



Lesson 2

Genesis 1-11: Mythical or Historical?

Apologetics Press Advanced Christian Evidences Correspondence Course

GENESIS 1-11: MYTHICAL OR HISTORICAL?

INTRODUCTION

On November 24, 1859, J.M. Dent & Sons of London released for distribution Charles Darwin's book, *The Origin of Species*—a volume that would change forever the perceptions held by many people regarding their ultimate origin. However, long before Darwin wrote his book, he had seen his own perceptions of origins change as well. When he was but a young man, his parents sent him to Cambridge University to become a minister. In fact, somewhat ironically, the only earned degree that Charles Darwin ever held was in theology. But while studying theology, he also was studying geology and biology. After his graduation, and a subsequent five-year voyage at sea aboard the *H.M.S. Beagle*, Darwin's attitudes and views had changed drastically.

In 1959, Nora Barlow edited Darwin's autobiography, and included additional material that previously had been unavailable. In that volume, this amazing statement can be found:

I had gradually come, by this time, to see that the Old Testament from its manifestly false history of the world and from its attributing to God the feelings of a revengeful tyrant, was no more to be trusted than the sacred books of the Hindoos, or the beliefs of any barbarian (pp. 85-86).

Before Darwin could give himself over wholly to the doctrine of evolution, he first had to abandon all confidence in the historicity of the Old Testament and any belief in its teachings on origins. That accomplished, he then was able to imbibe evolutionary scenarios without obvious discomfort.

“If evolution is accepted, Adam and Eve go out! That story, that Bible fable, is interesting **mythology** but it doesn't present the true picture of the origin of man.” This was the assessment of Woolsey Teller, second president of the American Association for the Advancement of Atheism, when he debated James Bales of Harding University on the existence of God (see Bales, 1947, p. 54, emp. added). Equally as harsh are these words from Dorsey Hager regarding those who accept the Genesis account as being literal and historical:

The most important responsibility of the geologist involves the effect of their [sic] findings on the mental and spiritual lives of mankind. Early geologists fought to free people from the myths of Biblical creation. Many millions still live in mental bondage controlled by ignorant ranters who accept the Bible as the last word in science, and accept Archbishop Ussher's claim that the earth was created in 4004 B.C.... Man's rise from the simple life forms, even today, causes much controversy among “fundamentalists” who cling to a literal belief in the Bible (1957, p. 12).

The idea set forth by these two men is that the Genesis account of creation is to be regarded as nothing more than “interesting mythology.” That such an attitude should be expressed by atheists like Teller and Hager hardly is surprising. What is surprising, however, is the fact that some who profess to be Bible believers agree with this viewpoint. For example, the editor of the popular *Westminster Dictionary of the Bible* wrote: “The recital of the facts of creation is obviously not a literal, historical record” (see Davis, 1944, p. 119). The March 9, 1961 issue of *The United Church Herald* boldly stated: “The Biblical **myths** that Christians deal with are familiar: the Paradise story, Adam and Eve, the Fall, the Flood, the Tower of Babel, the miracles, the resurrection, and Ascension. These are myths to be solved for a myth is a combination of symbols pointing to an ultimate concern” (p. 15, emp. added). John L. McKenzie, in an article, “Myth and the Old Testament,” in *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, wrote: “It is not a tenable view that God in revealing Himself also revealed directly and in detail the truth about such things as creation and the fall of man; the very presence of so many mythical elements in their traditions is enough to eliminate such a view” (1959, 21:281).

In 1981, Neal Buffaloe (professor of biology at the University of Central Arkansas in Conway, Arkansas) and N. Patrick Murray (Rector, All Saints’ Episcopal Church, Russellville, Arkansas), co-authored a small volume titled *Creationism and Evolution*. In that book, they stated concerning the Genesis creation account:

In other words, the Genesis poems are significant not because they tell us how things **were**, or the way things happened long ago. Rather, they are talking about man’s situation **now**—the eternal importance of man’s relationship to God, and the primordial disruption of that fellowship that lies at the root of human nature and history. When we read the ancient Hebrew accounts of the creation—Adam and Eve, the Garden of Eden, man’s “fall” by listening to the seductive words of a serpent, and God’s Sabbath rest—we must understand... that “these things never were, but always are.... The stories are told and retold, recorded and read and reread not for their **wasness** but for their **isness**” (1981, p. 8, emp. in orig.).

How much clearer could it be stated? The first chapters of Genesis are about things that “never were.” They are not literal or historical, but poems, allegories, and myths.

