

## 4. GENESIS ... BACK TO THE BEGINNING: History or Poetry?

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“**H**ave you not read that He who made them from the beginning of creation made them male and female?” --- **Jesus** (Matthew 19: 4; Mark 10: 6).

Should the **Genesis** account of creation be taken as literal history --- just as Jesus evidently believed in our opening verse?

The timeless debate as to whether the primeval creation narrative in the first chapters of **Genesis** is actual history or just poetic allegory penned millennia ago by nomadic goat herders --- as I heard one Bible critic describe it --- continues to rage on. Are the first chapters of **Genesis** to be located in real space-time history or should they be consigned to ‘dreamtime’ mythology? ( <sup>1</sup> )

Cracking the old chestnut questions --- whether the days of the creation week are literal 24-hours; whether Adam & Eve were real historic individuals in a real garden; whether there was an actual tree of the knowledge of good and evil; whether there was a “talking snake”, and so forth --- requires lots of prayerful and careful study.

It stands to reason that if **Genesis** is not actual history, where then, should we stop with the rest of the Biblical narrative? Did the Red Sea crossing really occur? What about the Virginal conception of Messiah in Mary or the miracles of Jesus, or his resurrection? Are angels and demons real or merely figments of pre-scientific imagination?

We have previously indicated that most, if not all of the bioethical questions our generation faces are found in principle, or in ‘seed-form’, in the Book of Beginnings. So let there be no doubt that, the way we approach **Genesis chapters 1 -11** has huge ramifications for our individual lives and destinies --- not to mention its ripple effect upon the worldview of our youth and wider society. Mindset determines morals.

### TRADITIONAL HEBREW UNDERSTANDING

If anybody should be able to understand the *genre* and the *original intent* of the book of **Genesis** it surely must be the Hebrew people themselves. Jews have for thousands of years unanimously held that all of **Genesis** is historical narrative which records events that actually took place in human history. **Professor James Barr**, **Regius Professor** of Hebrew at the University of Oxford has written;

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<sup>1</sup> Actually, the debate really only rages over the first eleven chapters of Genesis, because chapters 12 to 50 are very clearly written as authentic history as they describe the lives of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and his 12 sons who were the ancestral heads of the tribes of Israel. Genesis 12 onwards is thus located within the earliest known written languages of the Near Middle East and falls within the purview of documented ancient history.

Probably, so far as I know, there is no professor of Hebrew or Old Testament at any world-class university who does not believe that the writer(s) of Genesis 1-11 intended to convey to their readers the ideas that: (a) creation took place in a series of six days which were the same as the days of 24 hours we now experience, (b) the figures contained in the Genesis genealogies provided by simple addition a chronology from the beginning of the world up to later stages in the biblical story, (c) Noah's Flood was understood to be world-wide and extinguish all human and animal life except for those in the ark.

Or, to put it negatively, the apologetic arguments which suppose the 'days' of creation to be long eras of time, the figures of years not be chronological, and the flood to be a merely local Mesopotamian flood, are not taken seriously by any such professors, as far as I know. ( <sup>2</sup> )

Yes. Jews and Christians have traditionally understood the first chapters of **Genesis** are not poetic allegory but historical narrative expressed in Hebrew prose. This doesn't *ipso facto* mean we are bound to that interpretive grid, but it's a very helpful indicator.

### INTERNAL LITERARY EVIDENCE

The big question facing us is this: What kind of literature is **Genesis** and what was the original *meaning* of the words? If we can't get this fundamental issue sorted out then we are open to the dismissive objection, "Well, that's just your interpretation!"

Theologian **Herman Hoeksema** (1886-1965) has this sound advice when we read the Bible;

There is no separate 'God-meaning' for words that is different from 'man's meaning', and neither is there a 'divine logic' that's separate from 'human logic', otherwise Scripture simply could not communicate God's truth to man: All of Scripture is given us that we might understand it ... all of it is adapted to our human mind, so that, even though there are many things in that revelation of God which we cannot fathom, there is nothing in it that is contrary to human intelligence and logic ... either the logic of revelation is our logic, or there is no revelation. ( <sup>3</sup> )

God says what He means and means what He says, so there is no excuse for non-comprehension! When interpreting the Bible, we must be guided by the same verifiable grammatico-historical rules we use for any other literature --- how would the original audience have understood the words in their own context?

