



eBook

# IN THE BEGINNING: THREE VIEWS ON THE BIBLE'S FIRST CHAPTERS

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# INTRODUCTION

by Charles Halton

We are thousands of years removed from the origins of the book of Genesis. We live in a world that has sent people to the moon and back, that uses magnets to map the inside of human bodies; we work and sleep in climate controlled buildings, travel in air-conditioned cars, fly in pressurized planes, and send text messages through pieces of metal and glass small enough to slip into the pockets of our pants. The world of Genesis was dusty and barely literate. The people of its time were preoccupied with satiating hunger and securing physical safety. They consulted shamans for toothaches, thought that the gods spoke through birth defects and markings on sheep livers, and they defecated into ditches.<sup>1</sup> Reading Genesis is like traveling from downtown Dublin to rural Angola. The contexts of author and reader could hardly be more different.

“Reading Genesis is like traveling from downtown Dublin to rural Angola.”

To be sure, we don’t share the cultural context of the authors of Genesis but we do hold in common the experience of being human — joy at childbirth and mourning at death. We relish a good story just as much as they did. We have unfulfilled dreams, we take pride in accomplishment, and we experience interpersonal strife, just like they did. At the same time as there are vast differences between us, we share with the biblical writers some of life’s most fundamental elements. How much of this shared experience translates into our understanding of the literary genres that they used? How big are the gaps in our knowledge?

Is Genesis 1 – 11 similar to the genres of our culture? If so, what genre is it? Is it factual history, fictional fable, or somewhere in between? And how does its overall genre affect our interpretation of individual passages? After two thousand years of study, these questions remain a matter of debate. This ebook—adapted from the book [\*Genesis: History, Fiction or Neither?\*](#)—is intended to reflect this debate as well as to help individuals and congregations have a more informed and focused discussion on the topic. The ebook itself will not arrive at any particular conclusion, although each author advocates for the position that he believes is most beneficial.

In his essay, “Genesis 1 – 11 as History and Theology,” James Hoffmeier argues that the Genesis narrative relates historical facts, real events that happened in space and time. Hoffmeier points to features within Genesis, such as geographical clues and literary elements, that signaled to ancient readers that these stories were to be understood as historical. Gordon Wenham agrees with this to a point. In his essay, “Genesis 1 – 11 as Protohistory,” Wenham sees an undercurrent of history beneath the Genesis account but he likens it to viewing an abstract painting — the picture is there

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<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 23:12 – 14 specifies the way in which this was to be done.

but the details are fuzzy. Wenham believes that Genesis is protohistory, a form of writing that has links to the past but interprets history for the sake of the present. Kenton Sparks explains that the authors of Genesis wrote in typically ancient ways which did not intend to produce history as we know it. In his essay, “Genesis 1 – 11 as Ancient Historiography,” Sparks argues that many of the events recounted in Genesis did not happen as the narrative states.

In the spirit of Galileo, all of the contributors agree that competent interpretation of Scripture requires sensitivity to genre. They disagree, however, over the precise nature of the genre of Genesis 1 – 11 and its implications. To a large extent, competent reading involves getting to know ourselves as much as it does understanding an author. Christopher Wall observes, “Though reading is a close collaboration between a reader and text, it can only start when you notice the difference between what you see and what you want to see.”<sup>2</sup>

## CHAPTER ONE: Genesis 1 – 11 as History and Theology

by James K. Hoffmeier

Genesis 1 – 11 begins the story of redemption — the loss of God’s presence; intimacy between God and humans,<sup>3</sup> and access to the tree of life. The narrative commences with “Paradise Lost” and culminates in the New Testament with “Paradise Regained,” to borrow from one of John Milton’s seventeenth-century classic poems. Because of the overarching theme connecting the early chapters of Genesis to the book of Revelation, Genesis 1 – 11 must be taken seriously.

The focus of the present work...will be on the genre of the literature of Genesis 1 – 11 and the implications for interpretation of the texts that comprise it. I will also address the early Genesis narratives in a comparative manner with ancient Near Eastern literature in order to understand the relationship between the two.

### Genesis: A Literary Overview

Genesis 1 – 11 is a convenient way of dividing the period from creation through the aftermath of the flood, sometimes called primeval history, from the Abrahamic

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<sup>2</sup> “A Curmudgeon’s Guide to Praise.” Posted October 12, 2013. *Los Angeles Review of Books*. [www.lareviewofbooks.org/essay/a-curmudgeons-guide-to-praise](http://www.lareviewofbooks.org/essay/a-curmudgeons-guide-to-praise). (Accessed July 21, 2014.)

<sup>3</sup> I heartily agree with Gordon Wenham’s observations in his study, “Sanctuary Symbolism in the Garden of Eden Story,” in *Proceedings of the Ninth World Congress of Jewish Studies, Division A: The Period of the Bible* (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1986), 19 – 25.

narratives, plausibly set in the early second millennium BC. Some commentaries and studies are even divided accordingly. This convenient packaging of Genesis 1 – 11, however, is an artificial division imposed on the text by modern interpreters, not one self-evident in the text of Genesis. David Clines has made this point in his thematic overview of Genesis, observing, “There is at no point a break between primeval and patriarchal history.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, we are actually introduced to Abraham in Genesis 11:27 – 32, learning of his parentage, his original home in Chaldean Ur, his wife Sarah’s barrenness, and about his migration with his father Terah and family to Canaan, which stalled in Haran.

This lack of a break between the primeval and patriarchal narratives is likely intentional. In his search for the “theme of the Pentateuch,” Clines proposes that what unified these five books thematically is the promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:1 – 3, in which God pledges the patriarchal land, posterity, and a relationship (blessing) with him. The balance of Genesis and the four books that follow is on the fulfillment of the three facets of the promise, culminating in Joshua with the taking of the land.<sup>5</sup> When he turns to Genesis 1 – 11, Clines sees a pattern of “sin — speech (divine) — mitigation — punishment,” making Genesis 1 – 11 “prefatory” to the promise,<sup>6</sup> that is, it necessarily explains the need for the promise.

