It's

pretty creative. So we're in this crazy place, that's very improbable that we should be here and exist, but here we are. And we are creatures that were made from the stuff that's all around us, but yet we have this transcendence that's connected to this bigger picture. And this, whoever is responsible for all of this. What's wrong? What's wrong? That's the story of this tree and the serpent. So again, flying very "30,000 feet," here, because we want to get moving in the story. And these are the most familiar stories, I think, in the Torah.

So humans are given this choice with this tree of the knowledge of good and evil, are they going to trust? Hmm, you could say it this way. We were in verse 16. Let's look at verse 16, "The Lord God commanded the man, 'You're free to eat from any tree of the garden. The whole creation is yours. Go, go, go. But don't eat from one tree, the knowledge of good and evil. When you eat of it, you'll surely die.'" Now who's been the provider of good in the story so far? God has been—seven times in Genesis one. He pronounces this world, this world "really, really good."

What's at issue here is, as the humans flourish and go about their work, and reproducing and under God's blessing and so on, are they going to trust God's definition, his knowledge of good and evil, or are they going to seize the knowledge of evil, is something that they're going to define for themselves; to do what's right in their own eyes, "call the shots," that kind of thing. That's the story. And how long do the good times last? It's like a page and a half.

And so the humans, at the prodding of this serpent, which is not a theme that gets brought up again in the rest of the Torah, the serpent is this dark figure, appears only in the story as somebody that exists before the humans, and wants to destroy them. And so the humans give in to the deception, and they want to become—ooh, this is a good one—look at chapter three. This is part of the tragedy.

Chapter three, verse five, the serpent says, "God knows that when you eat of this tree, your eyes will be opened and you will be like God." There's a, stop right there. What's the trap? What's the deception? "You'll be like God"? They're already like God, in every way they could possibly dream of. But there's one thing that we're being told—God's holding out on; he doesn't want you to call, to go your own way. Since I taught on this a few weeks ago, I since read the short little book, *Peralandra*, by—go read *Peralandra*. It's the most brilliant retelling of Genesis three that you will ever read in your entire life. It's absolutely brilliant. And it's not a super long read. C.S. Lewis; *Peralandra*. And you realize this is not just a weird story from the past. This is a story about the past, but this is also a story about every human being that's ever lived.

And so the human beings, they take, they seize the fruit—this idea of "defining good for themselves." The whole thing just falls apart. And so, where the story goes from right here then, is from Genesis three, Genesis 3 through 11, what does it say on your handout there? There you go. So the image bearers, they foolishly rebel. And what happens from here is, the storyteller of Genesis has collected a whole bunch of little vignettes, each of which is showing humanity spiraling deeper and deeper down into lostness, into rebellion, and into selfishness.

And so here, this is where we begin the vignettes and all the little, little stories. So a story about two brothers; one murders the other; Cain and Abel. Or the story about Lamech, this weird savage of a man who kills boys and collects wives like property and sings songs about it, right? You know? So that's all of, like, five verses. And then there's another vignette about humans making these "grand cities" and so on, with their technology. And then there's a story about humans becoming so violent and unjust that God washes, he washes the creation clean with the Flood, but he saves one family, a guy named...Noah. So there's Noah and the Flood here. And then, what's the first thing Noah does when he gets off the boat? Well, he makes the sacrifice, which is great, and God makes the covenant. What's the second thing he does? So right. So he plants a vineyard and he gets "plastered." And then something really, sketchy and "not okay" happens with his son in a tent. Genesis 9. It's a very disturbing story.

The last vignette is in Genesis chapter 11, here. So people make the city, and the Tower of Babel—and this is about all of humanity uniting. And they have this new technology called "the brick," and they build the city out of bricks, which is much more efficient than stones because stones, they're not all the same shape and you can only stack them so high. But bricks—you can mass produce these suckers, and make them all the same shape, and you can make walls that are taller, and you can make them faster and—than anybody else. And so they want to build a tower "up to heaven." Go to Genesis 11 with me.

These stories are fast-paced. They're short. Our heads are just "spinning" when we're reading Genesis chapters one through 11. We're like, "No! This was not supposed to happen this way. No!" Chapter 11, "Now the whole land had one language and a common speech and people moved eastward and they found the plain of Shinar and they settled there and they said, 'Come, we can make bricks. We can make microchips,'" or something. So this humanity has a little snake wrapped around their hearts now, but they have these tools of technology to remake the earth. So they bake them thoroughly and they use brick instead of stone and tar instead of mortar; so they can make them faster, higher, stronger than anybody's ever done before. "Then they said, 'Come, let's build ourselves a city with a tower that reaches to the heavens so that we can make'"—what for ourselves? "A name." So tuck that away.

