

The Importance of Taking Genesis Literally

As we begin our study of Genesis, the temptation (pun intended) would be to jump right in. After all, we all know the stories. Creation, Satan's temptation of Adam and Eve, Noah and the flood, all of these stories are so much a part of our cultural heritage as to be almost universally known. Yet, they are not universally believed. And therein lies the problem. We are, perhaps, too familiar with these stories. They have become caricatures of themselves in our minds. We don't always take them seriously.

So the challenge for us as we study Genesis, will be to study it as if we don't know it. We need to look at it and be in wonder at the Creation. We need to grieve over the Fall, and weep over the Flood. We need to rejoice when God provides a substitute for Isaac. We need to look at the stories of Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers as if for the first time. To try to do so will require us to go slow enough that we don't take things for granted - that we don't assume too much. But that is always the challenge when studying the past we know.

Coming up behind Eve in the Garden of Eden, Satan began his assault with a simple question. "Did God really say . . . ? (Genesis 3:1, NIV). As with most of Satan's temptations, it seemed innocuous at first glance. But it led to the great enemy of faith - doubt. And so it was that by doubting God's Word, that humanity began its decline into total depravity. Therefore, it is important as we turn to a study of any book of the Bible, but especially so as we begin our the study of the book of Genesis, to clarify the question, "did God really say?"

Genesis is the book that begins to tell the story that reaches its climax in the rapture of the Church, the tribulation, return of Jesus Christ, the millennial kingdom, the final judgment, and the eternal state. Flowing out of Genesis, the rest of Scripture tells the story of God's sovereign plan of salvation that ends with the consummation of Revelation. So we must address the question of what did God really say as recorded in the book of Genesis. What did God say regarding the origin of the universe, the creation of man, the reason for sin, and the purpose of all things? These are serious questions, and they deserve serious answers.

To begin, we must make the rather obvious point that this is a story, at least in the the very beginning, that can only have been told by God. Though Moses may have written the words, those words must have been inspired by God. No man could have been present at the creation. A retelling of the actions of the Creator cannot have been inspired by anyone other than the Creator, Himself. That is, to do any justice to a serious reading of the Bible, we must begin by acknowledging that the beginning of Genesis purports to be the word of God, and not the word of man.

So, we might believe that Genesis is the inspired Word of God, but that does not necessarily mean that we must take every word literally. Nor should it. Rather than so simple (one might say naïve) a strategy, we are instead commanded to handle Scripture carefully. We must "be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15). To accurately handle the Scriptures, we must know when they are to be taken literally and when they are not. In addition, we are told that false teachers will arise, as indeed they have. They

will focus on “things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction” (2 Peter 3:16). A proper understanding of Scripture is the great antidote to false teaching.

Naturally, while all of Scripture is subject to misinterpretation, this is especially true for the first part of Genesis, chapters 1-3. There have been many different interpretations of these chapters throughout Church history - the early Church fathers were especially fond of allegorical interpretations. But it was beginning in the 16th century, when science began to assert itself as a method of understanding truth apart from revelation, that literal interpretations of Genesis began to be challenged on a grand scale. By the middle of the 19th century, science had replaced Scripture as the ultimate source of truth in the minds of many, and the new scientific understanding of the beginnings of the universe and of humankind did not align particularly well with the account written in Genesis 1-3. Consequently, Christian thinkers retreated into what became known as “Christian liberalism” and devoted most of their intellectual and practical energy to arguing not the literal truth of Scripture but rather its usefulness. That is, it no longer mattered of the Bible was actually true, what mattered was if it made you a better husband or wife, worker or employer, friend or neighbor.

Though this trend began to change in the early 20th century, still the sovereignty of science had made irreversible inroads into the intellectual life of the Church. So, while most evangelical Christians would agree that the accounts of Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph are true historical accounts, there is still less agreement regarding the literal historical account of the first three chapters, those chapters which deal with creation and the fall. Many believers contend that while these chapters are inspired Scripture, they need not be read literally. So, that then is the crucial question - how literally we ought to read the first three chapters of Genesis.

Issues to Consider

We might begin by considering that perhaps God never intended Genesis to be read literally. After all, Scripture (particularly the gospel of John) is full of metaphor. Consider the following:

“I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture” (John 10:9).

“I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser” (John 15:1).

“I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me will not hunger, and he who believes in Me will never thirst” (John 6:35).

“He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life” (John 6:54).