One of the dangers of doing genre analysis of a large piece of ancient literature — be it in the Hebrew Bible, or Mesopotamian or Egyptian literature — is in imposing a single literary category on a work that is quite complex and made up of a variety of types of literature.

“The system of dividing Genesis into fifty chapters is not original to the text but a later creation.”

Then too, one mistake of modern scholarship is to press onto ancient literature modern literary categories that did not exist in the ancient world. Even the system of dividing Genesis into fifty chapters is not original to the text but a later creation. The book of Genesis does in fact have its own organizational program, not one imposed by later scribes or interpreters. I maintain that working from the text, using clues within the book of Genesis itself, is the best way to read and understand the book as a whole and Genesis 1 – 11 as a vital unit of the larger work.

## Genre of Genesis 1 – 11

### *Legend*

One of the most influential figures in viewing Genesis as legend is Hermann Gunkel. At the end of the nineteenth and at the outset of the twentieth century, he argued that Genesis was comprised of sagas, or legendary stories that were transmitted orally over

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<sup>4</sup> David J.A. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1978), 84.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 9 – 65.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 66 – 82.

long periods of time before being recorded in written form.<sup>7</sup> “Inherent in the nature of legend,” Gunkel maintained, is that “we cannot perceive ancient circumstances in them clearly, but only as though through a mist,” and furthermore, that “legend poetically recast historical memories” by adding to them elements from other legends and characters.”<sup>8</sup>...

In my judgment, the genre “legend” is inappropriate for Genesis as a whole. The inability to prove that certain characters existed, be they Adam, Noah, Nimrod, or Abram, does not make their stories legendary. We simply lack written materials to verify or reject elements of their stories.

### *Myth*

Myth as a type of literature is widely accepted in biblical scholarship.<sup>9</sup> The problem with the literary category “myth” is that definitions abound, and there is a long tradition of regarding myth to be fiction, opposite of history, something made up, even fantasy. Given this predisposition, it is understandable why conservative biblical scholars have been reluctant to use the term “myth.

The British Assyriologist, Andrew George, recently lamented that “there is little consensus as to what myth is and what it is not.”<sup>10</sup> One definition of myth is “a timeless event in the world of the gods,”<sup>11</sup> which is appropriate for many ancient Near Eastern cosmologies. Kenton Sparks has identified four categories of myth, namely those pertaining to the psychological, metaphorical, historical, and pleasure.<sup>12</sup> Mircea Eliade, the great historian of religion, believed that “myth is bound up with ontology; it speaks only of realities, of what really happened, of what was fully manifested.”<sup>13</sup> “Myth narrates a sacred history,” Eliade maintained and it relates to “an event that took place in

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<sup>7</sup> Hermann Gunkel, *Schöpfung und Chaos in Urzeit un Endzeit* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1895), and further developed by Gunkel in *Genesis* (trans. Mark Biddle; Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> Gunkel, *Genesis*, xvi.

<sup>9</sup> For example, see Bernard Batto, *Slaying the Dragon: Mythmaking in the Biblical Tradition* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992) and *In the Beginning: Essays on the Creation Motifs in the Ancient Near East and the Bible* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2013). I am grateful to Professor Batto who kindly gave me a copy of his new book.

<sup>10</sup> Andrew George, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1999), xxxiii.

<sup>11</sup> Donald Redford, *Egypt, Canaan and Israel in Ancient Times* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 409.

<sup>12</sup> Kenton Sparks, “The Problem of Myth in Ancient Historiography,” in *Rethinking the Foundations: Historiography in the Ancient World and in the Bible; Essays in Honour of John Van Seters* (eds. S.L. McKenzie & T. Römer; Berlin, de Gruyter, 2000), 271 – 77.

<sup>13</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred & the Profane* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959), 95 (emphasis Eliade’s).

primordial Time, the fabled time of the ‘beginnings.’”<sup>14</sup> The key idea here is that myth deals with what “really happened.”

Thus myth, in the technical sense, is concerned with ultimate realities, not fiction. Even though preserved in the forms of stories or epic poems, myths are not fantasy. Peter Enns recently (and rightly) questioned “how much value there is in posing the choice of Genesis as either myth or history.”<sup>15</sup> Myth is a type of literature that does not necessarily look like historiography. It could be written in poetic form and may employ highly symbolic language, and yet, myth can be considered writing about real events. A classic example of this is the flood story, for which we not only have the biblical Hebrew report, but also a number of different Mesopotamian flood traditions (see further discussion of this below).

“Myth, in the technical sense, is concerned with ultimate realities, not fiction.”

Lastly, to further illustrate that there may be no conflict between history and myth, it has been noted by historians that annalistic historical records from the ancient biblical world used mythological images when speaking of historical events. The “Hero-god versus Chaos” motif, for example, is used in the reports of Ramesses II at the battle of Kadesh in the thirteenth century BC.<sup>16</sup> Sennacherib’s annals, which include records of his campaign against Hezekiah’s Judah in 701 BC, contain allusions to the cosmic struggle with Tiamat (the primeval sea), from the Babylonian creation myth *Enuma Elish*.<sup>17</sup>

Similarly, biblical authors used mythological motifs, even when writing about historical events and known individuals. Ezekiel, for instance, likens the reigning pharaoh (probably Hophra/Apries) to “a monster in the seas” (Ezek 32:2). Here, the biblical term *tannîn* references a sea monster known from Ugaritic literature. It is this same monster that the Old Testament states was mastered and defeated by God (see especially Isa 27:1, 51:9; Job 3:8, 41:1; Ps 74:14, 104:26). So Ezekiel saw no conflict in appropriating a mythological motif in service to a contemporary historical event.