So this is humanity, with their wisdom and technology and their dark, selfish hearts, making "a name" for themselves, and a tower that reaches "up to the heavens"—right up to the gods—"so that we will not be scattered over the face of the whole earth." What was the blessing that God gave humanity in chapter one? "Go make a whole bunch of yourselves and just go for it." And this, here, is humanity is saying, "No, we want to all come together in one place."

"So the Lord came down to see the city and the tower that the people were building. And the Lord said, "If as one people, speaking the same language, they're doing this. Then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them.'" And God is not "biting his fingernails" right here. He's seeing the horror of what the human race can do when they have unlimited power and technology, combined with their darkened hearts. It sounds to me, this is—Genesis 11—is a tale told precisely for the generation and the century that

we were all born in, namely the 20th century, the bloodiest century in the history of the human race. This is the story of Genesis 11.

And so Yahweh, Yahweh God, he says, “Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they won't understand each other.” And so the Lord scatters, which is an act of judgment, but it's all, it's an act of mercy at the same time, because he's trying to save them from themselves, right? And so he scatters them. There you go. That's the first part of the story. Happy face, sad face? Horribly, horribly sad face. I mean, this is tragic. Everything that God meant for good, humans are now turning into evil and they're doing it so that they can “make a name for themselves.” That's what Genesis 11 said.

Look down, after the story about the Tower of Babel, the little story about the Tower of Babel. What follows it? What comes after it? What kind of—you have a story in the first half of Genesis 11. What's the second half of Genesis 11? This puts you to sleep. That's what it does. Right? So we're right here, is where we're at. So “Who cares about this? I'm sorry. I'm going to go read Romans, or something,” you know, right? So no, no, no, don't do that. No, you're missing the story. Why is this dark flower shape next to the little baby wolf that's a little lighter, next to whatever that is, that's a little light, next to, you know? Why is that next to each other? Well, because when you back up and you say, “Oh, it had to be because it's describing this whole other part of the painting.”

We have this “scattering of the nations.” And what this genealogy is going to tell you is about tracing a family line that goes out of the scattering. So you can say—we'll make this blue—so, the nations are scattered, scattered out into the world. And what this genealogy is going to do, if you read it closely, is it's going to say, “Here, let me let me show you one family that comes from this division of the Earth.” You'll read it, if you read it. And then it traces this family down 10 generations, right there, to a guy named Abram. Abram. Or we'll just call him by what his name is changed to later in the story, “Abraham.”

And then, all of a sudden, look at chapter 12. What's the first words of chapter 12? It just kind of starts having a conversation with this guy. This is a story about all of humanity, destroying itself—lost, rebellion, against its creator—“and then you're going to tell me a story about having a conversation with this random guy? This is weird. This is weird.” So that's like, that's as, just like telling a story about the Revolutionary War, and then fast forwarding, “And then Tim Mackie was born.” That's the idea—is, somehow this guy has everything to do with the fate of a lost, rebellious humanity.

The words that you're about to read—and also, look at the format of the words, these first words of chapter 12, what do they, what are they formatted like? Are they formatted like poetry, in your Bible? It's good; they're poems; it's because they are. This is a favorite technique of the author of the Torah, is to insert poems at key moments in the story to force you to slow down, because poetry, by nature, you have to slow down to read it, but you should. And usually it's in the little poems that are inserted or that—it's like a musical. Man, did anyone see the new *Les Miserables*? It was part of our Valentine's Day date and it ruined our date. I'll just say that much. So in our humble opinion—you're welcome to your humble opinion—but there's a movie experience where the whole thing is music and poetry, and so you don't know what's important or

what's not, cause it's all so. Think of, like a musical that has acting and then moments where they break out into song. That's poetry. Pay attention to poetry when you come across it in the stories.

And so, uh, let's read the poem here. Genesis 12, "The Lord said to Abram, 'Leave your country, your people, your father's household. Go to the land that I'll show you. I'll make you into a great nation and I will bless you. I will make your name great. You will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you. Whoever curses you, I will curse. All the peoples'" —or literally "families of the earth"—"will be blessed through you.'" Now, just by word repetition alone, what's the main idea? Clearly it's "blessing." So here's theme number two. So this is how you tell stories in the Bible is if you want to emphasize something, you just repeat it. If you think about it, you're like, "Oh totally." So pay attention to repeated words as you read through the stories of the Bible—cause they'll lock you, lock you into the main themes.

