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# A Literal Reading of Genesis

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# A LITERAL READING OF GENESIS

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## The first 11 chapters of Genesis form a solid and consistent reporting of human history.

In 1999, PBS aired a critically acclaimed special on the biblical Book of Genesis. Though it received numerous favorable reviews, a question that apparently lurked in many minds was voiced by *Newsweek*: “But Did It Really Happen?” It is one thing to read and even enjoy the stories in the Bible; it is quite another to hold that they are historical. Certainly, recent conclusions of both evolutionary science and historical-critical analysis of the Bible have cast doubt on the historicity of biblical events—especially those in the first 11 chapters of Genesis.

Dillard and Longman<sup>1</sup> point out that a long tradition of Jewish and Christian scholarship supports the

view that most biblical narratives impart information about real events and characters of the past. Only in the past two centuries, with emerging challenges of modern science, have alternative genres been seriously proposed.

During this time, three schools of thought have emerged concerning a literal interpretation of Genesis. The first was the historical-critical school. Generally, advocates of this position argue that the author of Genesis in-

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tended readers to understand the narrative as literally and historically true. Historical critics assert, however, that modern science and archaeology have shown that much if not most of the Genesis narrative did *not* really happen historically.

The second school of thought emerged out of the early 19th-century evangelical movement as a response to historical criticism. This school of thought continues today, though its name has changed since. It has been called “neo-evangelical,” although presently it is described as part of the “young” or “younger evangelical” movement. Though some describe it as liberal evangelicalism, defenders view it as progressive.

Generally, this school of thought has denied that the author of Genesis intended the narratives to be understood literally or historically. Rather, these narratives were intended to be read in a non-literal way. Some argue that the text is mythological; some say it is poetic—a literary artwork not meant to be understood literally; some say it is theological; some say it is symbolic. Some have proposed interpretations that the days of Genesis were not 24-hour days, and that the Flood was local instead of global—or not real at all. A number of Adventists scholars have been attracted to the interpretations of this school.

The third school of thought is described as conservative orthodox, al-

though its critics dismiss it as fundamentalist. Ironically, this school agrees with the liberal, historical-critical school that the author of Genesis indeed intended to describe literal, historical events with regards to Creation and the Flood, etc. The difference is that conservative orthodox advocates accept not only the intention of the author, but the accuracy and veracity of his claims. They accept a six-day creation and a global flood.

This last school of thought is closest that expressed in Ellen White’s writings: “We are dependent on the Bible for a knowledge of the early history of our world, of the creation of man, and of his fall. Remove the word of God, and what can we expect than to be left to fables and conjectures, and to that enfeebling of the intellect which is the sure result of entertaining error. We need the authentic history of the origin of the earth, of the fall of the covering cherub, and of the introduction of sin into our world.” Clearly, Ellen White saw the Bible’s historicity as a critical factor in the opening chapters of the unfolding of the Great Controversy.

### **Old Testament View of Scripture’s Historicity**

For several reasons, a significant number of scholars, liberal and conservative, believe that the author of Genesis meant his accounts of Creation and the Flood to be under-

stood literally and historically.

*The Temporal/Spatial Sweep of the Story.* Most readers can detect the overall unity of the narrative plot in Genesis that runs from the account of Creation all the way to the Exodus. It recounts past events within a narrative structure (see below). Indeed, Genesis 1–11 clearly serves as a prologue for the rest of Genesis and the Pentateuch.

*The Waw Consecutive Verbal Form.* A certain Hebrew verbal form, known as the *waw consecutive*, is found throughout the historical narratives in the Old Testament. Interestingly, this same verbal form typical of the later biblical historical narratives is also used in Genesis 1–11. This suggests that the author made no distinction between Genesis 1–11 and later biblical narratives with regards to historicity.

*The toledoth Formulae.* Some scholars have also noted the presence of the *toledoth* formulae (“these are the generations of”) in Genesis 1–11. This expression points to a “historical impulse” for Genesis.