To say, "It's just your interpretation" --- an appeal to individual fallibility and bias! --- is in fact to say that there is no such thing as objective truth. **Jonathan Sarfati** writes;

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<sup>2</sup> As quoted in *Defending Genesis*, Creation Book Publishers (US), 2018, p110

<sup>3</sup> **Hoeksema, H.**, *The Clark Van Til Controversy* (based on his *Standard Bearer* editorials from 1944-1946), p8, cf. also pp26,27 and as quoted in *The Genesis Account* by **Jonathan D. Sarfati**, Creation Book Publishers (US) 2nd edition, 2015, p37

“When someone tells you it’s impossible to know 100% how to correctly interpret a piece of writing”, he certainly intends that people correctly interpret *this* particular piece of his own writing. But he has no basis for objecting when an opponent throws his postmodernism back at him and decides to ‘interpret’ that statement as meaning, ‘A piece of writing has an objective meaning which is usually possible to interpret correctly.’ “ ( <sup>4</sup> )

Okay. So let's take a simple example to illustrate why the **Genesis** account of creation is structured prose and not poetic allegory --- why it is meant to be taken in its traditional grammatico-historical meaning.

## THE GARDEN OF EDEN

Was there an actual **Garden of Eden**? How can we tell if it’s not just a metaphor for an idyllic existence? We read;

Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden, and there he put the man he had formed. And the LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground ... A river watering the garden flowed from Eden; from there it was separated into four headwaters. The name of the first is the Pishon; it winds through the entire land of Havilah, where there is gold ... The name of the second river is the Gihon; it winds through the entire land of Cush. The name of the third river is the Tigris; it runs along the east side of Asshur. And the fourth river is the Euphrates (Gen. 2: 8-14).

This is a geography lesson: Place names, directions, landmarks such as rivers and other topographical features are identified with precision. It bears all the hallmarks of being a locatable place on the earth.

Of course it will be objected that these literary features are all found in *The Lord of the Rings*! But everybody knows what kind of literature that story belongs to, so is **Genesis** in the same category? Besides, it will be countered, if **Eden** was a real place with four identifiable rivers, then where is it today?

The Bible answer is that **Eden** was inundated by being buried in the global **Flood** which radically rearranged earth’s topography;

**Which of the trees of Eden can be compared with you in splendour and majesty? Yet you too will be brought down with the trees of Eden to the earth below (Ez. 31: 18).**

Here Ezekiel likens the historical destruction of Pharaoh **and his hordes (v.1)** within recorded ancient history to the burial **of Eden to the earth below**. A careful reading of the preceding verses also gives hints that the rivers and lush vegetation which once covered **Eden** and its surrounds are now nothing like their original created condition.

So the Bible indicates that Eden’s pre-Flood geography was vastly different to that of Mesopotamia and the Near Middle East of today. According to verses like **Genesis 7: 11**

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<sup>4</sup> *Op Cit., Defending Genesis*, Creation Book Publishers (US), 2018, p43

and 8: 2 during the Flood the crust of the earth was massively upheaved ... all the fountains (springs) of the deep were broken up, and the torrents of heaven were opened.

The Bible says **The Garden of Eden** once really existed before the crust of the earth was smashed up. This means that post-Flood names can't be used with any precision now. The fact that many post-Flood names are similar to the Genesis pre-Flood ones no longer existing is explained by the phenomenon we call 'linguistic borrowing'. For example, many of the place names in Australia, New Zealand, America and wherever else the British colonialists went are from the homeland they emigrated from. Thus, for example, today's Euphrates is not the Euphrates of **Genesis 2**.

## THE CHRONO-GENEALOGIES

Another thing. Genesis gives us not only the genealogies for the direct descendants and subsequent generations from Adam, but also impresses their literal existence by supplying the ages of the fathers when their sons were born and how old they were when they died. History is being conveyed by the double featured *chrono-genealogies!*

On this score alone there can be no doubt that primeval history in the early chapters of **Genesis 1** through **11** (up to the **Tower of Babel**) is meant to be taken as reliable literal history. <sup>(5)</sup>

## THE HEBREW BIBLE TIES THE GENESIS CREATION TO LATER LITERAL HISTORY

**PSALM 136** is an excellent commentary on how the flow of Biblical history is to be viewed. It traces the links from the Genesis creation of the world to the calling of Abraham and the establishment of the nation of Israel. This hymn of praise links the God of creation with the unfolding drama of mankind within the world's history ...

