

Getting to Know Your Bible

Is Genesis history or myth, fact or fiction?

While the scope of this question is far greater than the limits of this brief discussion, we want to focus on a few helpful suggestions that will better alert us to the key issues at stake. Some of us may not be sure how the historicity and veracity (the historical and truth claims) of Genesis affect the validity of the Christian faith. Others may feel that there is no direct connection between the historicity of Genesis and the validity of Christian faith, or that if we throw out one the other is irretrievably lost. As difficult as these questions may be, clearly many of the major themes leading to and laying the foundation for the Pentateuch (the first 5 books of the OT, of which Genesis is the first), the Old Testament, and ultimately the New Testament, are found in Genesis. If the Genesis account is unreliable, then why, we may ask, should the rest of the Scriptures be any better? *At the center of this question is the genre of the Genesis account, the concept of history, and the difference between the concept of history the author of Genesis had and modern concepts of history today.*

The Genre of the Genesis Account: Literary Theological History

The above question illustrates an important point—Genesis is an anomaly to many modern readers who puzzle over how to classify and understand it. Along with the biographies of the Israelite patriarchs and the genealogical tables, we find stories of the supernatural: God creating the world out of nothing, a snake tempting Eve to eat forbidden fruit, angelic beings visiting earth, to name only a few. Looking further into the text, we find literary devices such as chiasm and wordplays, poetry and prose. One Old Testament scholar, on the basis of these literary observations, calls the Genesis account *artistic*.¹ Generally by modern standards we do not expect a historical account to be artistic. Works of literature are artistic but not, typically, history. Not surprisingly, such observations can and often do lead people to classify the Genesis account as mythical. However, scholars have noted that the author of Genesis is quite aware of myth, and frequently demythologizes events that otherwise would be interpreted by the surrounding peoples of Israel through a mythological worldview.² For example, in Genesis 1.14-19 (the creation of sun and the moon), the author deliberately chooses *not* to use the names for sun and moon because those names were the names of divinities in other related languages.³ To summarize the above: Genesis is a non-mythical, literary account of events, concerning God's interaction with Israel, which we may call a *Literary Theological History*.

¹ Dillard and Longman, 22.

² Hamilton, 58.

³ Hamilton, 127-128. This is but one of many examples of demythologizing, even in this specific passage.

The Concept of History: Historiography

Why classify the genre of Genesis in this way? Because it alerts us to the fact that how we understand history depends on how we record, interpret, and write about it (the technical term for this interpretive writing is Historiography). Further, it informs us that how we write about history depends on our worldview. Genesis is so hard for modern readers to classify because the author wrote it with a different worldview. The author wrote it with different beliefs and different ways of communicating them. *We can only begin to understand the Genesis account truly when we learn to appreciate the unique historiography of Genesis, comparing and contrasting it with our own modern historiographic methods.*

The Historiography of Genesis vs. Modern Historical Theory

Rather than dealing with specifics, we will here look at some of the broad philosophical concepts and assumptions that undergird and separate the historiography of the Genesis account from the methods of modern historical theory. Modern historical theory, broadly said, believes that the writing of history involves an objective report of people and events that exist in a “closed” system, or a system in which the only explanation any event can have is one that involves natural (as opposed to supernatural) causes. The historiography of Genesis, however, sees the possibility of God intervening in history; in fact, it sees God as directing history for His purposes. Thus the writing of history in Genesis is not an objective report of facts, it is a highly selective and interpretive endeavor that has God at center. The fact that the historical reports are interpretive and purposeful, however, does not mean that the reports are inaccurate or even contrived. The reason why it sounds difficult for our modern ears is because we are used to thinking of history from the modern perspective. Thus the real conflict over “Genesis- history or myth?” concerns the clash of different assumptions and philosophical concepts that are beneath our understanding of history and the author of Genesis’ understanding.

In short, one can embrace Genesis as being a reliable and trustworthy historical source given a proper understanding of the genre of Genesis and the different concepts of history and their underlying presuppositions for the author of Genesis and people today. Much more can (and probably should) be said; please consult the below for more information (available through Yucan).

- *An Introduction to the Old Testament* by Raymond Dillard and Tremper Longman.
- *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch* ed. D. Alexander and David Baker
- *The Book of Genesis, Ch. 1-17* by Victor Hamilton
- *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* by Gleason L. Archer