Consequently, it is reasonable to assume that while Genesis 1 – 11 uses mythic language, that such language does not necessarily make its contents fiction. It may be, as I have argued elsewhere, that ancient Near Eastern creation motifs in Genesis 1 and 2 are primarily employed for polemical reasons against the prevailing worldviews of Mesopotamia, Canaan, and Egypt, all of which influenced ancient Israel.<sup>18</sup>...

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<sup>14</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 5. Emphasis is Eliade’s.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 49.

<sup>16</sup> Redford, *Egypt, Canaan and Israel in Ancient Times*, 409.

<sup>17</sup> K. Lawson Younger, “Assyrian Involvement in the Southern Levant at the End of the 8th Century B.C.E.,” in *Jerusalem in Bible and Archaeology: the First Temple Period* (eds. A. Vaughn & A.E. Killebrew; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1993), 254 – 55.

<sup>18</sup> James K. Hoffmeier, “Genesis 1 & 2 and Egyptian Cosmology,” *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* 15 (1983), 39 – 49.

## Family Histories

Before examining Genesis 1 – 11 as a unit, we need to step back and look at the entire book of Genesis. It has long been recognized that the repeated phrase, “these are the generations” (KJV, RSV, ESV) or “this is the account” (NIV) is critical to understanding how the book is organized and, as will be suggested here, it is a key to identifying the genre of the book. The phrase employs the key Hebrew term *tôlêdôt* eleven times (Gen 2:4, 5:2, 6:9a, 10:1, 11:10a, 11:27a, 25:12, 25:19a, 36:1, 36:9, 37:2). As early as his commentary, first published in 1852, Franz Delitzsch recognized that this repeated refrain provides the organizational structure for the book of Genesis.<sup>19</sup> Later, in Delitzsch’s classic commentary with C.F. Keil, the same analysis is offered,<sup>20</sup> thus dividing the book of Genesis by *tôlêdôt* formulae as follows:

- History of the heavens and the earth (2:4b – 4:26)
- History of Adam (5:1 – 6:8)
- History of Noah (6:9 – 9:26)
- History of the sons of Noah (10:1 – 11:9)
- History of Shem (11:10 – 26)
- History of Terah (11:27 – 25:11)
- History of Ishmael (25:12 – 18)
- History of Isaac (25:19 – 35:29)
- History of Esau (36:1 – 8 & 36:9 – 42)26
- History of Jacob (37:1 – 50:26)

[...]

Likewise S.R. Driver, and many scholars since, recognized the importance of the *tôlêdôt* formula as providing a unified “plan” for Genesis, likely the work of the Priestly writer and compiler (of the sixth-fifth centuries BC) who utilized “pre-existing materials in the composition of his work.”<sup>21</sup> Driver also thought the formula was used for genealogical purposes. Furthermore, Gerhard von Rad thought that the *tôlêdôt* formula was “the original framework for the Priestly narrative.”<sup>22</sup> This early-twentieth-century understanding remains the view of scholars who still hold to the four-source hypothesis.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Franz Delitzsch, *A New Commentary on Genesis* (revised edition, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1888), 60ff.

<sup>20</sup> Franz Delitzsch and C.F. Keil, *Commentary on the Old Testament. Volume 1, The Pentateuch* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1885), reprinted by Eerdmans, 5 – 6.

<sup>21</sup> S.R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis* (London: Methuen & Co., 1909, 2nd ed.), ii – iv.

<sup>22</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis, A Commentary*. Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), 126.

<sup>23</sup> E.S. Speiser, *Genesis*. The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), xxiv – xxvi. Coats, *Genesis with an Introduction to Narrative Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 19 – 21.

Scholars who approach the Bible using more historical, exegetical methods and who appropriate newer literary approaches likewise recognize the centrality of the *tôlêdôt*.<sup>24</sup> Recently, Averbeck has written on the “genealogical framework” of Genesis, and considers that the *tôlêdôt* formula “shapes and unifies” the book.<sup>25</sup>

Genealogical texts in the ancient Near East, by their very nature, are treated seriously by scholars and not cavalierly dismissed as made up or fictitious, even if such lists are truncated or selective.<sup>26</sup> Donald Redford reminds us that genealogies in Egypt were “carefully kept.”<sup>27</sup> Proof of this practice can be seen on a statue of the priest Basa, from the ninth century BC, who traces his priestly line back twenty-seven generations, to the early or mid-fifteenth century BC.<sup>28</sup> An even longer genealogical span is preserved on the Assyrian King List,<sup>29</sup> dating from the reign of Shalmaneser V (726 – 722 BC) to around 2000 BC, to the earliest Assyrian rulers “who lived in tents.”<sup>30</sup> Private genealogies and king lists were recorded and, as far as we can tell, were an accurate accounting of family histories and dynasties. Priestly genealogies were important to confer priestly offices on individuals, but royal lists had an important civil function. Alan Millard observes such lists had to be accurate because, “legal deeds had to be concluded” based on them and “they enabled kings to learn when their predecessors had built temples or palaces which they were rebuilding.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> As a student of R.K. Harrison, I learned about the “tablet theory” behind the *tôlêdôt* that was advanced by P.J. Wiseman, *Creation Revealed in Six Days* (Edinburgh: Morgan and Scott, 1948), 34ff. His famous son, Donald Wiseman, the Assyriologist and Old Testament scholar, saw merit in aspects of his father’s theory about the *tôlêdôt* in Genesis (see the forward to the reprinted version of P.J. Wiseman’s earlier studies: *Clues to Creation in Genesis* [London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1977], v – vii). See too R.K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 548 – 51.

<sup>25</sup> Averbeck, “Ancient Near Eastern Mythography as It Relates to Historiography in the Hebrew Bible: Genesis 3 and the Cosmic Battle,” 343.

<sup>26</sup> See my discussion on king-lists in *COS* 1:68.

<sup>27</sup> Donald Redford, *Pharaonic King-list, Annals and Day-books* (Missisauga: Benben, 1986), 62, n. 226.