O give thanks to the LORD, for He is good, for His steadfast love endures forever.  
O give thanks to the God of gods, for his steadfast love endures forever.  
O give thanks to the Lord of lords, for his steadfast love endures forever ... Who by understanding made the heavens ... Who spread out the earth on the waters ... Who made the great lights ... the sun to rule over the day ... the moon and stars to rule over the night ... for His steadfast love endures forever.

After praising God for His handiwork and wisdom in the 'primeval history' of the beginning of the world, the psalmist seamlessly moves onto the second major reason for his praise of God --- how God has acted in Israel's history: He **struck Egypt through their firstborn ... and brought Israel out from among them ... with a strong hand and an outstretched arm ... Who divided the Red Sea in two and made Israel pass through the midst of it ... and overthrew Pharaoh and his army in the Red Sea, for His love**

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<sup>5</sup> This is not to deny that the basic prose narrative of **Genesis** is not punctuated here and there by brief poems (such as Jacob's Blessing in **chapter 46**).

endures forever, etc. (all space-time miracles in the flow of verifiable and recorded history).

The psalmist then sees God's Hand actively engaged in his own day. As Francis Schaeffer summarises it,

Psalm 136 brings us face to face with the biblical concept of creation as a fact of space-time history, for we find here a complete parallel between creation and other points in history ... The mentality is that creation is as historically real as the history of the Jews and our own present moment of time.

Both the Old and the New Testaments deliberately root themselves back into the early chapters of Genesis, insisting they are a record of historical events ... the hermeneutical principle involved is that ... the early chapters of Genesis are to be viewed completely as history --- just as much so, let us say, as records concerning Abraham, David, Solomon or Jesus Christ. (6)

The literature of **Genesis** is Hebrew prose to be literally believed! On the other hand, if you want to see what Hebrew poetry looks like, take a look at **Psalm 104**. That psalm is a celebration of creation, but set in the literary style of poetry;

The LORD stretches out the heavens like a curtain ... and lays the beams of his upper chambers on the waters. He makes the clouds His chariot and rides on the wings of the wind (vs. 2-3).

Though celebrating God's real creative works --- such as in the heavens, the waters and the winds --- under no stretch of the imagination does the writer expect us to picture that the LORD needs to ride on **the wings of the wind** to get around, or that He literally resides in a house, the rafters of which sit **on the waters**. This is what Hebrew poetry looks like and it's obviously of a different *genre* than the historical prose of **Psalm 136** --- and certainly of **Genesis 1-3**.

## THE CONTRADICTIONS BETWEEN GENESIS AND EVOLUTION

When we consider how modern science views the origin of the cosmos, we can see why this grammatical-historical meaning for the **Genesis** narrative has fallen out of favour. Look at the conflict and major contradictions proposed by uniformitarian and evolutionary science; (7)

**1). Big Bang Theory** places the big bang at 13.8 billion years ago, then for billions of years, stars were born and died and from 'stardust' our own sun was born ... Then the earth and the rest of the planets formed about 4.5 billion years ago by somehow condensing out of a swirling cloud of gas and dust (nebula). Thus, the sun came before the earth, and many stars came billions of years before the sun.

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<sup>6</sup> Francis Schaeffer, *Genesis in Space and Time*, IVP, Ill., Third Printing, 1972, p15

<sup>7</sup> *Op Cit.* As cited in *The Genesis Account*, p57

***But Genesis teaches that God made the earth on Day 1, and the sun and stars on Day 4.***

**2). Evolution** postulates that the first living organism was a single cell, which arose from an oceanic primordial soup by chemical evolution. After that, living creatures evolved in the seas long before land plants and animals, and longer still before trees.

***But Genesis reveals that God created land plants, including trees, first.***

**3). Evolution** teaches that ichthyosaurs and the other marine reptiles evolved from land reptiles, and that whales evolved from land mammals, which had evolved from other land reptiles.

Similarly, evolutionists believe that birds and pterosaurs evolved from land reptiles, while bats evolved from land mammals. However ...

