

# Tales of Old

Stories from The Old Testament

Retold by Clive Johnson



**Labyrinthe Press**

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First published February 2020.

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Labyrinthe Press  
Leigh-on-Sea, United Kingdom  
[www.labyrinthepublishers.com](http://www.labyrinthepublishers.com)

Book Layout ©2013 BookDesignTemplates.com  
Cover illustration ©2019 Universitaria  
Distributed by IngramSpark and CreateSpace

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
Tales of Old/ Clive Johnson. — 1st ed.  
ISBN 978-1-9162276-2-0 (Print edition)  
ISBN 978-1-9162276-3-7 (Electronic edition)  
Also available as an Audible digital audiobook.

*Listen for what God says in everything you do,  
and everywhere you go; he will lead you along  
the right path.*

—PROVERBS 3:6 (interpretation)

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*To Miranda, whose fascination with God's Creation  
touches the hearts of all who know her.*



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# Introduction

IN A 2019 Intelligence<sup>2</sup> debate, entitled *Old Testament vs. New Testament: Passion, Poetry and the World's Greatest Stories, Which of these two texts is the greater, in terms of message, literature and legacy?*,<sup>1</sup> the Old Testament won over the audience hands down. Its canon provides one of the richest works in English literature, not to mention the literature of many other tongues.

What sets this extensive collection of inspiring writings apart is its breadth. Its pages cover topics as diverse as the meaning of holiness to a vision for the end of times, as well as detailing the history of Israel, offering

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<sup>1</sup> Old Testament vs New Testament: Passion, Poetry and the World's Greatest Stories, Which of these two texts is the greater, in terms of message, literature and legacy? Available at <https://www.intelligencesquared.com/events/old-testament-vs-new-testament/>, accessed 9 August 2019.

words of wisdom to live by, and laying down the law for an ancient people.

Its message of a forgiving God, but one who must be honored before all others, features strongly, while its many colorful characters have inspired writers, film makers, painters, composers and many more over the centuries.

Most of all, the Old Testament is a *book of stories*. These were written not just to be read—and at a time when very few were blessed with that particular faculty—but to be told to an enthralled audience, and preached by learned elders, in the true nature of the oral tradition. Following this great tradition, the stories in this book should ideally be read aloud.

Myths, elaborate illustrations, and actual factual accounts may all play their part. Yet here, the crucial purpose of the stories is not to entertain, but to inform, to urge to action, and often to warn. Each carries a powerful message that can be heard and understood.

Giants, fabulous creatures, and unworldly beings all feature. Celebrated leaders, maverick prophets, as well as good and bad kings and queens have important roles to play. Within its pages are described unfathomable miracles and celestial wonders, violent wars and the crushing of entire cities.

This collection of tales doesn't shy away from being candid, vivid, and even explicit in its descriptions.

We read about angels and demons, heroes and cowards, the lowly and the exalted. Exotic visitors from Ara-

bia, kings with strange sounding names, and rags-to-riches princes all make their mark.

Many of the Old Testament's cast of characters live shadowy lives. Just a few remain faithful to God, and these are the individuals whose examples we are encouraged to follow.

The backdrop for much of the narrative is often dramatic—snow-capped mountains, sweeping deserts, whirlwinds, parting seas and a burning bush—all play their part. We even venture to the depths of the sea.

The selected collection in this book focuses on the better-known tales in the canon. Prescriptions of the law, psalms and proverbs, and the lives of many of the prophets are left for others to tell.

This retelling attempts to remain faithful to the message of scripture, if occasionally using artistic license, and not always relaying the full detail of what is contained in the books upon which it is based. Thus, for example, the dialogue between Job and his three friends is abbreviated, while the story of Noah is elaborated with fresh color.

These stories are written for children from around the age of five years and up, but should delight any reader. In writing and researching them, I have been touched by many of the messages, surprised to be shown something new in a story that I thought was very familiar to me.

This is the nature of scripture, of course—every reading brings something new, a lesson or purpose that's

relevant for the moment. My hope and prayer is that this wonderful capacity for fresh interpretation isn't lost in this retelling.

So follow, as we now journey from a perfect garden into thorny wild lands, make an exodus from Egypt to a promised land, meet strongmen and scheming women, dive inside the belly of a giant fish, and watch an entire city crumble at the sound of a battle cry.