In each case, Jesus was speaking to His disciples and trying to teach them profound truths. Yet rarely do you find someone who thinks that God intended those passages to be taken literally, though the Catholic Church has used the last mentioned Scripture as the justification for its teaching on transubstantiation. So, why can't the same be true of Genesis 1-3? That is, no one seriously thinks Jesus is saying that He really *is* a door or a vine or bread. We simply agree that they contain important spiritual truths, but not

actual historical realities. So how do we know that the words of Genesis 1-3 are not simply illustrations God used to inform His people about more important theological truths than simply the beginning of the material world? Furthermore, a corollary of this argument is that if we do read Genesis 1-3 as literal, historical facts, then we will miss the true theological purpose behind the narrative.

For those who believe that a literal reading of Genesis is inappropriate, one argument that is offered is to compare Genesis 1-3 along with other similar narratives of Ancient Near Eastern cultures. For example, in the Akkadian myth *Atrahasis*, man is created of a composition of clay, flesh, and blood. In the Sumerian text, *Enki and Ninmah*, man is made from some leftover clay. And in the Babylonian *Gilgamesh Epic*, man is again made out of clay. Since the purpose in these texts was to explain the nature of the world, rather than its specific historical origin, ought not the Bible to be read in the same way?

Another argument to consider is this. The Hebrew word used for “to create” or “to make” is used in other places in Scripture as well as in Genesis 1-3. For example,

“Create in me a clean heart, O God,
And renew a steadfast spirit within me” (Psalm 51:10).

It is not assumed that God literally created a new, physical heart in David, but rather His purpose was to realign David with God’s purposes, plans, and way of thinking. Therefore, why should we assume that the word “create” is being used literally in Genesis 1-3?

To sum up, the main objections to a literal reading of Genesis 1-3 center around the idea that, while these are the very words of God, they were written in such a way as to meet the needs of the ancient readers themselves. That is, the narratives were designed to not be literal statements of fact, but rather stories that embedded the worldview God intended, to a people in terms they could understand. Contemporary ideas such as “the sun rises” or “heaven above” are similar. We all use such phrases, and we all know what we mean, but nobody takes them literally.

History and Theology

One way to respond to this issue is to look at the way the inspired writers of the Bible viewed the relationship between literal history and theology. Did they see a connection between spiritual truths and what actually happened in the past? Or, does the Bible seem to suggest that the spiritual truths it teaches can be affirmed even if the historical events on which they are based are not true. Perhaps the best example is Paul’s discussion of the resurrection.

“¹⁶For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised; ¹⁷and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. ¹⁸Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. ¹⁹If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied” (1 Corinthians 15:16-19).

Paul’s reasoning is this, if the resurrection of Jesus did not really happen as an historical fact, then we, as believers, have no hope of literally rising from the grave either. The resurrection of believers is contingent upon Jesus Christ actually having Himself been raised from the grave. A metaphorical

resurrection of Jesus would imply only a metaphorical resurrection of believers. Thus, our hopes end with this life, and “we are of all men most to be pitied.”

Peter expressed the same sense when he wrote about the flood.

“³Know this first of all, that in the last days mockers will come with their mocking, following after their own lusts, ⁴and saying, ‘where is the promise of His coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation.’ ⁵For when they maintain this, it escapes their notice that by the word of God the heavens existed long ago and the earth was formed out of water and by water, ⁶through which the world at that time was destroyed, being flooded with water. ⁷But by His word the present heavens and earth are being reserved for fire, kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men” (2 Peter 3:3-7).

Peter is basing his confidence in God’s judgment of the disobedient on the fact that God actually judged mankind during the time of Noah. The fire of future judgment must be as literal as the water of former judgment. To Peter, it cannot be that the flood was simply a metaphor for God’s judgment of sin. His argument only makes sense if the flood was a literal, historical fact.

In the Old Testament, the choice between obedience and blessing and disobedience and punishment was often put before His people. And when that choice was offered, it was done so by reminding the Israelites of what had happened in the past. For example,

“has a god tried to go to take for himself a nation from within another nation by trials, by signs and wonders and by war and by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm and by great terrors, as the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes?” (Deuteronomy 4:34).

It is clear that these facts of the past were used not as illustrations, but as examples of historical reality upon which the theological truths of the faith was based. The Israelites were called upon to remember what had actually happened in the past, the stories they had been told through the generations of God’s provision and God’s judgment. They were to recall these stories not as metaphors or illustrations of what a powerful God could do, but as actual historical realities of what He had, in fact, done.

But is this also true of the creation story? Was that also looked at as a real and historical example of what God had actually done in the past? When dedicating themselves to God after returning from exile, the Levites and others exclaimed,

“⁶You alone are the Lord.
You have made the heavens,
The heaven of heavens with all their host,
The earth and all that is on it,
The seas and all that is in them.
You give life to all of them
And the heavenly host bows down before You.
⁷You are the Lord God,
Who chose Abram
And brought him out from Ur of the Chaldees,

And gave him the name Abraham” (Nehemiah 9:6-7).