***Genesis explicitly teaches that God made the sea and flying creatures on Day 5, a day before He made land creatures on Day 6.***

**4). Modern evolutionary theory** consistently denies a literal first solitary man and woman who are the sole ancestors of all other humans who ever existed. Rather, evolution proposes that a population of ape-like creatures evolved into a *population of humans*.

***But Genesis teaches the first man was not made from living creatures but from inanimate matter (dust of the ground) which did not become living until God breathed upon it.***

***And, Genesis teaches that the first woman had no mother, but was made from the man's rib/side.***

**5). All billions-of-years worldviews** place death before sin. (It's hard to overstate the importance of this.) These views teach that almost as soon as living things arose, they also died. However ...

***Genesis teaches that initially God's finished cosmos was evil-free and death-free being **very good**.*** In fact, ***Genesis teaches that the first recorded death of a biblically living creature (a **nephesh chayyah**) occurred after Adam & Eve rebelled --- when God Himself killed an animal to make skin clothes for the humans.***

***Millions of years of prehuman-like creatures evolving into homosapiens place death before the biblical Adam. This absolutely contradicts evolution's billions of years of death and corruption.***

It ought to be obvious then, that the popular rejection of the **Genesis** story of how God created the world with its functional specificity/differentiation is not because people can't understand the message of the Bible. It's because they won't and don't accept the Scriptures as the inspired revelation from God.

It's not a question so much of intellectual stumbling blocks (though it's critically important that we give rational and reasonable scientific reasons for our faith because true Bible and true science are friends, not enemies).

It's rather a question of repeating the original sin of our first parents ... questioning if God has really said? Or, alleging that God is not telling us the whole truth. Or, that the God of the Bible may be disregarded because He doesn't exist and has not acted in history.

In other words, it's a question of authority. Man's problem is not so much intellectual but spiritual and moral rebellion. Who will get our ear?

## ATTACKS FROM WITHIN

Unfortunately, however, serious attacks on the traditional historic Judeo-Christian interpretation of Genesis have not only come from the scientific hypothesis of life on earth for billions of years according to evolutionary biology and uniformitarian geology. The more sinister attacks have come from within the Church's own ranks in fairly recent times. In the late 1800's and early 1900's there arose a method of literary study called **Form Criticism**. <sup>(<sup>8</sup>)</sup>

**Form Critics** initially proposed that the creation account of **Genesis chapters one and two** is not one unified nor harmonious whole, but is, in fact, two completely separate and disparate accounts --- **Genesis 1** and **Genesis 2** are from different sources or authors --- not from Moses as the Jews believe --- with the implication being that there are discrepancies. The **Form Critics** didn't stop there of course, but made it fashionable to cut up the rest of the Bible. No better "inside job" to rob the bank of Scriptural authority could have been devised by the cunning of men! <sup>(<sup>9</sup>)</sup>

## GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY

We may add that, if Genesis emphasises anything, it emphasises the sovereignty of the LORD God --- in particular, His sovereignty at four "crunch points" in **the first eleven chapters of Genesis** (1. The Creation of the world with its "functional specificity" or differentiation; 2. The Rebellion of Adam & Eve in the Garden; 3. The Flood; and 4. The Tower of Babel dispersion) --- and His sovereignty over four outstanding individuals in **Genesis 12-50** (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph).

This unifying theme of God's Sovereignty with His ability and freedom to act within human history undergirds the whole book of **Genesis**. The book is thoroughly monotheistic, taking for granted that there is only one God worthy of the Name. The

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<sup>8</sup> From the German word *Formgeschichte* (Form History) which seeks to classify both secular and religious literature by reconstructing the sources of the documents that have led to our present texts. The German pioneer of this line of enquiry was **Hermann Gunkel** who first applied the method to --- you guessed it --- the book of **Genesis**. The disastrous effect of the philosophical presuppositions of *Formgeschichte* ultimately led to questioning things like the historicity of the miracles of Christ. Naturally such inquiry gutted the faith of multitudes because it proposed the Church had created the Christ-stories.

<sup>9</sup> E.g., 'J', "E", "D" and "P" sources hypothesised four authors for **Genesis**. There was "Deutero Isaiah" and even "Tritero Isaiah", etc. which all have the effect of making the Bible a patchwork of disparate ideas.

book is thoroughly opposed to the idea that there are many gods (polytheism), that there is no god (atheism) and that nature is divine (pantheism). This literary foundation and harmony topples into a heap if any part of its earliest creation-story is not literally true.

