

# ***SOUNDINGS***

# **ABOUT GENESIS**

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Literate or literal. Which type of reader  
are you?

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**BY: KAREN A. BELLENIR**  
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# About Genesis

## PULL UP A CHAIR.

I'd like to talk to you about the opening chapters of Genesis.

Before we get started, I want to tell you a bit about myself. Please pay attention. This is relevant, and there will be a test.

I am a writer. I am interested in how language works and how it has been used through the ages to convey information. Writing is not humanity's oldest profession (at least according to one popular joke), but it holds the distinction of being associated with the dawn of civilization. Technologies of the trade have evolved through the millennia.



Once upon a time

    A scribe chiseled statements on stone surfaces

        The world turned on its axis

    A poet applied pigment to papyrus and palm

        The world turned on its axis

    Hands wrought scrolls to record history and human hopes

        The world turned on its axis

    Copyists working with animal skin created codices

        The world turned on its axis

    A printer put words on paper

        The world turned on its axis

    Dramatists dash off drafts in digital form

        The world will turn on its axis

My office includes diverse mementos representing the technological development of my chosen profession. A quill pen on display boasts that it "wrote history." During his day, my grandfather carried an antique, portable typewriter off to college. It now sits in a place of honor on the corner of my desk. My favorite pen lies in a drawer, somewhat idly since the birth of the digital age. My college diploma gathers dust in a corner. It says my education focused on English Literature and Linguistics.

That's enough about me.

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## READY FOR THE TEST?

Answer each of the following questions with “Yes” or “No.” Please don’t peek ahead at my answers until you’ve decided on yours.

1. When the above text claimed that writing was a profession associated with the dawn of civilization, did you think I meant to imply that civilization began on one specific morning at sunrise?
2. When I composed the portion of the text introduced with the line “Once upon a time,” did you think I intended that you should interpret that portion of the text in the same way as the surrounding paragraphs?
3. When the text claimed that “My office includes diverse mementos representing the technological development of my chosen profession,” did you think I believed this list of mementos to be comprehensive of all technologies?
4. Do you think that the quill pen in my office is the actual physical artifact used to write all of the documents that have been important in human history?
5. Do you think my college diploma can really talk?

## HERE ARE MY ANSWERS.

1. No. When I wrote “the dawn of civilization” I was referring to a time period that lacks a precise beginning. Its formative characteristics, including community settlements, the development of agriculture, and the use of written records, spanned an era.

2. No. That portion of the text is a poem. Poetry and narrative serve different purposes. The narrative provides explanatory information. A poem asks you to bring your own knowledge and experience into an interaction with text that draws your attention to specified concepts. You probably recognized the poem by the way its form differed from the surrounding text (featuring indented lines, alliterative phrases, a refrain; contrasted with paragraphs made up of sentences).

Poetic expressions often use figurative language and invite readers to consider abstract ideas. In my poem, terms such as “scribe” and “poet” stand for diverse writers of all types. The tools and practices mentioned merely hint at the vast variety of the technologies they used. The refrain imposes a rhythm emphasizing that innovation follows innovation in a repeating cycle; the last refrain is modified because that future is yet to be.

Poetry frequently relies on metaphor, allegory, symbolism, and a profusion of stylistic devices customary to the ways people use language in a figurative manner. The figurative use of language is not limited to poetry, however. Even in every-day conversation, people use words in figurative ways so often many do not realize they have done so. For example, if you’ve ever heard a boss ask

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for “all hands on deck,” you probably understood the intent without pausing to consider that “all hands” is a figurative way to say “everyone”, and “on deck” is a figurative way to request participation.

3. No. I provided an illustrative list of some, but not all, of the items in my office. I also did not intend to imply that my personal collection represented all, or even most, of the technological developments across the span of human history. The items I possess are simply mine.

4. No. My quill pen is actually just a feather with the end of the quill cut so that it is pointed. I don't think it actually was used to write anything. I don't even know if it can carry ink. I bought it many years ago as a souvenir during a visit to Williamsburg, Virginia. The boast is merely a light-hearted reminder that, historically speaking, a lot of writing was done with quill pens.

5. No. My diploma is a piece of paper, an inanimate object. It can't talk. Ascribing human characteristics (like the ability to speak) to something that is nonhuman (like a piece of paper) is another commonly employed figure of speech (that is, another example of a figurative use of language). You probably use it frequently without realizing it: For example, “I saw the cake, and it called out to me so sweetly...”

How did you do? If your answers align with mine, Congratulations! That means you read and interpreted the text the way its author (me) intended. If you go back and read it again, looking for figures of speech and poetic devices, you'll find more than the ones highlighted in these questions.