In Exodus 20:11, Moses wrote: “For in six days Jehovah hath made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day....” However, in his publication, *Does God Exist?*, John N. Clayton of South Bend, Indiana stated that the acceptance of Exodus 20:11 as literal history is “a very shallow conclusion” that is “inconsistent with the Genesis record as well as other parts of the Bible” (1976, 3[10]:5). Clayton also has gone on record as stating that “Exodus 20:11 is a quote of Genesis 2 and Genesis 2 **is not a historical account**” (1979, 7[4]:3, emp. added).

Is the material in Genesis 1-11 to be accepted at face value as literal history? Or, are statements such as the ones above correct in suggesting that the information contained in these chapters is mythological in nature?

IS GENESIS 1-11 LITERAL AND HISTORICAL?

Genesis 1-11 should be accepted as a literal, historical account, and not be relegated to the status of a myth or “poem,” for the following reasons.

(1) The style of these early chapters of Genesis does not suggest a mythical, allegorical, or poetical approach. Noted scholar Edward J. Young declared:

Genesis one is not poetry or saga or myth, but straightforward, trustworthy history, and, inasmuch as it is a divine revelation, accurately records those matters of which it speaks. That Genesis one is historical may be seen from these considerations: (1) It sustains an intimate relationship with the remainder of the book. The remainder of the book (i.e., The Generations) presupposes the Creation Account, and the Creation Account prepares for what follows. The two portions of Genesis are integral parts of the book and complement one another. (2) The characteristics of Hebrew poetry are lacking. There are poetic accounts of the creation and these form a striking contrast to Genesis one (1975, p. 105).

The cautious reader will be completely unable to detect differences in style and syntax between Genesis 1-11 and Genesis 12-50. There is no striking difference between the type of literature or style of writing within these two sections of the book. The same type of narrative is to be found in Genesis 1-11 as in Genesis 12-50. As Thomas H. Horne stated in his classical *Introduction to the Scriptures*: “The style of these chapters, as indeed, of the whole book of Genesis, is strictly historical, and betrays no vestige whatever of allegorical or figurative description; this is so evident to anyone that reads with attention, as to need no proof” (1970, 2:205).

(2) The Genesis narrative is to be accepted as literal history because that is the view entertained by our Lord. Henry Morris has observed:

Especially significant is the fact that the Lord Jesus Christ Himself frequently quoted from Genesis. In one instance He used a quotation from both Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 (Matthew 19:4-6), thus stamping these chapters as both historically accurate and divinely inspired. Thus, one cannot legitimately question the historicity of the creation record without questioning the judgment or veracity of the Apostles and of Christ Himself. And this, of course, is an option which is not open to any consistent Christian (1967, p. 57).

John Whitcomb suggested:

...It is the privilege of these men to dispense with an historical Adam if they so desire. But they do not at the same time have the privilege of claiming that Jesus Christ spoke the truth. Adam and Jesus Christ stand or fall together, for Jesus said: “If ye believed Moses, ye would

believe me. But if ye believe not his writings, how shall ye believe my words?" (John 5:46-47). Our Lord also insisted that "till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law (and this includes Genesis) till all things be accomplished" (Matthew 5:18). If Genesis is not historically dependable, then Jesus is not a dependable guide to all truth, and we are without a Savior (1972, p. 111).

Christ referred to the literal and historical events of Genesis 1-11 on more than one occasion. For example, Jesus spoke of the Flood of Noah as a real, historical event (Matthew 24:37ff.). He referred to Abel as a real, historical character (Matthew 23:35). He spoke the truth on marriage and divorce in Matthew 19 (cf. Mark 10), using a command of God from Genesis 2:24 as a the historical background. Jesus called Satan the "father of lies" (John 8:44), referring back to the historical account of Genesis 3:4. Other similar examples could be given, but these should be sufficient to prove Jesus' support of the historical nature of Genesis. As Morris has stated: "...[D]enying the historical validity of the Creation account also undermines the authority of the New Testament and of Christ Himself" (1966, p. 92).

(3) The Genesis narrative is to be accepted as literal and historical because the inspired writers of the New Testament not only referred often to the narrative, but made doctrinal arguments that depended upon the historical validity of the Genesis record. Every New Testament writer made allusions to, or quoted from, the book of Genesis. In fact, all books of the New Testament except Philemon, 2 John, and 3 John contain allusions to Genesis. Of the 50 chapters in Genesis, only 7 (20,24,34,36,40,43,44) are not quoted or cited in the New Testament. Each of the first eleven chapters of Genesis is quoted or cited; none is omitted. There are 200 references to Genesis used by the New Testament writers, more than half of which are from the first eleven chapters. Sixty-three of those references are to the first three chapters of Genesis, while fourteen are from the Flood story, and fifty-eight are related to Abraham.