Let us huddle with Noah and his family inside his ark, marvel at the wisdom of Solomon, and feel Joseph's yearning for his father and family when he is reunited with his brothers.

These great stories of old have lessons aplenty to teach, and wonders to inspire. They are as fresh and meaningful today as they have always been.



Note: in keeping with common convention, honorific titles are used for God throughout this book. Pronouns referring to Him similarly use title case.

While aiming to remain faithful to scripture, an attempt has been made to introduce gender neutrality into the stories, as well as to feature the strong female role models that appear in the Old Testament, alongside the male. Thus, for example, Adam's gender is not stated until God creates Eve. The terms "person" and "human

being" are preferred to "man", except where the latter is specifically intended within the context of the story.

Each chapter presents a different story, ordered in the sequence that these appear in scripture. Each is separately available as a short story on Kindle, and as an Audible audiobook.



## CHAPTER ONE

# In the Beginning: The Story of Adam and Eve, and The Great Creation

IN THE BEGINNING, there was only God. God's Word, what He wanted to happen, caused everything to be.

So it was, that our Earth, the Sun and Moon, and all the stars in the sky, were created by God. Before even all these existed, God still existed.

Then He created the Heavens and Earth, which was at first without its gently rounded shape that it has today. A great swirling mass of gases churned around in space—dark grey, growing and squeezing, not revealing what form it might take next.

God decided that out from the darkness, there should come light. And so, He commanded that darkness and light should be separated, making night and day.

And so it was, that the very first day came to be.

As the gases started to gather, and water appeared, God willed that they be separated into what we now see as the sky, and the waters that bob up and down as the sea. So, the blue sky and the blue seas became separated, making space for air to fill the void between them.

Morning came again, and then another evening—and so ended what we may call the second day.

On the third day, God decreed that the water of the seas be gathered together, making space for land.

When the land had formed, He desired that all sorts of plants and trees, grasses and ferns, and nuts and berries should come to grow upon it. Through their seeds, these would each continue to grow, providing food for the many animals and people that were later to be born.

Evening came again. And so ended the third day.

When morning came once more, God decided that there should be bright lights that should shine in the sky, both at nighttime, and by day. These would shine light, give guidance, mark out the times of the seasons, and the times for celebrating and remembering.



In the night sky, countless twinkling stars made their presence known. God set the Moon in motion, reflecting its light back to the Earth when nighttime came.

In the sky that appears each day, God made our glorious Sun to shine brightly, giving light so that everyone could see, and providing warmth to shield us from the bitter cold.

Evening came again, and so ended the fourth day.

God then saw that there should be creatures in the sea, and too, animals of many kinds that would fly through the air.

Through His Word, He caused sea creatures of all kinds to come to be, dwelling deeply in the oceans, and swimming freely in the rivers that rush down from tall mountaintops. Giant whales were created, and the tiniest angelfish. Sharks and swordfish, turtles and teeming trout—He gave life to them all, giving them His blessing so that they might multiply and continue to live through their offspring.

God gave life to all the birds of the sky, and to the butterflies and other flying insects too. He made powerful wings for the mighty albatross, so that it might be able to fly across an entire ocean. In different colors, and with so many different shapes and sizes, He created all the creatures of the air. Their squawks and heart-felt songs were like beautiful music to God's ears, and He loved them all, as He loves all of His Creation.

This, then, was the fifth day.

God saw His wonderful world, and all its living things,  
and He felt very happy with what had come to be.

On the sixth day, God decreed that there should be  
animals of many kinds to populate the Earth.

These too, He willed should multiply and give birth to  
others of their kind.

He made happen the coming of wild beasts, tiny field  
mice, and scurrying lizards. He allowed the giraffe to  
grow its tall neck, and the elephant its swinging trunk.  
Dogs and horses, lions and lemurs—these, and many  
other creatures of the land came to be, as God designed.

While his world was very beautiful, rich in variety,  
and constantly alive with color and movement, God felt  
that his Earth was missing a creature or a plant with  
whom He could have a special relationship. He desired  
that there might be one among His creation that had His  
own image, and who would be invested with intelligence  
and responsibility to care for His world.

So, God created humankind. To the firstborn of our  
own ancestors, He gave the name Adam.