And so he's receiving, like, "hyper-blessing." I mean, humans got one blessing, you know, Abraham's getting five blessings. And so God's going to bless him. What's he going to give him? To the—"I going to make you into a great nation." So he's going to have a, "I'm going to give you a big family, lots of kids. I'm going to bless you." And what comes after that? "I'm going to give you a great name." What has rebellious humanity, defining good and evil for themselves—what were they trying to do? Make a name for themselves. So God scatters them. Right, "he scatters the proud, but he exalts the humble." And just as a sheer act of grace and gift, he says, "Here's this random guy. I'm going to make your name great. And I'm going to bless you and give you a huge family with loads and loads of kids." And this family is going to be, somehow, under the providential direction and protection of God.

And what's the last line of verse three? This is absolutely key. Does God just like people named Abram? Do you think he's good-looking, or something like that? Like, why is he doing this for him? So that this blessing can spread back—to whom? "All the families of the earth, all the nations of the earth." What have the nations of the earth been up to in the story so far? Making themselves enemies of God. And so what does the God of the Bible do for his enemies? He sets in motion a plan to bless them. There you go. So if all you had was Genesis 1 through 12, you would know a lot about the God of the Bible and you would know that his intentions are to bless his enemies and to set in motion a plan. And so it's not just blessing—the idea is "the blessing," it's what humanity lost in the Garden.

And so God is going to do something through this man and through his family, that is going to give what humans have been looking for, but in all the wrong ways. It's going to give it to them as pure gift and restore them to his original intentions for what he always meant for the humans to experience. But it's not going to be through what humans do. Cause what we do, is ruin everything. It's going to be as a sheer gift and a surprise of God's grace.

This is loads of theology built into this whole poem right here. And most of it just comes from saying, "Why does this story come after this story?" And what are the implications of that? And so, essentially, right here, the whole story of the Bible, at least the end of

the Old Testament specifically just flows right out of this promise to Abraham right here. Why is the rest of the Old Testament about these people of ancient Israel? Well, this is why. Because what you're supposed to have in the back of your mind is that, somehow, God is going to do something with this people to rescue and save and restore blessing to all humanity.

And so it's not like God "likes" these people more than anybody else or something. They, he's, out of his grace, that's the family, he chooses, the vehicle for his blessing and salvation for all of the nations. In the second part of the story here, the word "now," in the big story part two. So what's going to happen then is fast-paced, moving really fast, little vignettes—thousands of years, you know, going forward. And then the story right here, as it reaches part two, is just going to slow down. And now we had one through 11, for 11 chapters, for thousands of years. And now we have 38 chapters for just, like, four generations of one family. The story, way slows down, and it zooms in.

And so we're given stories about, uh, Abraham. And then he has a son who inherits the promise after him. What's his name? Isaac. Ike. He has two sons—and, who's the son of the promise? So a guy named, Jacob, whose name means "deceiver." And then Jacob has 12 sons that become the 12 tribes of Israel. And so here you go.

So what God is going to do, if you're reading through Genesis and you're looking for this key word here, God is going to repeat these promises "to bless all the nations" through this family; he's going to repeat that over and over and over again, right, straight through. And he's not just going to repeat it. He's going to make an official promise.

Go to Genesis 15 with me. In Genesis 14, Abraham just picked a fight with five of the most powerful kings in the land, and he has reason to be scared. So chapter 15, "After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, 'Don't be afraid, Abram. I am your shield and your very great reward.' But Abram said, 'Sovereign Lord, what can you give me? I don't have any kids yet. And the one who is going to inherit my estate, well, it's this guy, Eliezer of Damascus.'"

No, see, what's happening? What did God promise him in chapter 12? Lots of things, but lots of kids. What does Abraham not have yet? He doesn't have any kids. So, you know, he's been waiting, waiting, and he's going to continue to wait for a while. So he says, "'You haven't given me any children. This servant in my household will be my heir. So the word of the Lord came to him, 'This man will not be your heir, but a son who comes from your own body will be your heir.' So he took him outside and he said, 'Look out at the sky and count the stars'—chuckle, chuckle—"if indeed you can count them," ha-ha. "And he said to him, 'This is what your offspring, your family's going to be like.'" Now just stop right there.