*Genre Similarity.* There are no dramatic genre shifts (shifts between types of literature) between Genesis and the rest of the Pentateuch, and none between the Pentateuch and the so-called “historical” books (Kings, Chronicles, etc.). “Indeed, if we are speaking of the original intention of the biblical writer(s), the style of the book [Genesis] leaves lit-

tle space to argue over the obvious conclusion that the author intended it to be read as a work of history that recounts what has taken place in the far-distant past.”<sup>22</sup>

*Historical Content of Extra-Biblical Primeval Histories.* A point that critics often overlook is that those accounts of origins and earliest human events are not necessarily completely non-historical. Because these ancient stories often include the activities of gods, secular historians have tended to dismiss them as mythological, legendary, etc. It has recently been noted, however, that elements within Mesopotamian primeval histories such as the Sumerian King List and the Gilgamesh Epic mention the names of people and places that archaeology has actually confirmed.

Interestingly, some of these people would be considered legendary by today’s standards—they accomplish incredible feats and have incredibly long life spans. Specifically, the name of Gilgamesh himself, and (En)mearagesi, one of his contemporaries, have been found on an inscription that date to the time when the later legends say Gilgamesh and Enmearagesi lived.

(En)mearabesi, king of Kish, listed as king No. 22 on the Sumerian King List, is credited with having ruled 900 years!

The Gilgamesh epic recounts the building of the wall of Uruk by Gil-

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gamesh. This very wall has also been found, which has led some scholars to caution that just because an individual's name appears in ancient literature within a supernatural or mythological context, it should not be assumed that they did not truly exist or that they did not accomplish the achievements ascribed to them. Likewise, that the literature may assign them incredibly long life spans or reigns does not deny the possibility that they were historical persons.

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have jumped out at scholars. Though the relationship between the biblical account and the Sumerian texts is difficult to determine, there appears to be a connection between them.

### **Old Testament View of the Historicity of Genesis 1–11**

Before examining evidence that New Testament authors believed in the historicity of the early chapters of Genesis, it should be noted that many such statements occur in a context of apprehension about the credibility of the gospel to a pagan world. There was concern about the ideas that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah and that He had risen from the dead. Peter wrote: “We did *not* follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty” (2 Peter 1:16, italics supplied).<sup>3</sup>

In beginning his first Epistle to the Corinthians, Paul admits that “the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, [those who

refuse to believe], . . . to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness” (1 Cor. 1:18, 23).

Yet, Paul affirms the reality of the resurrection in a stirring appeal that occupies all of chapter 15. The climax: “For if the dead do not rise, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable” (15:16-19).

Though it is tempting to believe that people were more gullible in those days, many, if not most, were as cynical about the resurrection of a dead man as people are today. The controversy between the Sadducees and the Pharisees (Acts 23:6-10) shows the uncertainty among educated Jews about the possibility of resurrection. Paul’s speech to the intellectual elite of Athens on Mar’s Hill (Acts 17:32, 33) was being well received until he mentioned the resurrection, whereupon he was sneered at by some and politely dismissed by the rest.

New Testament writers, however, viewed Genesis 1–11 as historical. In Matthew 19:4, 5, Jesus introduces quotes from Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 with the phrase, “have you not read . . .” indicating the truthfulness, historicity, and authority these passages held for Him. Genesis 1:27 refers to the creation of Adam and Eve in a

manner that suggests this was considered an historic event and the reference from 2:24, that the two “shall become one flesh” is used to justify Jesus’ teaching of the permanence and sanctity of marriage. In Luke 17:26-29 Jesus warned that the last days would be “as it was in the days of Noah.” Obviously, the threat of the final judgment is seriously diminished if the judgment of Noah’s day was not considered real and historical.

The author of Hebrews cites seamlessly events from these early chapters of Genesis along with later, commonly accepted historic events that suggests no distinction of their relative historicity in the minds of the early church (see Hebrews 11). Peter’s references to the time of the Flood assumes their historicity (2 Peter 3:3-7).

When viewed together, these and other New Testament passages suggest that the historicity of Genesis 1–11 was taken for granted by the early church. So Christians who believe in the New Testament should also accept this. □

#### REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> Raymond D. Dillard and Tremper Longman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1994, p. 49).
- <sup>2</sup> *Medical Ministry*, p. 89.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>4</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references in this article are quoted from *The New King James Version of the Bible*.