God showed his new friend the wonderful world that  
He had created—a world filled with all kinds of sweet-  
smelling flowers and trees overflowing with luscious  
green leaves. He led Adam beside gently bobbing  
streams of water, to grassy meadows, and high mountain  
paths.

"I give you this place to rule over!" said God. "Take  
care of all My creatures that swim in the sea, and look

after all the plants and trees, and the many animals that roam on the land!"

"Grow strong, and be happy. I give you My love and My blessing!

"For food, I give you all the plants that bear seed. For all the birds in the sky, and all creatures on the Earth, I give all the green plants, such that they also might eat.

"You are My beloved Creation! You are very precious in My sight, and it pleases Me to see that My Creation dwells together in harmony!"

After God had spoken, evening came again. And so ended the sixth day.



This is then the story of how our wonderful world came to be. When God had completed everything that He willed to be, He rested.

"This is my precious world," said God. "I am well pleased with it, and see that it is good!"

God decreed that the seventh day, the day that He rested, should be a holy day. So it is for us today, that we need not work every day, but should have time for rest. This is a day when we might especially remember everything that God has created for us.



When He created Adam, God breathed life into Adam's nostrils. As it was for Adam, every breath that we take gives us life, and connects us with everything that is.

God led Adam to a beautiful oasis that He had created. He called this "The Garden of Eden."

The garden was rich with many fine green plants and brilliantly blossoming flowers, for it was fed by the waters of four mighty rivers, which branched out from a single stream.

In the middle of the garden stood two giant trees—one that was known as the "Tree of Life," while the other was called "The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil."

The land was very fertile, producing rich fruit for Adam to eat. There was gold there, and shiny black onyx, and other precious stones.

The plants supported many kinds of life, which all lived happily together, for there was no reason for them to argue. God provided everything that they needed, and He commanded Adam to be their caretaker.

God gave Adam the fruit of every plant and tree to eat. But there was one tree that He warned must not be eaten from.

"You must never eat from The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil," warned God, "For if you take the fruit from there, you will surely die!"

Adam listened carefully to what God said, but did not understand His meaning.

Adam gave names to all of the creatures that God had created. One by one, God brought one of each kind before Adam. Some seemed more like His human creation than others—such as monkeys that could nearly stand on their hind legs, and parrots that could even speak the same words uttered by Adam!

God wanted Adam to have a special friend with whom he could share his life. Yet, none of the other animals seemed to be a suitable companion for him.

So God caused Adam to fall into a deep sleep. God then formed a second human being from Adam's own body. Adam he made male, and his partner, who later became known as Eve, he made female.

Adam said to Eve, "We are made of the same bones, and are from the same flesh. When we are together, we are as one flesh."

These first two people wore no clothes, but were not ashamed for being naked.



One day, while they were walking in the garden, Adam and Eve came upon a snake, who had coiled himself around the thick trunk of a tree, and slithered to the end of a strong, overhanging branch, from where he could raise his head to speak to the humans.

"The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil is here," said the snake. "Why do you not eat from it? Is it really

so that God has told you that if you do so, you will surely die?"

"This is indeed what God has told us!" answered Eve. "We may eat from any other tree but this one."

"Oh, you foolish people!" teased the snake. "Do you really believe that eating the most delicious fruit that hangs from this tree will kill you?"

"I tell you that you will not die! God knows that when you eat this fruit, your eyes will be opened, and you will see just as He does—knowing the difference between good and evil. This is knowledge that He does not want you to have!"

"See, the fruit that hangs from the tree is waiting for you! See how ripe it is for picking!"

The snake continued to invite the curiosity of his human neighbors. Eventually, Eve was persuaded to try a small bite from the fruit of which he spoke, which appeared to be mouthwatering and too tempting to pass by. She offered a little to Adam, who also took a bite from the fruit that God had forbidden to be eaten.

In an instant, what the snake had claimed came to be true—the eyes of both Adam and Eve were opened to the existence of both good and evil, to what keeps them in company with God, and what separates them from Him.

Then they saw that they were naked, and they felt ashamed.

Quickly, they gathered thick leaves from the garden, which they sewed together to make simple clothes with which to cover themselves.

Afraid that God would be angry with them when He learned what they had done, they sought to hide. But God soon made His presence known, calling out to them, "Where are you hiding?"

The terrified couple came out to face God, knowing that they could not keep secret what they had done.