<sup>28</sup> Robert Ritner, “Denderite Temple Hierarchy and the Family of Nefwenenef,” in *For His Ka: Essays Offered in Memory of Klaus Baer* (ed. D. Silverman; Chicago: The Oriental Institute), 205 – 26.

<sup>29</sup> Of course, with king lists, there are different dynasties in play, although there may be a biological link between families. The numbering of dynasties used by historians of Egypt follows the system set in place by Manetho (the Ptolemaic period priest-historian), which seems to have been rooted in earlier traditions like that in the Turin King List. In some instances, there could be biological connections between royal families, like Dynasty 4 and 5, and certainly between 17 and 18.

<sup>30</sup> Alan Millard, “Assyrian King Lists,” *COS* 1:463 – 65.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 461.



It has been rightly noted by Richard Hess that the genealogies of Genesis do not find an exact parallel with ancient Near Eastern counterparts.<sup>32</sup> The differences in form, he suggests, are due to the differences in function. He is undoubtedly correct, but the differences in function do not mean that both the Genesis genealogies and those from the ancient Near East were not interested in an accurate and orderly sequence of ancestors. Lists could be truncated and schematically organized, but the names refer to real people, not fictitious figures. And this is the essential point for our discussion here.

“The genealogies of Genesis do not find an exact parallel with ancient Near Eastern counterparts.”

The point of this excursus is to show that genealogical lists (with which Genesis abounds) and history (especially family histories) are closely related. This brings us back to the word *tôlēdôt*. Recognizing the historical nature of genealogies, some scholars render this key word as “record”<sup>33</sup> or “history.”<sup>34</sup> I think Gordon Wenham captures the essence of *tôlēdôt* by rendering it “this is the family history of X.”<sup>35</sup>

By using the formula “this is the family history,” the author or compiler signals the genre of the book of Genesis, including chapters 1 – 11. Even if we concede that earlier records were used, the “family history” structuring of the book indicates that the narratives should be understood as historical, focusing on the origins of Israel back to Adam and Eve, the first human couple and parents of all humanity. The use of a genealogical-historical framework for Genesis points the reader towards how the book as a whole should be understood, namely, the narratives are dealing with real events involving historical figures — and this includes Genesis 1 – 11.

## CHAPTER TWO: Genesis 1 – 11 as Protohistory

by Gordon J. Wenham

The book of Genesis contains a variety of literary types. There are genealogies, a king list, poems both short and long, and narrative material. Naming the genre of these

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<sup>32</sup> Richard Hess, “The Genealogies of Genesis 1 – 11 and Comparative Literature,” *Biblica* 70 (1989), 241 – 54.

<sup>33</sup> Speiser, *Genesis*, 39.

<sup>34</sup> KBL 1700; Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary of the Book of Genesis* (2 vols.; trans. Israel Abrahams; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1961), 1:273; Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1 – 15*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco: Word, 1987), 4, 16.

<sup>35</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 1 – 15*, 119, 149, 209, etc.

different elements is not easy, especially when it comes to the opening chapters 1 – 11...

What should we call the stories of Adam and Eve or the account of Noah and the flood? ... Ultimately we must recognize that how we define the genre of Gen 1 – 11 is a secondary issue: our primary concern must be the interpretation of the stories and their application today. The definition of genre refines and clarifies the message of Genesis, but disagreements about genre should not obscure our substantial agreement about the theological teaching of these stories. Whether one calls Gen 1 – 11 doctrine, history, fiction, or myth, it is clear that these chapters are making profound statements about the character of God and his relationship to mankind. Elucidating these truths must be the goal of every interpreter.

So how should we proceed? The first aim should be to enter the thought world of the author of Genesis, what is technically called its cognitive environment,<sup>36</sup> to see what his presuppositions are and how the Genesis material compares with them. In other words, our aim is an emic approach to these chapters...[that is,] an understanding of the nature of the text as it was understood by the original, or more exactly, the implied author and readers of the text.

“The first aim should be to enter the thought world of the author of Genesis.”

But we cannot be content with just an emic understanding. The title of this book *Genesis 1 – 11: History, Fiction or Neither?* invites the expectation of an etic interpretation, i.e., how a modern reader should view the text. Such a reading will be partly determined by that reader’s presuppositions, which may range from skeptical atheism to naïve fundamentalism. By embracing orthodox Christian assumptions, I hope to recover an approach to the text that does it justice in its biblical and theological contexts as the opening chapter of Holy Scripture.

## Genealogies

We begin our study of the minor elements that make up Gen 1 – 11 with a look at its genealogies.<sup>37</sup> ... What is the function of genealogies in general and these in particular? And, how do they relate to the book of Genesis as a whole? By themselves linear genealogies serve to connect the generations...

Segmented genealogies on the other hand serve to make claims to territory or skills. The Table of Nations in Gen 10 is an elaborate segmented genealogy that shows how

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<sup>36</sup> See John H. Walton, *Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2011); Daniel D. Lowery, *Toward a Poetics of Genesis 1 – 11: Reading Genesis 4:17 – 22 in its Near Eastern Context* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2013).

<sup>37</sup> For fuller discussion see Robert R. Wilson, *Genealogy and History in the Biblical World* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1977).

the nations of the then-known world were seen to be all descended from the sons of Noah. The much shorter segmented genealogy in Gen 4:20 – 22 shows how three of Lamech’s sons founded guilds of herdsmen, musicians, and metalworkers. These interests, Lowery argues, show that the primary purpose of genealogies is not to relate history but to provide a charter for landholding and expertise in various areas.<sup>38</sup> These conclusions are supported by studies of genealogies in other oral cultures as well as by ancient Near Eastern texts.

But there are features of the biblical genealogies that are unusual. In Gen 5 the seventh generation from Adam is Enoch, renowned for his walk with God and for his translation to heaven: “he was not, for God took him” (5:24). Similarly, the genealogy in Gen 4 involves six generations of linear descent and then with the seventh generation, i.e. Lamech’s sons, it becomes segmented. This interest in sevens is underlined by reference to Cain’s threat of sevenfold vengeance and of Lamech’s seventy-sevenfold revenge (4:24). This interest in sevens is also obvious in the structure of Gen 1 (see below) and in many Old Testament rituals. These features demonstrate careful organization of the text with a didactic purpose, not mere historiography...

