

## Interpreting Genesis 1-11

### I. Introduction

Many Old Testament departments in formerly conservative seminaries now teach that Genesis 1-11 is not real history, but rather consists of a wholly different genre of literature. For over 3000 years this important passage was interpreted in a normal way to yield a young earth created by God in 6 days! Things began to change in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century with the uniformitarian theories of Lyell and Hutton who believed that the formation of sedimentary rock took long ages to form, and then in 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Darwin theorized that life forms took millions of years to evolve.

**The main issue:** The early chapters of Genesis contain the foundation for every major doctrine in theology, i.e., the foundation of the Christian worldview. In the light of the above: *are the major beliefs of Christianity then based on events that never happened in space and time?* Can truth be based on fiction? The current belief among these same scholars is that real history of the Bible does not begin until Gen. 12 where Abraham can be reliably dated cir. 2100 B.C. Noted theologian, Wayne Grudem says:

*From the standpoint of theology, the debate is primarily about the proper interpretation of the first three chapters of the Bible, and particularly whether these chapters should be understood as truthful historical narrative, reporting events that actually happened. This is a question of much significance, because those chapters provide the historical foundation for the rest of the Bible and for the entirety of the Christian faith. ...Without the foundation laid down in those three chapters, the rest of the Bible would make no sense, and many of those doctrines would be undermined or lost. It is no exaggeration to say that those three chapters are essential to the rest of the Bible. **Theistic Evolution**, pp.61,62.*

### II. Contemporary Interpretations of Gen. 1-11

- A. The increasingly popular opinion of evangelical scholars is Gen. 1-11 is a Hebrew variation of ancient pagan Near Eastern creation and flood myths. These scholars see the creation of light before the sun, the formation of Adam from dirt, Eve from a rib, a tree of life and a tree of good and evil, a talking snake, men living for hundreds of years, an Ark with all the animals, as myth-like, and cannot be accepted by a rational mind in the light of current scientific knowledge.
- B. Since the theory evolution is considered *settled science* in the academic community, Evangelical scholars feel pressured to maintain academic respectability and must formulate interpretative schemes to allow for a billion-year old earth. Some of these are: (1)The days of Genesis One are a literary framework to convey spiritual meaning, and not meant to actually mirror the way God did it. Another, (2) is that the *days* of Genesis 1 are days of revelation; or, (3)that each day represents eons of time.
- C. Each of these accommodative approaches are sometimes admittedly designed to allow for long periods of time required by evolution to take place. **But one has to honestly ask: If there were no theory of evolution and no long ages, how would Gen.1-11 be read?**
- D. Ironically, the historicity of Adam and Eve has now become part of the controversy. Some see the denial as a significant departure from orthodoxy. These same seminaries that deny 1-11 as history are still wanting to hold to a literal Adam; they admit it is essential to maintain sound doctrine. However, the same seminaries while claiming to believe in a historical Adam, do not believe he was created as written in the text, but evolved from lower primates. Generally, the latter idea is still not publicized to their financial donors!

### III. Problems and Implications of Current Interpretative Schemes

- A. Current scientific theories on origins have become more authoritative than God's revelation.
- B. These new ways of interpreting these texts assume that for 3000 years Gen.1-11 was not correctly interpreted until now.
- C. Ironically, as these academic scholars now believe evolution should be accepted by the church as settled

science, the theory of evolution is under attack as never before in the scientific community.

- D. Some assume that this text (Chaps. 1-11) is a combination of myth and history. If that is the case, how do we determine which is history and which is myth? Again, the finite interpreter becomes the ultimate authority.
- E. These new interpretations of the text have some questionable assumptions. One is that this text was **only** written for ancient Hebrew readers who would have understood it because they were familiar with other ancient Near Eastern texts.
- F. It assumes that sin and death occurred before the Fall. This seems to go against the clear teaching in the NT in Romans 8.
- G. What is behind these innovative ways to interpret this text is an aversion to the supernatural. But here is the inconsistency: The NT has a virgin birth, a man walking on water, multiplying food, healing people, and raising people from the dead. How long will this inconsistency hold?
- H. Some scholars openly admit their innovative approach to the text was made to accommodate the scientific issue of an old earth (J. Walton and M. Kline). For this we must commend them for honesty!
- I. The concept of evolution as a worldview could not be more in opposition to a biblical one. It is hopeless to try and harmonize the two (See Briefing Outlines #4, 41, 87).