"We have eaten from the tree that You told us we must not approach," began Adam.

"Eve offered me some of the fruit, and this I took into my mouth."

"What is this you have done?" demanded God.

Eve then stepped forward to offer her confession.

"Mighty LORD, I am guilty for eating from this tree. I was deceived by the snake, who assured me that were I to eat from the tree, I would not die. Foolishly, I was led astray!"

God's heart was broken, because His children had disobeyed Him. From a place of such beauty and perfection, His human creation had sought out what they were not meant to have, and so separated themselves from always trusting Him.

"You are the most cursed among creatures!" God rebuked the snake. "From this moment forward, you will crawl upon your belly, ever close to being crushed under the foot of humankind! Yet too, you may strike at his heel, and there will be no friendship between you!"

"I will make you suffer pain!" God then told Eve in His anger. "When you give birth to your offspring you will

suffer, and no more will you enjoy the many comforts that I have provided for you."

"As for you," God then addressed Adam, "You will roam the Earth in search of food and shelter. The rich abundance of fruits and fine green plants that grow in My garden will no longer be yours to eat for free. You will work hard, in fields that are littered with bushes of thistles and thorns. All the days of your life you will toil, and no task will be made easy for you!"

God provided clothes for Adam and Eve, then led them away from the garden.

Beyond its boundaries, He knew that they would not be able to take from the Tree of Life, which would give them eternal life, as is so for God.

"When you have worked all the days of your life," said God, "Your bodies will return to dust, as it was from dust that you were made!"



Eve soon gave birth to two boys. The firstborn was called Cain, and to his brother, she gave the name Abel.

When they grew older, Cain and Abel worked the land for their parents. Cain grew crops, and tilled the soil. Abel looked after livestock, and became a diligent shepherd.

They both brought offerings from their labor to present to God. Cain brought fruits of the soil, while Abel



brought fat calves and newly born lambs, that were the pride of his flock.

God was especially happy with Abel's gift, which made Cain feel angry and rejected.

God then spoke to Cain, asking him, "Why do you have such anger in your heart? If you do as I command, then you have no need to feel angry. But when you do not, your heart will be filled with hatred, and this will lead to your own destruction!"

Cain continued to be angry, feeling jealous toward his brother for the favor that God had shown to him.

The elder of the two sons burned with rage. And so it was that, when they were both in the fields together, Cain came upon his brother, catching him by surprise, and killing him.

God then summoned Cain, and challenged him, "Where now is your brother, my son, Abel?"

"I do not know!" Cain replied. "Am I the keeper of my brother?"

God knew that Cain was lying, for He knows everything that comes to pass.

"The land is stained with your brother's blood!" roared God. "With your own hands, you have taken away the life of your brother! For this, the land that is stained with the blood that is on your hands will no longer provide for you. No more will you reap abundant crops, but will now wander from place to place, ever in search of food and a place to rest!"

Cain prostrated himself before God. "My Great LORD!" he screamed, "This is too much for me to bear! I will never find peace, and as I wander, I will surely be set upon by strangers and be killed!"

Yet God promised Cain, "This will not be so! Anyone who kills you will face My wrath, and their punishment will be seven times greater than that which you must now endure."

Cain then began to wander the land, eventually coming to a place to the east of the garden, which is known as Nod. He married, and his wife bore a son, whose name was Enoch.

Enoch in turn married also, and his offspring grew, forming the next of a line of generations that take us to the time of Noah, when a great flood of water came upon the land (but that is a story for another day).

Adam and Eve also had another son, whose name was Seth. He too began a line of many generations, and saw his father live to a great age.

By the time Adam and Eve died, many of their descendants had again started turning back to trusting God. Yet they had traveled far from the original garden, and the life of beauty and perfection that God had once provided for them.

Our journeys through our own lives may sometimes be difficult, like those of Adam and Eve. But we should never forget that if we work hard, and are faithful to God, we may one day find our way back to the life of having only good things, as God wants for us.

We are all His children, and He longs for us to live in harmony with Him.







## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Clive Johnson is an interfaith minister, storyteller and retreat host. He has had a lifelong interest in the power of myth and the oral tradition of storytelling. He has no fixed home, pursuing a nomadic lifestyle that allows him to follow his heart. This is his eleventh book.

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