Whatever significance may be read out of this fondness for sevens, tens, and seventy, one conclusion is clear — these genealogies constitute the backbone of Genesis...

Thus as a first approximation one could describe the genre of Gen 1 – 11 as an expanded genealogy.

## Genesis 1:1 – 2:3

Such a definition of the genre fits Gen 2:4 – 11:32. But the opening chapter (more precisely 1:1 – 2:3) falls outside these limits. This chapter prefaces the main body of Gen 1 – 11, each section of which is headed by the formula, “These are the generations of . . . .” The first of these headings occurs in 2:4, “These are the generations of the heavens and the earth” and introduces the narratives about Adam, Eve, and Cain. Often, 2:4 is supposed to conclude the opening chapter, but this is a mistake.<sup>39</sup> Everywhere else in Genesis it is a heading introducing what follows, not summarizing what precedes, and there is no reason to take 2:4 as summary rather than heading. We should therefore read 1:1 – 2:3 as a prelude or overture to the main body of Gen 1 – 11, if not to the whole Pentateuch.

Chapter 1 is a carefully constructed unit in its own right, which equips the reader with the theological spectacles that enables him to read the subsequent material with the correct focus. There are various marks of careful editing that characterize chapter 1...

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<sup>38</sup> Lowery, *Towards a Poetics*, 81.

<sup>39</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 1 – 15*, 49 – 56.

This careful structuring of this first account of creation sets it apart from the material that follows in the subsequent chapters. So does the language. Whereas 2:4 onwards is straightforward Hebrew narrative prose, 1:1 – 2:3 has a poetic flavor, and though some scholars have termed it poetry it is better described as elevated prose. It certainly has a different character from the later chapters of Genesis.

But can one be more specific about its genre? Hermann Gunkel called it “faded myth” while Von Rad said it was not myth or saga but priestly doctrine.<sup>40</sup> There is some merit in both these descriptions, but better than both is Westermann’s description of this section as an overture.<sup>41</sup> An overture opens an opera and introduces some of the key themes and tunes that will be developed later: this is what Gen 1 does for the rest of the book. In Gen 1 we meet for the first time some of the chief actors and learn something about their character.

The God of Genesis is quite different from the traditional gods of the ancient Near East.<sup>42</sup> In Gen 1 only one God is active; there are no other gods and goddesses such as are found in other ancient cosmologies. Not only is this one God unique, he is also omnipotent. With just a few words of command and no apparent struggle, the entire world is called into being; even the sun, moon, and stars, which are deities in other cultures, are created by the divine word. Besides presiding omnipotently over his creation, the God of Genesis creates with a purpose. He creates an environment where mankind can flourish. The creation of those elements most needful for human development — such as dry land, plants and fruit trees, the heavenly bodies — is described more fully than other aspects. But God’s particular concern for man is demonstrated by assigning him the plants for food. Other ancient cultures say mankind was created to provide the gods with food. Genesis says the opposite: God provides man with food. Another mark of divine benevolence towards man is his Sabbath rest. The creation of man is the climax of Gen 1. Both male and female are created in God’s image, which means they are to be his representatives on earth. And another implication of man’s divine image is that he should imitate God by observing the Sabbath.

God’s rest on the Sabbath implies something else. In the ancient world the dedication of a temple took a week and on the seventh day the god or gods came to take up residence in it. It seems likely that the creation of the world is viewed as creating a temple for the Creator who rests on the seventh day, i.e., comes to dwell on earth, his newly created temple.<sup>43</sup> In other words, the goal of creation is that God should “rest,” i.e., dwell with man. All students of Scripture will recognize theological motifs in Gen 1 that are developed more fully later in Genesis, indeed in the rest of the Bible...

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<sup>40</sup> Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis* (9th ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977), xiv and Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (2nd ed.; London: SCM, 1972), 47, respectively.

<sup>41</sup> Westermann, *Genesis*, 93. According to Westermann Genesis 1 is a festive overture to P, a putative source of the Pentateuch supposedly responsible for the genealogies among other texts.

<sup>42</sup> On the nature of biblical monotheism see Michael S. Heiser, “Monotheism and the Language of Divine Plurality in the Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 65 (2014): 85 – 100.

<sup>43</sup> See John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis 1* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2009), 72 – 92.

If one sees the genealogies as forming the backbone of Genesis, one could call Genesis 1 its head, in that its leading ideas flow out from it.

## Narratives in Genesis 2:4 – 11:9

It is these narratives from the garden of Eden to the Tower of Babel that dominate Gen 1 – 11 and essentially define its character...

But if we look at these stories one-by-one and temporarily disregard their present context, it is clear that they function to explain present experiences by relating the past. Thus chapter 2 relating the creation of Adam and Eve explains the necessity of marriage and the nature of the marriage union. Marriage is needed to prevent loneliness, “It is not good that the man should be alone” (2:18). It is also necessary if the human race is to survive and fulfill the creation mandate to “be fruitful and multiply” (1:28). Making Eve out of Adam’s rib shows the nature of the bond between man and wife. Marriage connects the partners to each other as though they were blood relatives. They are each other’s flesh and bone (cf. 29:14)...

Similarly chapter 3 offers a story that explains the nature of sin and its consequences. The essence of sin according to Gen 3 is disobeying God... We could say that this story offers a paradigm of sin. This is confirmed by the next story in Genesis, the murder by Cain of his brother Abel. There are many parallels between chapters 3 and 4 which underline the point that both stories offer paradigmatic descriptions of sin.