A nomadic tribesman, he's got about 300 people or so. You're in your seventies. Your wife is in her seventies. Never been able to have kids. How do you feel about these words spoken to you right now? It's just a joke; a cruel joke. "Come on. You've been telling me this for a long time now." And what is Abraham's response here? This is about the only thing he does right in the whole book of Genesis, right? And this act has nothing to do with him—he believes. He has faith in God's promise. He believes in

Yahweh, and “he credited it to him as righteousness.” So simply again, what does Abraham do to gain this status of “right relationship” with the God and the creator of the universe? He just trusts his word.

So with all of these stories about Abraham and Isaac, they're actually very quite detailed. They're very earthy stories about this family and this guy who's struggling to believe in the promises of God. And he doesn't get it right. I mean, he gives his wife away twice, without thinking about it. You know, constantly making these really bad decisions. And Yahweh God keeps stepping in to rescue him. But there's one time he gets it right. And what does he do right? He trusts in God's promise.

Anyway, sorry, I finished the chapter. This key. All right, “So God said to him, ‘I am the Lord, who brought you out of Ur, of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to take possession of it. But Abraham said, ‘Sovereign Lord, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?’ So the Lord said to him, ‘Bring me a heifer.’” This to me, this would be a good line in a Wes Anderson movie, because you're having a conversation like, “How do I know I'm going to gain the inheritance?” “Bring me a heifer.” You know, it's just like, “What does that have to do with anything?” Like, “Bring me a heifer? Why did you—bring what? That's so weird. So “bring me,” we're kind of, “what?” Let's trace.

“Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram.” You just... “Three years old. Oh—and bring a dove and a pigeon.” What? “So Abraham brought all these to him and he, he cut them in two.” Gross. “He arranged the halves opposite each other, but the birds, you know, he didn't cut those in half. Then the birds of prey were coming down like vultures, coming down on the carcasses—but Abraham drove them away.” Literally it says, “He ‘shooed’ them;” he puffed at them, “Puff, puff, puff.”

“And then as the sun was setting, Abraham fell into a deep sleep.” There's one other character in the Bible who's brought into a deep sleep. *Adam*, in chapter two, and then God scoops his whole side out and makes the woman. Right? So “a deep sleep. And a thick and dreadful darkness came over him. The Lord said to him, ‘Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country, not their own. They're going to be enslaved and mistreated for 400 years, but I'm going to punish the nation that they serve as slaves. And afterward they will come out with great possessions.’”

What just happened, right here? This is a flash forward. So in my era, this would be *Wayne's World* where they kind of, or whatever the screen like this, and then they, there's a flash forward. So right here in chapter 15, there's this flash forward to—what story? The next story. This is the next story. He's like shooting a little “arrow” out to the next story. Joining this, do you see, what the author is doing here, with all of these key words and references, these—linking all of the little stories together into this grand, big, huge story—so that you never forget the big story that makes sense of all the little stories.

So he says, you're, they're going to go there afterwards. “I'm going to bring them out. You, however, yes, sorry—you're going to die. You're going to go to your fathers in peace, be buried, in good age. The fourth generation of your descendants is going to come back here, for the sin of the Amorites, the inhabitants of the land, hasn't yet

reached its full measure.” This is a reference to the Canaanites currently living in the land. “Now, when the sun had set and the darkness had fallen, a smoking fire pot and a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces.” What on earth is happening?

“Bring me a heifer, and, like, cut them all in pieces, and bloody—but ‘not the birds,’ and set them like this; and then this smoking fire pot floats between the bloody pieces while Abraham’s drooling in his sleep? This is a strange story. Nod your heads with me. This is bizarre. What on earth is happening right now? The author knows that we’re sitting here scratching our heads. And so he comes along and gives us the punchline. “Dear reader, I know you’re totally confused right now.” Verse 18, let me just tell you what’s happening here, “On that day, the Lord made a covenant with Abram.”

So this is some kind of ancient ritual, and the details of which we can mostly piece together from a couple other passages and then from some other texts, Canaanite texts outside the Bible. So two kings—you make an agreement and you say, “We hereby make an agreement. I’m never going to cross this line and take that city over again. Deal.” And so they would do this ritual. They’d cut the animals in half, and the two kings would walk between them, and they would say, “May my fate be like that of these animals, if I ever cross the boundary and come take your city.” It’s like a way of saying, “I swear on my life, I’m going to do this.”

Who, alone, walks through the bloody pieces? Who does not walk through the bloody pieces? So God’s making an official promise to Abraham here, that he’s going to fulfill his promises and do all of this—the blessing, and blessing for the nations, and all this. And on whose faithfulness does the promise depend? God. On whose faithfulness does the promise not depend? Abraham. Which is really good news, because we wouldn’t be sitting here if it entirely depended on Abraham’s faithfulness. So “to your descendants, I will give this land from the river,” and then he, describes the land here.