Paul stated that woman is **of** (*ek*—a Greek preposition meaning "out of") man (1 Corinthians 11:8,12). He called Adam and Eve by name (1 Timothy 2:13), and considered Adam as historical as Moses (Romans 5:14) and Christ (1 Corinthians 15:45-47). He labeled Adam as the first man (1 Corinthians 15:45). He also stated that "the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness" (2 Corinthians 11:3). Peter used the Flood to make an analogy to our salvation (1 Peter 3), and referred to the emerging, created Earth as something that had actually taken place (2 Peter 3:5b). Other examples are far too numerous to give here. Morris has commented:

Many people have tried to explain away the record of this chapter by calling it an allegory, or hymn, or myth. But this is impossible without simultaneously undermining the integrity of all the rest of the Bible. This first chapter of Genesis fits perfectly into the historical record of the rest of the book of Genesis, which in turn is foundational to the entire Bible (1967, pp. 56-57).

(4) The Genesis narrative is to be accepted as literal and historical because of its relation to human redemption. Ed Wharton, in his book, *Redemption is Planned, Needed, Provided*, correctly pointed out:

A rejection of the biblical record of man's fall and of God's redemptive acts as historically factual has severe implications relative to the necessity and reliability of redemptive Christianity. When the Old Testament is not viewed as reliable history, the New Testament naturally comes under suspicion. For if the Genesis account of man's fall is not accepted as a reality, what can make redemption through Christ a **necessity**? If mankind did not actually fall through sin, from what would he need saving? The Old Testament presents the origin of man, his fall, and his inability to redeem himself and so educates him to his need for salvation. The New Testament presents Christ as the satisfaction of that need. Thus both testaments form a unity of narrative and of purpose. Their accounts are so interrelated that they cannot be separated and at the same time maintain that redemption is a human necessity.... **If therefore Genesis is not literally true, then Jesus as presented in the gospels is simply not necessary** (1972, pp. 10-11, emp. added).

Whitcomb agreed when he wrote that "the full historicity of the Genesis account of Adam and Eve is absolutely crucial to the entire God-revealed plan of salvation" (1972, p. 111).

(5) The Genesis narrative is to be accepted as literal and historical because of the importance it plays in presenting and tracing the Messianic seed-line through history. If the Genesis account of man's origin and fall is viewed as mythical, then mankind obviously cannot be viewed as fallen and in need of salvation. So why would God feel the need to preserve the Messianic seed-line from Adam through the rest of his future descendants (Noah, Abraham, David, et al.)? For what purpose would the seed-line need to be preserved?

If, however, man is in desperate need of salvation from sin (as the Bible indicates that he is), then at some point in his history, he must have actually sinned against God. Genesis records the occurrence of that sin, and then provides a factual account of God's promise of redemption through the seed of mankind (3:1-15). The remainder of the Old Testament reveals the providential preservation of the seed-line, and its eventual culmination in the person of Christ. When man's fall through Adam—as clearly revealed in the first chapters of Genesis—is regarded as factual and true, then the Messianic seed-line promised in Genesis 3:15 must somehow be historically traceable from Adam to Christ. As Wharton went on to note:

A discounting of the early chapters of Genesis as historically true must eventually lead to a discounting of the supernatural Christ and the salvation which he supernaturally attained for us through his death and resurrection. Any view of these chapters in Genesis other than authentic history will necessarily regard the genealogies and the tracing of the Messianic seed-line as unhistoric and unimportant. This will eat away at trust in God's word and cause faith's fire to go out (1972, pp. 11-13, emp. in orig.).

CONCLUSION

Thomas Whitelaw, writing on “Genesis” in the *Pulpit Commentary*, remarked:

If we are to listen to many expositors of no mean authority, we must believe that what seems so clearly defined in Genesis—as if very great pains had been taken that there should be no possibility of mistake—is not the meaning of the text at all.... A person who is not a Hebrew scholar can only stand aside and admire the marvelous flexibility of a language which admits of such diverse interpretations (n.d., 1:4).

