

God's Never-Ending Story: Unit 1, chapter 1, section 1

A Love Story

It is said that the course of true love never runs smoothly. There is almost a standard plot to a love story: a couple meets and there is mutual attraction; the relationship develops through a series of difficulties, misunderstandings, obstacles, misrepresentations and oppositions, but none of this completely ends the sense of belonging to each other; the couple finally overcome all obstacles and ride off into the sunset (they used to get married and live happily ever after, but that is so old-fashioned! Even "ride off into the sunset" is not what really happens, but you can no doubt read between the lines).

There is a sense in which this applies to the story we are looking at - we could call it God's love story. There are some obvious differences: one of the partners is never really accessible except through the reports and responses of the other partner; the story is not yet complete; and no one is about to ride off into the sunset.

Having said that, there are also some useful parallels with a love story. In God's love story, the plot is not immediately obvious. Like other traditional love stories, there is a lot of misunderstanding and rebellion on the part of one partner to the relationship, and even abandonment of the relationship from time to time. There are various attempts to re-establish the relationship. The actual nature of the love and the relationship involved and what it demands changes over time as well.

From a Christian perspective, the clue to understanding God's love story emerges in the story of Jesus. At last the true nature of this love story is revealed. We have the proper key for understanding the direction of things. And, of course, the story is by no means complete. From the time of Jesus onwards the ability of his followers to live in accordance with the story has been limited by the frailty of human existence. We catch glimpses of the hope and fulfilment of the story, but the reality is strewn with misunderstandings, rebellions, and conflicts. We will come back to some of those stories later in this series.

Where to Begin?

We expect a book to start at the beginning, but the Bible is not quite as simple as that. It begins with the first eleven chapters of Genesis, which form a kind of backdrop to everything that follows. Let's take a quick look at Genesis.

The book of Genesis falls into several clear sections:

Chapters 1 -11 cover primeval history - how the world and humanity began, how humanity went astray and murder came into the world (the story of Cain and Abel), how God thought to "start over again", but rescued Noah and his family and established a covenant with them with a promise to all living creatures (Gen 9:8-17), how the many languages of the world came about (the story of the tower of Babel - Gen 11:1-9).

Chapters 12 -25 cover the story of Abram/Abraham and Sarai/Sarah.

Chapters 26 -36 follow with the stories of the next generations: Isaac and Rebekah and their sons, Jacob and Esau.

Chapters 37 -50 continue the story of Jacob and his family and in particular the fortunes (and misfortunes) of the most important member of the family, Joseph, who ends up in Egypt.

We will come back to the first part of Genesis later, but if we ask when the love story begins, the best answer is, with Abraham. In both the Jewish and the Christian tradition, Abraham is regarded as the first character who consciously responds to this particular story. The Bible puts it like this:

Now the Lord said to Abram,

"Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. 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 shall be blessed." (Gen 12:1-3).

This is the starting-point that the story keeps returning to as the Jewish people told and retold the story.

SIDE TRACK Telling our stories in a New Zealand context almost invariably includes talking about transport - the waka, boat or plane that brought us or our ancestors here. When talking about origins we also talk about the dreams and aspirations that were part of the journey, and the way the dreams changed as the reality unfolded. To have no story is to be tragically lost. So how would you begin to tell your story?