So this is a key chapter, chapter 15, because we have the theme of “faith,” tuck that away for later; he has faith in God’s promises and God makes a covenant with him. So God puts his name on the line, his reputation. He personally commits himself to this family to fulfill his promises, somehow through them, to bring blessing to all of the nations that rebelled, right here.

Okay, we’re going to fly really far now, and come to the end of the book of Genesis. The rest of the book of Genesis is: God repeats his promise. It’s much more than just the book of Genesis. It’s mostly stories. You would think, “Oh, these are the heroes of the Bible. They’re great people.” No, they’re horrible people and they do horrible things to each other. If you just look at the Bible as a collection of stories about “how you should live,” like—don’t do that. This is, like, the worst book you could read if you’re looking for models for good behavior. Because these are horrible people—especially Jacob. His name means “deceiver.” He steals from his old, blind father, you know? Who does that? What a horrible person.

But at every step, God intervenes. He keeps them from completely running the train off of the tracks. And it’s this theme, here, of this “battle.” Here’s God’s will to bless, and here’s what humans do. Humans take what God gives them for good, and it’s the same

story, really. It's just, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, they just keep doing horrible things. And then God keeps coming along and bailing them out. This theme, "human stupidity and rebellion" and "God's desire to bless," in conflict with each other, running through each other, this theme gets brought to us, highlighted and climaxed, in the last main section of the book, 37 through 50—the story of who and his brothers? Joseph and his brothers. So just think about the story here. Again, it's a little story—actually a longer story. It's about 12 chapters.

So you have this punk, little kid who likes to tell on his brothers, right? And rat on his brothers. And so they don't like him. And he gets to wear the special coat because "dad likes him more than any of them." And so they want to kill him, but they don't. They decide to sell him into slavery instead, as if that's a better option, right? But so that's what they do. And you think that's it—this family's imploding, killing each other and selling each other in slavery. Like how can? What, worse? And then through this crazy set of circumstances, Joseph's in prison and then he meets some people in prison, and the crazy stuff about interpreting dreams. And the next thing you know, he's somehow, like, the second-in-command, over all of Egypt. And then there's this famine, and his brothers come to Egypt looking for food and who do they find? Their brother. And they don't even know it's him, you know?

And so this is irony, is that their brother—their act of evil, right? Their stupid, selfish act of evil, paradoxically, God redeems that very act to now be the thing that saves their lives. Do you see that in the story there? What an amazing story. It's like even when humans intend to ruin what God meant for good, we can't even do that. God won't let us. His promises are too, too precious. And so, go to the last page of the book, Genesis 50. Genesis 50 verse 20. Jacob dies; their father. "Joseph said to them, 'Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You guys intended to harm me'" —and again, this is really, this is all a part of the literary art of the storyteller here; this word "harm," it's the word *ra* in Hebrew. It means "evil" or "badness." "'You intended to do evil to me, but God intended it for good,'" which is the word *tov*.

Have you heard about "good and evil" before, in the book? "Oh, yeah, like, at the very beginning?" So what is it that humans—this is the words that are summarizing the Joseph story, but they're also casting a glance at the entire book and actually showing you what the whole story of the Bible is going to be about. What are humans up to in the story? *Ra*. Humans do *ra*, that's what we do. And what does God do? He doesn't just do good. In his providence, he actually responds to our *ra* and works it out so that even our *ra* can become *tov*, and result in his plans to redeem and to save and accomplish his blessing. So there you go.

If you want a summary of what the book of Genesis is, Genesis 50 verse 20 is about as good as you could get, "God intended it for *tov*, and to accomplish what's now happening. People's lives are getting saved." That's what God is up to in the world.

So who's going to win? Humans or God? Well, you get a hint here from Genesis that God's going to accomplish this plan to bless—but how is he going to get the humans to partner with him again? How is he going to restore them and bring their *ra* and turn it into *tov*, and restore them to himself? Dear reader. Dear reader.

[Musical Break (1:01:31—1:01:38)]

All right. Thanks for listening to *Exploring My Strange Bible* podcast. I hope that was an interesting dive into the first book of the Torah—such a compelling story. We're going to keep exploring, in part two, of the Torah Crash Course series that's going to come up next. So thanks for listening.

[Musical Finale (1:01:54—1:02:07)]