## JESUS' OWN INSPIRED VIEW OF GENESIS

For the Christian who trusts the Bible's creation account of our world's history, the most important reason in accepting our worldview is that Jesus Christ accepted the **Genesis** narrative as a reliable and unified testimony --- he tied the first two chapters together into one whole.

When the Pharisees tested Jesus over his view of divorce he replied;

**“Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning ‘made them male and female ...’ (Jesus is here citing from **Genesis 1: 27**) saying (and now he quotes from **Genesis chapter two verse 24**) ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? ... ” (Matt. 19: 4-6; cf. Mk. 10:6-8).**

Observe how Jesus joined the two **Genesis** chapters together ---thereby teaching us **not** only **not** to dissolve the marriage between a man and his wife, but at the same time **not** to separate what God Himself has joined together in the first two chapters of the Bible!

Observe also how Jesus believed that God created the individuals **Adam & Eve** **“in the beginning”**. **According to Jesus human history began when God created Adam & Eve.** As **Francis Schaeffer** puts it, **It is difficult to get away from the fact that Jesus was treating Adam and Eve as truly the first human pair in space and time. ( <sup>10</sup> )**

If we still need further convincing, then there are other NT verses which treat **Adam & Eve** as real historical, space-time, individuals. A classic case is from **Romans 5: 12**;

**Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death came through sin ...** The apostle held that **Adam** was **one man, the first man** who introduced sin into our world. And observe how he further emphasises the historicity of the man **Adam** in **verse 14**;

**Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam ...** The apostle obviously believed **Adam** was as real an historic individual as the man **Moses**. Paul's theology depends on the **Genesis** account of the historicity of **Adam**!

Furthermore, Paul extrapolates that **Adam is a type of the one who was to come (v. 14)**. Of course the apostle is talking about the historical coming of the man Jesus. So, for Paul, the man **Adam** is as much a part of our true history as that of **Moses** and **Jesus**!

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<sup>10</sup> *Genesis in Space and Time*, IVP, Ill., Third Printing, 1972, p41



Also observe how the NT takes the account of **Adam & Eve's** sinning in the Genesis story as solid history. **Romans 5** says that the reason why we die today is because when **Adam transgressed** in the **Garden of Eden** and that this is how mortality was passed on down through the line of every human being since.

Paul believed that **Eve was deceived by the Serpent's cunning** at a certain point in the historical past (**2 Cor. 11: 3**). And more than half of **Hebrews chapter 11** --- the roll of the faithful --- names and refers to characters who lived in the flow of real history.

And have you noticed how the apostle Paul applies the creation narrative to our own present-day experience of salvation? He writes; **For the God Who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' [has] made His light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4: 6)**. Every time someone turns to Christ history repeats itself for the God of creation steps into their individual experience and they become a brand new creation! Wow!

Clearly, the NT writers considered **Genesis** to be real history with present implications for us today. <sup>(**11**)</sup> (<sup>**12**</sup>)

## CONCLUSION

For the Bible, God is known by His actions and works in actual history as told by the **Genesis** creation account.

For the Bible, mankind's history did not exist before God's creative activity **in the beginning**.

For the Bible, human history is the story of God's sovereignty over and within our world ... History is His story and is going someplace! That's why ...

For the Jew, and for the Bible-believer, history **is** theology revealed. And that's why ...

For the Jew, and for the Bible-believer, theology not tethered to actual history has lost any sense. And finally, that's why ...

For the Jew, and for the Bible-believer, **Genesis** is literal history and cannot, must not, be separated from real life and our place in our world!

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<sup>11</sup> For an in-depth study of how the apostle links mankind's current rejection of God with idolatry and the whole Gay & Lesbian question, read **Romans 1: 18-32**. His theology is solidly grounded in the history of **Genesis 1 - 3**.

<sup>12</sup> For further examples of how the NT considers the creation story as space-time history, see **I Cor. 11:8-9** and **1 Tim. 2: 13-14** where Eve's creation after Adam is mentioned; **I Cor. 6: 16** where prostitution is condemned as being contrary to God's created intentions for men and women in the beginning; **Eph. 5: 31** in support of the sanctity and intended permanency of heterosexual marriage.