## HERE'S A BONUS QUESTION.



Does the fact that I composed a text that employed figurative language and literary devices mean that what I wrote was untrue?

No. I wrote what was true, and I expect literate readers to understand. The difference between reading a piece of literature literately (with an understanding of the common ways in which an author uses language to convey meaning) and literally (with an imposed exactitude of narrow meaning that disregards the concepts an author may have intended to communicate) can be vast. For example, in the familiar biblical story about David and Goliath, David tells his opponent, “This day the Lord will deliver you into my hand” (1 Samuel 17:46a). A literal reading would assume that Goliath must be quite tiny to fit into David's hand. If you've ever encountered the story *The Indian in the Cupboard* (by Lynne Reid Banks), you probably can envision the size scales that would be necessary for this accomplishment. On the other hand (yes, I'm making a point and a pun), a literate reader (rather than a literal one) would understand that the author probably used the word hand to stand for power or control.



## **SO, LET'S PUT AWAY OUR TEST PAPERS AND TURN TO THE BEGINNING.**

Please open your Bible to the first three chapters of Genesis. And, just for fun, also open a Bible in a translation that differs from what you normally read. If you don't have one easily at hand, you can choose from among a wide assortment at [BibleGateway.com](http://BibleGateway.com). The text you find may be presented in narrative paragraphs, it may present each verse on its own line, or it may use a typographic style (such as a hanging indent or a stanza arrangement) to indicate a literary genre that differs from narrative prose.

A genre is merely a category into which a composition (written, visual, or musical) can be classified. This process of categorization can be an important tool in grasping informational intent. For example, if you saw a book with lists of food ingredients and directions for combining them, you would probably recognize it as a cookbook and infer that the author (or editor) wanted to help you prepare something to eat. If you tried to identify recurrent ingredients as characters involved in an intricate plot, you would miss the author's intent and go hungry. On the other hand, consider a popular children's book by Dr. Seuss that counts differently colored fish and incorporates an assortment of other creatures (One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish). If you tried to use its lists of creatures as ingredients in a recipe, the likely result would be trouble.

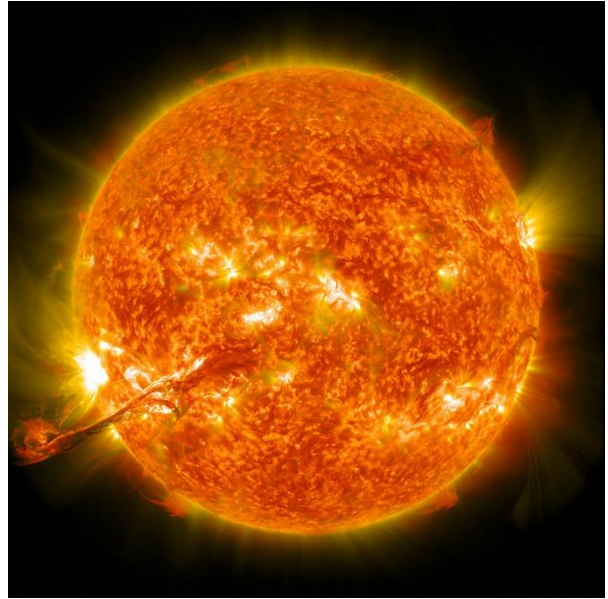
Within the first few chapters of Genesis (and also within the entire Bible), you may find a mixture of typographical styles. These techniques show how some translators have interpreted and categorized the ancient text (which, by the way, did not employ chapter and verse numbers; these revisions were made in the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries). The formatting differences illustrate some of the ways faithful people have attempted to convey information about the multiple literary genres included in the Bible. Even if people sometimes reach different conclusions regarding which verses fall into which genres, the presence of some textual variety is usually acknowledged.

## **LITERATE OR LITERAL?**

There are folks who argue that there is only one way to understand biblical text. They insist that each word must be defined exclusively in a literal manner in strict accordance with one concrete definition. For example, chapter one verse three tells about the creation of light. Literal-minded readers may insist that this refers specifically and only to daylight or sunlight. By contrast, literate readers may discern a broader range of meaning. For just a few examples: Light may

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mean any type of electromagnetic radiation that falls within the portion of the spectrum that is visible to the human eye. Or, light can encompass the entire electromagnetic spectrum, including portions invisible to unaided human eyes, such as infrared and ultraviolet. Or light could refer to an object that creates the conditions necessary for human vision or insight (please turn on the light; let's shed some light on this situation). Or it could function as an abstract reference to spiritual illumination (I see the light.)