Notice that to the Israelites, there was no difference between God’s act of creation and His calling of Abram. Both were historical realities. Both had really happened. The call of Abram was as much an event in history as the creation of the stars, earth, seas, and all the planet’s inhabitants. The call of Abram was seen by the Israelites as the very inception of their people being those chosen specially by God. It was from that moment they dated their existence as a people. The call of Abram could not be a simple metaphor or illustration. It had to happen really. And if it did, then so did creation.

And the Psalmist as well voiced his praise of God not in remembering an illustration about God, but in the historical fact of creation,

“²⁴O Lord, how many are Your works!

In wisdom You have made them all;

The earth is full of Your possessions.

²⁵There is the sea, great and broad,

In which are swarms without number,

Animals both small and great” (Psalm 104:24-25).

We can infer from these examples (and many others could be offered) that the inspired writers of Scripture did not distinguish between history and theology. That is, their theology - that God would bless or punish His people in accordance with their faithfulness, that He is worthy of praise, that He would ultimately judge the unrighteous, and that the righteous will rise again - are all based on what the writers believed to be historical facts. And we must note that the biblical writers included everything from creation to the resurrection in this conception.

Other ANE Narratives

As mentioned before, there are similarities with the biblical narrative and other Ancient Near Eastern narratives. But the differences are much more significant. For example, most ANE narratives view creation as the consequences of a cosmic struggle. For example in one narrative the god Marduk forms the heavens and the earth by ripping open the goddess Tiamat. In Scripture, creation is an intelligent, orderly plan of a Creator. In most ANE narratives, man is relatively unimportant, it is the gods who take center stage. In the biblical narrative man is the culmination of the creation narrative. Also, in most ANE accounts, the world is a very flawed place even from the beginning. In Genesis, the world, as originally created, was “very good” (Genesis 1:31). And, ANE narratives refer to the objects of creation (sky, moon, sun, ocean, etc.) as animate and divine. That is the gods of the ANE myths are part of creation, they do not transcend it. Finally, ANE narratives make no mention of such crucial elements as sin.

All of this to say that the narrative of Genesis is not very similar to other ANE creation accounts, and therefore to compare them seems to force the issue. The composition of Genesis was not intended to offer a competing account of creation alongside other ANE narratives. Genesis was not meant to be just another story relevant to a particular ancient people living in the Fertile Crescent. It was inspired by God to give an accurate, historical, literal account of God’s creation.

How did Biblical Authors Read Genesis

We have noted that the inspired biblical writers did not generally distinguish between history and theology in recounting events. But how precisely did these inspired writers of Scripture read Genesis 1-3 itself. Did they take it literally, or did they view it as illustrative of God's plans and purposes only?

Let's begin by noting that as Moses composed Genesis, he believed he was making a literal accounting of what had occurred in the past. In the narrative of Adam, we find he had children, specifically Seth. In Genesis 5, the generations of Seth are listed. If Adam was merely a metaphorical character, and not a real living human being, then are all of his children equally metaphorical? Clearly that is not what Moses intended. The generations of Seth are as real and historical as Adam.

Fifteen hundred years later, when Paul preached in Athens, he argued that

“²⁴The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; ²⁵nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things; ²⁶and He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, ²⁷that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; ²⁸for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, ‘for we also are His children.’ ²⁹Being then the children of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man. ³⁰Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, ³¹because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead” (Acts 17:24-31).

Let us investigate Paul's argument. He insisted that there was one Creator God who was the source of all life and has life in Himself. Paul said that the Creator made one person as the source of all peoples and nations, and that all men therefore are made in the image of God. However, Paul insisted that all men have sinned and are, therefore, under judgment. They must repent, for one day the God Who created all things will judge all mankind. The proof Paul offers of this was the resurrection of the Messiah. The fact of the resurrection of Jesus Christ (whether it was believed or denied) was common knowledge to those to whom Paul was speaking. Christianity developed and spread around the entire Mediterranean world, in part, because the resurrection was understood to be an historical fact. Paul's argument is that the Creation, existence of sin, mankind's need for repentance, and God's future judgment were all as real as the resurrection. This simply cannot be an argument based on metaphor. It is only reasonable to view Paul's reasoning as a logical connection between historical facts.

Takeaways

There is no reasonable argument why a student of Scripture ought to presume that the narratives recorded in Genesis are not real and true. Therefore, as we begin our study Genesis, we will consider it as a literal, historical recording of facts.