## Myth: An Inappropriate Category

Anthropologists and religious phenomenologists describe stories about the distant past, which explain present phenomena, as myths, especially where the divine is involved. And I have argued that this is what the opening chapters of Genesis do. They explain relationships between man and beast, between man and woman. They picture monogamous heterosexual marriage. They explain the presence of toil, pain, and death. And in describing these phenomena, they both prescribe a pattern for society — life in the garden of Eden gives a glimpse of the ideal — and they describe what the life of an ancient Israelite farmer was like — life outside the garden — enduring the curses of Gen 3. So there is no doubt that phenomenologists would be quite at ease describing Gen 1 – 11 as myth.

But calling Gen 1 – 11 myth is at least unwise, at worst misleading, and as I shall argue, inaccurate. Since the time of the ancient Greek philosophers in the fifth century BC, myths have had a bad press. Greeks contrasted the myths of Homer with the logic of the philosophers... This denigration of myth continued down the ages...

[Despite] modern attempts to enhance the standing of myth in scholarly perception, the word “myth” itself still has very negative overtones... And this is not how the first authors or hearers of these stories would have viewed them: they would doubtless have held them in similar respect to our era’s respect for modern cosmologies or other scientific theories. For these reasons, it is prudent to avoid the term “myth” in describing the genre of Gen 1 – 11...

[There are] good reasons for affirming that the stories of Genesis are like history in some respects. For example, though Gen 3 offers a paradigm for every sin — disobedience, alienation, suffering — it is clear that some features of the narrative are unique and not repeated every time someone sins; Adam and Eve were naked when they ate the forbidden fruit but were clothed afterwards. Wearing clothes is taken by Genesis to be the usual current situation. Other permanent changes include living outside the garden, for subsequent sins (e.g. Cain and Abel) take place outside Eden. It is also likely that Genesis views toil, pain, and death as part of the human inheritance, not something that originates every time someone sins, even though every sin subsequent to Adam and Eve’s confirms the justice of the divine punishments. On a more positive note, one can be sure that ancient Israelites did not think the creation of every woman involved the cloning of a man! Though the creation of Eve from Adam’s rib was an illustration of general principles about marriage, and in this sense paradigmatic, there is also a uniqueness about their relationship that is not replicated universally.

“One can be sure that ancient Israelites did not think the creation of every woman involved the cloning of a man!”

For this reason I think these chapters should also be seen as protohistorical. These chapters contain stories that both illustrate important social and theological principles, as myths are often alleged to do, yet they also tell of unique occurrences. These may not be datable and fixable chronologically, but they were viewed as real events. This is confirmed by the way these narratives are attached to the genealogies... As an interim conclusion we may say that Gen 1 – 11 is a genealogy, which has been expanded with stories from ancient times to produce an account of the development of the human race from its origin to the time of Abraham...

But there are texts from Mesopotamia that parallel Gen 1 – 11 that may be utilized in an attempt to clarify the genre of Gen 1 – 11.

## Some Mesopotamian Parallels to Genesis 1 – 11

The best known of these texts is the Atrahasis epic (c. 1600 BC). It is a long poem written in Akkadian that begins with the god Ea creating seven human couples to take over the work of the lesser gods whose task was to till the land to grow food for the great gods. Tiring of the effort, the lesser gods went on strike, and human beings were made in order to circumvent the problem. However, soon a population explosion

threatened, so the great gods adopted various measures to combat the growth of the human race, the last being a universal flood. From this disaster, one man, Atrahasis (=Noah), and his family were saved by building an ark in which they and the animals survived the flood. The flood is described more completely in tablet 11 of the Epic of Gilgamesh, another Mesopotamian text from about 1600 BC. However, the context of the flood story in Gilgamesh is quite different from the Atrahasis epic, which provides a much closer analogy to the setting of the flood story in Genesis.

While the Atrahasis epic offers good parallels to the narrative elements in Gen 1 – 11, it is the Sumerian King List (c. 1900 BC) that furnishes the better parallel to the genealogies. The Sumerian King List tells of eight, nine, or ten kings<sup>19</sup> whose reigns lasted up to 43,200 years each. It then mentions that a flood swept over the earth and kingship had again to be lowered from heaven...

There is yet another Sumerian text that matches the pattern of Gen 1 – 11 even more precisely by mixing genealogical elements and epic narrative even more intimately. This is the Sumerian Flood Story, renamed by Thorkild Jacobsen "The Eridu Genesis."<sup>44</sup> ...

"A term is required that does not suggest to many readers that the account is make-believe."

[Jacobsen] characterizes both the Eridu Genesis and Gen 1 – 11 as mytho-historical, "We may assign both traditions to a new and separate genre as mytho-historical accounts."<sup>45</sup> This is a sensitive analysis of the nature of both texts, but as argued earlier "myth" is a loaded term, which, when applied to Scripture, leads to misunderstanding. A term is required that does not suggest to many readers that the account is make-believe, but one that affirms its truth and validity. This is why I prefer to describe Gen 1 – 11 as protohistory. It is *proto* in that it describes origins, what happened first. It is also *proto* in that it is setting out models of God and his dealings with the human race. It is historical in that it is describing past realities and the lessons that should be drawn from them.

If then we are seeking a definition of the genre of Gen 1 – 11, protohistory, I maintain, is the best we can do. It is not ordinary history that relies on contemporary sources, or at least on sources much closer to the events it describes than Gen 1 – 11 does. On the other hand it is not fiction, whose basis is in the author's imagination rather than stimuli from the external world. Yet, protohistory shares with both these genres the aim of imparting an interpretation of the world as we experience it. It could be described as theology and sociology in pictures. But whereas history could be described as a photograph of the past and fiction as a movie, protohistory is akin to a portrait of the past. It is a valid representation that faithfully portrays the artist's intentions. And it is these intentions that the modern reader must focus on.

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<sup>44</sup> See Thorkild Jacobsen, "The Eridu Genesis," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 100 (1981): 513 – 29, reprinted in Richard S. Hess and David T. Tsumura, *I Studied Inscriptions from Before the Flood* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 129 – 42.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 140 = *JBL*, 528.