#### IV. Reasons Why the Earth is Young (Thousands rather than Millions)

##### A. The clear teaching of Scripture

- 1. When God created He created it as a functioning cosmos. The world and **everything in it had the appearance of age**. Adam was created as an adult male. Fruit trees were producing fruit, etc.
- 2. The passage in question has all the characteristics of history; it is giving us straight-forward account. It is not Hebrew poetry.
- 3. The days of Genesis 1 must be taken as solar days. The Hebrew word for *day* when it is preceded by a number, always means a literal day. Exodus 20:11: is a slam-dunk: *For the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and everything in them in six days; then he rested on the seventh day.* (CSB)
- 4. The genealogies of Gen. 5 and 10 seem to clearly indicate a time of creation and the flood. Yes, you can make a case for a missing generation(s), but not a chronological gap! I refer you to the excellent work of **Henry B. Smith, Jr.**, and **Jeremy Sexton**. Their work may be accessed at the website of **Associates for Biblical Research**. They have shown definitive evidence that the Greek translation of the OT, done about 200 B.C., (**the Bible of Jesus and the authors of the NT**), indicates God created the world in 5556 B.C. or 7574 years ago from this date (2023), and the flood, 5321 years ago. The major exegetical question that needs to be answered here is: what was the purpose of the Holy Spirit in being so precise with birth dates and years of life? Remember *all Scripture is inspired*, including these numbers! If you have a hard time with these precise dates for creation and the flood, then we can simply conclude that the creation was no more than 10,000 years ago. The current date according to the Jewish calendar is 5781 (They used a later Hebrew text). Isn't it interesting that full-blown civilization suddenly appeared about 5000 years ago!
- 5. The OT and the NT quote extensively from Genesis; All refer to creation and the events of 1-11 as though they are real history. They assume Moses wrote it, and Luke gives us a genealogy of Jesus back to Adam. If Jesus and the NT writers believed it was history that should settle the issue!

##### B. There seems to be physical or scientific evidence indicating a young earth

1. The most recent is several discoveries of soft tissue in dinosaurs which are dated by evolutionists as billions of years old. DNA was even extracted from the samples! This should not be possible if they are that old. Indeed it indicates that dinosaurs went extinct fairly recently. Partially decayed dinosaurs have been found in permafrost of Alaska.
2. The Decay of the Earth's magnetic field: The earth is like a giant magnet with a magnetic field which is decaying at a known rate. When projected backward to the point where the magnetic field would be too strong for life, we find that this only projects back about 10,000 years. Old earthers and evolutionists respond that the field declines but is periodically regenerated. However, there is no evidence for this, and it would seem to be in violation of the second law of thermodynamics.
3. There is other evidence from science which seems to indicate a young earth. One can find a discussion of this evidence at creation.com, or, in the excellent video: *Is Genesis History?*