In other words, how is it possible to have so much evidence—in a language as specific as Hebrew—and still have people claim that “it does not mean what it says”? If we are unwilling to accept Genesis 1-11 as historical, how, then, will we be able to accept: (a) any biblical concept of man’s origin; (b) the unifying concept of both the Old and New Testaments (i.e., the need for a coming Redeemer); (c) God’s personally designed plan of salvation; (d) the Sonship of Christ; (e) the truthfulness of the Old and New Testament writers; or (f) the overall authority of the Scriptures as the inspired Word of God? [NOTE: For an in-depth treatment of these, and other, arguments supporting the literal, historical nature of Genesis 1-11, see Thompson, 2000, pp. 133-161.]

G. Richard Culp correctly observed: “One who doubts the Genesis account will not be the same man he once was, for his attitude toward Holy Scripture has been eroded by false teaching. Genesis is repeatedly referred to in the New Testament, and it cannot be separated from the total Christian message” (1975, pp. 160-161). John Whitcomb’s words form a fitting conclusion to this study:

Surely the words of rebuke given by our Lord to the two on the road to Emmaus must be applicable to many Christians today: “O fools and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken” (Luke 24:25). Our basic problem today in the question of origins is not so much that we are ignorant of the theories and speculations of men. Our problem too often is that we neither know the Scriptures nor the power of God, and therefore deeply err in communicating God’s message to modern man (1972, p. 111).

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Questions—Lesson 2

TRUE OR FALSE

Write TRUE or FALSE in the blanks before the following statements.

- _____ 1. Christ referred to the literal, historical events of Genesis on several different occasions.
- _____ 2. The Greek preposition *ek* means “coming to.”
- _____ 3. Genesis 1-11 is written in a different style than Genesis 12-50.
- _____ 4. Exodus 20:11 is a quote of Genesis 1, and Genesis 1 is not a historical account.
- _____ 5. Every New Testament book makes allusions to the book of Genesis.
- _____ 6. Genesis is not important to the entire God-revealed plan of salvation.
- _____ 7. The Messianic seed can be traced all the way back to Adam.
- _____ 8. The story of Noah’s ark is a fable told around the world.

COMPLETE THE BIBLE VERSE

(NEW KING JAMES VERSION)

- 1. 1 Timothy 2:13: “For Adam was _____ first, then Eve.”
- 2. 1 Corinthians 15:45: “And so it is written, ‘The first man Adam became a living being.’ The last _____ became a life-giving spirit.”
- 3. 2 Corinthians 11:3: “But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived _____ by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ.”
- 4. Exodus 20:11: “For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the _____, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.”

5. Matthew 19:4: "And He answered and said to them, 'Have you not read that He who made them at the _____ made them male and female?'"
6. Matthew 24:37: "But as the days of _____ were, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be."
7. John 5:46: "For if you believed _____, you would believe Me; for he wrote about Me."
8. Romans 5:14: "Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who had not sinned according to the likeness of the transgression of _____, who is a type of Him who was to come."

MULTIPLE CHOICE

Circle the correct answer(s).

1. The only earned degree Charles Darwin ever held was in:
(a) Biology (b) Geology (c) Religion (d) Botany
2. Before Darwin could devote himself wholly to the doctrine of evolution, he first had to abandon any confidence in the:
(a) Church of England (c) Teachings of his parents
(b) Old Testament's accuracy (d) Bible's teachings on origins
3. Christ's testimony, as recorded in the New Testament, would leave one to believe that Genesis 1-11 is:
(a) Literal history (c) Untrustworthy
(b) Poetical (d) Allegorical
4. The legitimacy of the entire scheme of redemption is dependent upon the:
(a) Correct interpretation of biblical poetry
(b) Literal and historical nature of Genesis 1-11
(c) Accuracy of the fact that man sinned and needed salvation
(d) Truthfulness of the book of Esther
5. A person who doubts the Genesis account of creation:
(a) Possesses the necessary tools to build a rock-solid faith
(b) Will be in a good position to convert others
(c) Possesses an attitude eroded by false teaching
(d) Is a good example to other Christians

MATCHING

Match the related concepts (place the correct letter in the space provided by each number).

- | | |
|----------------------------------|---|
| 1. ___ 1859 | A. Refers back to Genesis 2:24 |
| 2. ___ Genesis 1-11 & 12-50 | B. Made salvation necessary |
| 3. ___ Global Flood | C. Written in same style/syntax |
| 4. ___ Matthew 19 | D. Adam to Christ |
| 5. ___ Adam and Eve named | E. <i>Origin of Species</i> published |
| 6. ___ Man's sin | F. 1 Timothy 2:13 |
| 7. ___ Messianic seed-line | G. New Testament contains |
| 8. ___ 200 references to Genesis | H. Used by the apostle Peter as an analogy to man's salvation via baptism |

NOTES

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