# CHAPTER THREE: Genesis 1 – 11 as Ancient Historiography

by Kenton L. Sparks

“It is a disgraceful and dangerous thing for an infidel to hear a Christian, presumably giving the meaning of Holy Scripture, talking nonsense on these topics; and we should take all means to prevent such an embarrassing situation, in which people show up vast ignorance in a Christian and laugh it to scorn.”

**Augustine**, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*

Because the gospel is for all people and not for the Church alone, Augustine believed that Christian interpretations of Scripture should be true to the facts of “public knowledge” as understood by the larger world to which the Church speaks. Aquinas expressed the same sentiment eight centuries later, when he warned that Christians “should adhere to a particular explanation [of Scripture] only in such measure as to be ready to abandon it, if it be proved with certainty to be false; lest Holy Scripture be exposed to the ridicule of unbelievers, and obstacles be placed to their believing.”<sup>46</sup> It is no accident that these admonitions were uttered in the context of interpreting the book of Genesis. For in the days of Augustine, and even more so in the days of Aquinas, tensions between a literal reading of Genesis and the insights of science were growing with each advance in our understanding of the cosmos. As is well known, the Church’s response was slow and awkward. In the seventeenth century it banned the astronomical works of Galileo, only to reverse course a century later as the accumulating evidence caved in on what was formerly considered an unassailable dogma of Scripture, tradition, and common sense.

Time has only widened the breach between science and Genesis. From where we stand now, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, in a time when we’ve sequenced the Neanderthal genome and traced out in the DNA our shared genetic heritage with primates and other mammals, it is no longer possible for informed readers to interpret the book of Genesis as straightforward history. There was no Edenic garden, nor trees of life and knowledge, nor a serpent that spoke, nor a worldwide flood in which all living things, save those on a giant boat, were killed by God. Whatever the first chapters of Genesis offer, there is one thing that they certainly do not offer, namely, a literal account of events that actually happened prior to and during the early history of humanity. If Genesis is the word of God, as I and other Christians believe, then we must try to understand how God speaks through a narrative that is no longer the literal history that our Christian forebears often assumed it to be...

There is ample evidence that the authors of Scripture were not modern historians or scientists, and equally compelling evidence that evolutionary biology provides the best

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<sup>46</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1, q. 68.



explanation for life's origins, including human origins.<sup>47</sup> Given this assumption, my primary task in this essay is to propose an approach to Genesis that allows informed Christians, living in these early decades of the twenty-first century, to read Scripture responsibly. To do this well, we will have to understand, as best we can, the literary genres used by the ancient authors to speak for God...

## Musings on Genre

“Genre” should not be construed merely in terms of literature or art. It is better understood as an epistemic function of human interpretation in which we make sense of things by comparing them with other things. We compare and contrast, note similarities and differences, and formulate categories in which things fit or do not fit. The generic process is usually a tacit, unconscious operation in which we attend closely to neither the procedure nor its result.<sup>48</sup> We see a piece of fruit, judge that it's a tasty apple such as we've seen before, and take a confident bite. Nary is a thought given to this process unless the taste surprises us — for good or ill. But if we're surprised by the taste, we'll take mental note of the generic details so that, in the future, we will make even better choices.

Genres should not be construed as fixed categories in heaven, as if our goal is to discover the true definitions of “fruit” and “vegetable” so that we can put the right objects into the right boxes. The fixed point for interpretation is the thing we are interpreting. It is from this and similar things that we abstract our generic categories, which in turn become convenient “tools” for us to use in interpretation. But again, these tools are not fixed. We could easily change our definition of “fruit,” join its members with other things to create a new genre (such as organic things), or divide its members to create entirely different generic categories (edible vs. inedible fruits). Genres are flexible categories which help us make sense of and engage the world...

Literary genres reflect different strategies for representing reality. The parables of Jesus are a good example. When Jesus said that a Samaritan once turned aside to help his suffering neighbor, he was not referring to a particular Samaritan or neighbor. His parable represented the many instances in which all of us have opportunities to lend a helping hand. Will we fail our neighbor, as the priest and Levite did, or will we come to his aid? That was Jesus' question. And this illustrates well the unique power of fiction. It depicts the broad sweep of human history, and of the human condition, rather than a particular moment in history.

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<sup>47</sup> For a good summary of the evidence through a confessional lens, see Karl W. Giberson and Francis S. Collins, *The Language of Science and Faith: Straight Answers to Genuine Questions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011). For an accredited theological assessment, see Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, *In the Beginning: A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and the Fall* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990).

<sup>48</sup> See Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1983).

Certainly there are times when detailed, accurate history is called for, but this produces a different kind of representation. When Luke reported that Jesus exited the tomb after his death, he wasn't offering a symbol of our potential for psychological renewal. He intended to say that there was once a particular, very special man named Jesus who died and rose again. Events in history can certainly be described in other ways, as we see in the "little lamb" allegory used by the prophet Nathan to entrap King David (2 Sam 11), but this and similar genres cease to represent reality with similitude, as Luke's gospel did. Nathan's representation was heavy on symbol; Luke's was heavy on similitude. I raise this point because, when we bring our historical questions to the stories in Genesis, we should not confuse representation in general with historical representation. Historical representation maintains a very close relationship between the narrative and actual events. The flood story in Genesis (as an example) will be this kind of text if and only if the author intended it to represent a literal worldwide flood and a literal boat on which the last vestiges of animal and human life were saved. Anything less will count as representation but not as historical representation...

## Genesis 1 - 11 as the Word of God

Christians (and Jews) believe that Gen 1 – 11 is embedded in, and is indeed the introduction to, a larger "canon" of books that together constitute the written word of God. Christians generally agree on the contours of the canon but have never reached full agreement.<sup>49</sup> To this day different branches of the Church include different books and order them in somewhat different ways. In at least one case the disagreement stems from biblical testimony, for the Ethiopic Church, unlike the others, has accepted 1 Enoch as canonical because the author of the Book of Jude accepted it (see Jude 1:14). But that is a matter for another time. Christians on all sides certainly agree that Gen 1 – 11 is the introduction to and sets many theological agendas for the larger canon from Genesis to Revelation.