Literate readers bring all these possible meanings (and many more) to the text. It isn't necessary to select one and only one. In fact, various meanings may have more significance at different times. The text's genre often gives indications regarding the appropriate amount of flexibility to be used in interpreting images and allusions, understanding metaphors or similes, or responding to repetitions or other literary devices. Although such indications can serve as general guides, the process of discovering a more profound personal revelation embedded within a text often results from a spiritual whisper that expands upon the shallow, surface reading of a word or phrase.

## **TEXTUAL CLUES HELP IDENTIFY GENRE.**

The first three chapters of Genesis offer textual clues that lead me to believe that the primary genres are poetry and parable. The first chapter tells the creation story using images of cosmic happenings with allusions to processes beyond human understanding. There is a refrain and a progression. I hear repetitions that create a rhythm and stylistic phrasing that differs from more straightforward narrative accounts (albeit with some variation according to the translator's skills and stylistic interpretation). In other words, poetry.

A retelling of the creation account in story form begins in the second chapter. It provides instruction through a narrative that involves human actors and culminates in a moral lesson. In other words, it is a parable (although one could argue that the serpent's participation causes it to cross a definitional boundary into something more precisely classified as a fable; a fable is a parable-like story that evokes animals or other non-human actors to build toward its moral lesson).

Some people prefer to view the first part of Genesis as a document that presents scientific and historic data. The text itself argues against such an interpretation, and attempting to force it into such a frame creates as much difficulty as cooking up a Seuss stew.

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Let's consider the word "day." You know what a literal day is, right? A 24-hour period during which the earth spins once about its axis. But, how does the text actually define the word "day"?

"God called the light Day," chapter one, verse five. The text makes no reference to the earth's rotational spin or its relationship to the sun. In fact, the sun itself doesn't enter the picture until Day Four (1:16). The refrain counting days up to the seventh day of rest seems to be a poetic strategy for indicating an orderly progression. For another clue, look ahead to chapter 2. "In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens..." The day? One day? Not six? If a person were to read the text as a historically based, scientific essay, the opening chapters of Genesis contain contradictions such as this. For just one other example, in 2:5-7 God creates man before creating plants; but, in 1:11-13 the plants come first.

Reading the accounts according to the standards of their literary genres resolves these difficulties, and the two versions complement each other. They reinforce divine agency, order, and will. The poem talks about what God created. It opens a window into the mystery of creation and invites the reader to discover all the ways in which God's creative desires shaped the universe, right down to our personal place within it. The parable teaches about why God created: God's purpose expressed in breathing life into that which was formed, God's desire for relationship with creation and created beings, and God's willingness to let creatures choose between goodness and its opposite. The story's moral arc describes a compassionate deity, the provisions made for humans to thrive, and the consequences of ignoring God's instructions.



Ignoring the literary genres present in biblical texts limits the message in a way that falls far short of what its ultimate author intended, and the practice leads to conflict and confusion. When young people are taught to read the Bible as if it were a scientific paper or court document, they grow up lacking the skills needed to understand the difference between a fact and a truth. They miss opportunities to dig deeper for a living, spiritual encounter. Then, when they meet teachers or have experiences that introduce them

to knowledge that seems to challenge the literal meaning of a biblical passage, they experience a crisis of faith. Many conclude that it is necessary to choose between God and what they have learned about the physical world, how it functions, and the roles people play within its communities. This is a false and unnecessary choice, yet all too often people feel pressed to make it. They adopt an unyielding form of religion that discards people who hold other opinions, or they abandon God along with the scripture they cannot reconcile.

The choice can be avoided altogether when one realizes that the Bible is a treasure. And it is a literary work. If God had not intended to reveal God's self through language and literature, God

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could have relied exclusively on other means. For just a few examples, God’s self can be revealed through prayer, spiritual enlightenment, community, symbolism, ritual, and tradition. Yet among these options, God seems content to allow humankind access to a sacred text that encompasses many different literary genres: poems and parables as we’ve discussed, but also biographies, prophecies, letters, instructions, speeches, essays, apocalypses, and more. Biblical pages are filled with all the forms of literary expression humans have used since the first scribe scratched on a stone: analogies, aphorisms, euphemisms, juxtapositions, symbols, parables, paradoxes, and poems, to name just a few. Recognizing this diversity opens doors for greater understanding, increased personal meaning, and a closer relationship with the divine creator.

The next time you read the opening chapters of Genesis, see how many layers of meaning you can unwrap. Let there be light.

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