#### V. The Starting Assumptions of Biblicist

- A. The Bible is a revelation from God and is therefore infallible. This make Scripture the ultimate authority, infallible and inerrant. God is truth and His revelation in the original manuscripts is likewise truthful, and must therefore, be of necessity without error. If we allow for errors as some do, how do we decide what is truth and error? *Ultimately the one deciding is then more authoritative than the Word itself.* If one allows for errors, how can it (God's Revelation) be trusted to be completely authoritative in all it addresses? This issue is of paramount importance in the postmodern age of relativism in which we live (where a correspondence view of truth is denied).
- B. The Bible was meant to be understood by the average reader. This is known as the clarity or perspicuity of Scripture. Some of these intepretative schemes can be pretty complicated!
- C. We should never forget God was the co-author of Scripture with Moses.
- D. Yes, there are similarities of the Biblical account with the ancient creation and flood myths. However, **the differences are far greater**, It is good to study these myths as they might shed some linguistic evidence and other insights, but they are not necessary. It seems probable that where there are notable resemblances, the myths are drawing on corrupted memories of the original divine revelation about Earth's and humanity's beginnings as found in Genesis.
- E. The Bible is timeless and was meant for all people of all time. Yes, it's original readers were the contemporaries of Moses, but it was not for them alone.
- F. No, the Bible is not a textbook of science. However, when it refers to the things which can be measured and checked by the scientific method it should stand as accurate. This assumption rejects the view that the Bible is only accurate and authoritative when it speaks about spiritual matters. This view leads to unbridled subjectivism since the interpreter would then become the ultimate authority in discerning what is *spiritual*.
- G. Special Revelation is preeminent over General Revelation. *The natural world is not the 67<sup>th</sup> book of the Bible!* There is revelation in the natural world. We can know that God exists and that He is powerful (Rom. 1:19-20; Psalm 19), but nature is not on the same level as propositional Holy Scripture.

#### VI. The Composition of Genesis (Where did Moses get his information?)

- A. The consensus of Scripture itself is that Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible. Genesis was probably written about 1400 B.C. just before he died and the Israelites entered into Canaan.
- B. He was not an eyewitness to the events in Genesis, so where did he get his information? He grew up as an Egyptian and was undoubtedly highly educated. He had to have had sources. It is conceivable that he had written records of some kind. **He may be referring to them in Gen. 5:1.** There is a Jewish tradition that Noah took written records aboard the Ark. We also now know that the ancients where highly skilled in

accurately relaying oral tradition

VII. Conclusion:

- A. Sound biblical theology must be based on actual historical events (Example: the resurrection: I Cor. 15:13).
- B. *If we get creation wrong, we can't get the gospel right* (Andrew Sandlin)
- C. **If a proclamation of Scripture appears clear but is contrary to what scientific establishment says, I will hold to the word of Scripture and assume there must be something wrong with the scientific majority.** Why do this? Because Scripture, God's Revelation to man, is the beginning of knowledge; it holds the position of supreme authority.
- D. It is just as reasonable to assume that both these ANE Flood accounts and Genesis go back to the same ancient source, **or historical event**. Bernard Ramm says: *Both came out of the same common ancient tradition and so both possess similarities. The Babylonian account represents the tradition freely corrupted by human imagination; the Hebrew account is that which was kept chaste and pure through divine providence and then revealed through divine inspiration.*  
  
In fact, there is good evidence the early chapters of Genesis are a polemic against these pagan ancient ANE accounts (See *Against the Gods*, noted below).
- E. The Bible is the primary arbitrator of truth and meaning. When an interpretation of a passage of Scripture is so clear in that it agrees with that of the great exegetes throughout church history, and after all grammatical and lexical resources are exhausted to the point that it can yield no other interpretation, yet still stands in contradiction to the consensus of scientific majority, then the scientific establishment must yield. The scientific method is an invaluable tool to mankind, but utilized by fallible man makes it a fallible tool.

Recommended for Further Study:

- Bigalke, Ron J. Jr. ed. *The Genesis Factor*. (Especially Chapter 3)
- Currid, John D. *Against the Gods*. (See Chapter 3).
- Gentry, Kenneth L. *As It Is Written: Literal or Literary?*
- Heck, Joel D. *In The Beginning God*.
- Kelly Douglas F. *Creation and Change*.
- Lisle, Jason. *Understand Genesis*.
- Merrill, Eugene H, Rooker, Mark F, and Grisanti, Michael A. *The World And The Word: An Introduction to the Old Testament*. (Chapter 10).
- Mortenson, Terry, and Ury, Thane H. eds. *Coming to Grips With Genesis*.
- Oswalt, John N. *The Bible Among the Myths*.
- Reymond, Robert L. *Contending For The Faith*. (See especially chapters 2-4)
- Sandlin, P. Andrew, ed. *Creation According to the Scriptures*.
- Van Dam, Cornelis. *In the Beginning: Listening to Genesis 1 and 2*. (60 pages of bibliography!)
- Van Pelt, Miles V. ed. *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*.