It is natural to infer from Scripture's genre, as the Word of God, that there are certain generic traits that cannot appear in its pages. Christian Fundamentalists often deny that the Bible reflects historical error or theological confusion because these traits would ostensibly impugn God's character. While I am myself an evangelical and understand the strong impulse to stake out this claim, I don't believe that the Bible's status as the Word of God places any necessary limitation on the range of generic possibilities... How, then, should we think of Scripture? Scripture is not a room filled with clairvoyant theologians who have the same ideas and agree on every point. It is better understood as a room of wise elders, each an invited guest because of his unique voice and relation to God.<sup>50</sup> Every elder has insight, but no elder has all of the answers, nor are any of

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<sup>49</sup> Lee Martin McDonald, *The Biblical Canon: Its Origin, Transmission, and Authority* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007).

<sup>50</sup> While I prefer to use gender inclusive language, here and elsewhere in the essay I assume that the biblical authors were men. This is in keeping with the patriarchal perspective of the texts and

them wholly liberated from humanity's broken, sinful condition. Every voice is of value, but each will perhaps push too far in one direction and not enough in another, and each will push, in some way or other, in the wrong direction. When we read Scripture well, we listen in on the conversations of these elders, and, in conversations with other readers, seek as best we can to understand God's voice. It is through this communal reading experience that God points us to his one and only solution for our broken condition: Jesus Christ.<sup>51</sup>

## Genesis 1 - 11 as Human Words

God's word is expressed in human languages and generic conventions, so we best honor God's choice to speak in this way by reading Scripture as the human discourse that it is. Many generic categories provide readers with a useful grasp on all or parts of Gen 1 – 11. In what follows I will explore these generic features, beginning with the genealogies in Genesis (because these provided my first "Aha!" moment) before moving on to traits that appear in the text's smaller and larger units. As we pursue this end, we will often consider comparative texts from the ancient Near East and also those within the Bible itself. But in the end, there are no texts from the ancient world that stand generically close in all respects to either the Bible as a whole or to the Book of Genesis. Like all texts, the Bible is ultimately *sui generis* — its own genre.

## Genesis 1 - 11 as Primeval History

Anyone with an ounce of curiosity about our life and world will be interested in the first few chapters of the Bible. These combine stories and genealogies to describe the earliest moments of our cosmos and the early days of human history. This is why scholars refer to this part of the Bible as the "primeval history." The basic structure of this history alternates between story and list. The creation story is followed by a genealogical list of the first human beings (who lived much longer than we do), which is then followed by the flood story and by another list of human beings (who, again, lived much longer than we do). If this were the only ancient text we had ever read, it would certainly strike us as quite unique. But for those familiar with other texts from the ancient world, our natural response is a *déjà vu* feeling that we've seen it all before.

The primeval history of Genesis participates in a generic tradition found already in Mesopotamian texts from the third millennium BCE and which endured at least until the time of Berossus in the third century BCE. The basic structure of this tradition, which in

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also with our current understanding of ancient Israelite society, in which scribal education was a male enterprise.

<sup>51</sup> For Christ as criterion in biblical interpretation, see John 5:39 – 40; Ratzinger, *In the Beginning*, 8 – 18.

whole or part appears in the Eridu Genesis, Sumerian King List, Atrahasis and Berossus, is the same as in Genesis: (1) creation, (2) list, (3) flood, (4) list.<sup>52</sup> ...

The aforementioned parallels between the biblical and Mesopotamian primeval traditions are striking and illustrate in general what is also true in more specific cases. As Rembrandt worked in oil on canvas, so the authors of Gen 1 – 11 worked in the motifs and literary forms of the ancient world.

## CONCLUSION

You've gained a solid overview of three interpretations of Genesis 1 – 11.

**But how do these views make sense of key stories in Genesis?**

[Pick up the full text from Zondervan](#) to dig further into this discussion. You will:

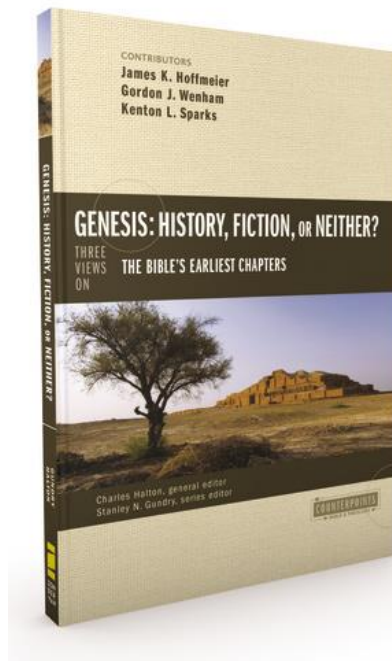
- Apply these three views of Genesis to specific biblical texts
- Reflect on the creation story and the Garden of Eden
- Discover surprising characteristics of the biblical genealogies
- Examine the mysterious *Nephilim*, the giants or heroes of Gen. 6:1 – 4
- Study the story of the Flood (Gen. 6:9 – 9:28) and the judgment at the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:19)
- Compare ancient Mesopotamian stories to Genesis 1 – 11
- Gain deeper insight into Scripture's message
- Hear in-depth responses from each contributor to the others' views
- Draw informed conclusions on these much-debated chapters in Genesis

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<sup>52</sup> See *ATSHB*, 345 – 48, 310 – 11, 313 – 14, 375 – 76, respectively. Translations in *ANET*, 265 – 67, 566 – 67; *BMes*, 491 – 93; *COS* 1.130: 450 – 52, S. Burstein, *The Babyloniaca of Berossus* (SANE 1.5; Malibu, CA: Undena, 1978).

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