

# Genesis as ancient historical narrative

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The three authors contributing to *Genesis: History, Fiction, or Neither?* all adopt a non-historical view of Genesis 1–11 to some extent. However, an analysis of the genre of Genesis based on its grammar and its usage in the rest of Scripture shows that it is historical narrative and should be interpreted as such.

*Genesis: History, Fiction, or Neither?* (figure 1)<sup>1</sup> is part of the ‘Counterpoints’ series, which features essays from three views, with a short response to each essay from the two other contributors. It is intended to be a useful format to compare and contrast differing theological views. The three contributors were asked to do the following:

“1) identify the genre of Genesis 1–11; 2) explain why this is the genre of Genesis 1–11; 3) explore the implications of this genre designation for biblical interpretation; and 4) apply their approach to the interpretation of three specific passages: the story of the Nephilim (6:1–4), Noah and the ark (6:9–26), and the Tower of Babel (11:1–9)” (p. 20).

The three contributors were James Hoffmeier, Gordon Wenham, and Kenton Sparks. As Wenham noted in his response to Hoffmeier’s essay:

“On the one hand, none of us is defending an extreme literalist view that requires us to regard the days of Gen 1 as 24 hours long, or like Jewish tradition and Archbishop Ussher use the ages of the patriarchs to establish the date of creation. On the other hand, none of us holds that these chapters are just fiction, that is, tales based solely on the imagination of some ancient Israelite. We are all somewhere in between” (p. 59).

This is very useful if one is deciding which flavour of compromise on the biblical text to adopt, but it would have been much better if they had actually enlisted a biblical creationist to give his or her view on the text. Then we would have been treated to a three-way debate between a biblical creationist, a compromising Christian (either Hoffmeier or Wenham), and a heretic unbeliever (Kenton Sparks, who has explicitly stated that he believes Jesus erred in His understanding of Scripture<sup>2</sup>).

Therefore, rather than simply reviewing the essays of Hoffmeier, Wenham, and Sparks, I will undertake the same task that they did, from a biblical creationist viewpoint. I am confident that a biblical creationist view not only does better justice to the text of Genesis, but is more consistent with the views of the later biblical authors and Christ Himself. At the same time, I believe it can stand the test of scholarship, if dogmatic materialism is not held to be an absolute prerequisite for critical scholarship.

## What is the genre of Genesis?

Wenham and Hoffmeier resist plainly stating their view of the genre of Genesis. Hoffmeier rejects the classifications of ‘legend’ and ‘myth’, and believes that Genesis 1–11 is historical in some sense. He says:

“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 toward 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” (p. 32).

Biblical creationists can agree with this paragraph as far as it goes. However, Hoffmeier is unable to commit to defending the complete historicity of Genesis, including its timeframe and its 6-day creation account. This leaves him vulnerable to attack from Sparks, in particular, who harshly criticizes Hoffmeier’s evasiveness in his response.

“If the author of Genesis used mythical imagery, as Hoffmeier has suggested, then which images are mythic symbol and which are closer to historical representation? Does Hoffmeier believe that the cosmos was created in six literal days? Does he believe that the first woman was made from Adam’s rib? Does he believe that a serpent spoke in the garden? Does he believe that our broken human condition can be traced back to eaten pieces of fruit? Does he believe in giants who roamed the pre-Flood earth? Does he believe in a literal world-wide flood, and a boat with animals? Does he believe that God created rainbows to remind himself not to destroy us again? And how does all of this relate to what is now public knowledge about human origins, which emerged over millions of years through a long evolutionary process rather than in one literal day? One wonders why Hoffmeier does

not answer these questions when the historicity of Gen 1–11 is the main theme of our discussion” (p. 64).

Wenham agrees substantially with Hoffmeier’s analysis of genre:

“In my view, the book of Genesis is a genealogy with digressions or expansions focusing on key episodes or actors in the story. ... But as I have argued in my essay, I think we need a more nuanced characterization of the genre of Genesis, which I termed protohistory. Otherwise we may be forced to conclude that Genesis is trying to relate history but not succeeding, which would be a rather negative conclusion” (p. 61–62).

In other words, Wenham has come to the text with the assumption that it fails to relate history, so the only way to preserve a high view of Scripture is to find a way of saying that Scripture does not *try* to relate history in this area. But Sparks does not waste time pointing out the inconsistency in Wenham’s views:

“While I can certainly respect a candid admission that the text is historically ambiguous, in this case I question whether Wenham’s conclusions are justified.

First, in spite of his preference for historical ambiguity, Wenham’s description of the narrative as ‘literary picture’ and denial that it offers ‘ordinary history’ fits very nicely with what most scholars would call ‘fiction’. For as usually conceived, fiction includes any narrative genre that does not closely represent the actual events of history” (105).

Kenton Sparks believes that evolution proves Genesis is myth. He posits that the author of Genesis believed certain things to be true (like the historical Adam and Eve) that were not, and wrote other things not intended to be taken literally that others mistakenly interpreted as history, in his view. Both Wenham and Hoffmeier are at their best and most interesting when responding to this rank liberalism. Hoffmeier comments:

“It is hard to disagree with the position that one’s interpretation of Scripture should not be verifiably false. My problem is that whenever there is a conflict between the two, Sparks rarely gives Genesis the benefit of the doubt; science is always right, never to be questioned” (p. 140).

### Ancient historical narrative: a definition

I identify Genesis 1–11 (indeed, the book of Genesis as a whole), as ancient historical narrative—each word in this term is important. This doesn’t dispute that there are poetic elements with the typical parallelism that characterizes Hebrew poetry. However, they always involve someone speaking, e.g. the climaxes in Genesis 1:27 (by God), 2:23 (by Adam), and 4:23–24 (by Lamech). These just reinforce the contrast between the quoted poetry of the speakers and the main narrative text.

‘Ancient’ reminds us that we cannot impose modern historiographical notions on an ancient text. Just because we write history in a certain way does not mean that we can impose those rules on an author writing thousands of years ago. Instead, we must ask, “If an ancient person wanted to write history, how would that look? What grammatical constructions would he employ? What details would he include in the document?”

‘Historical’ anchors our thoughts on the fact that Moses intended to communicate about actual people, places, and events in history. When he presents Adam and Eve as the first people God created and the parents of all mankind, he is not giving us a metaphor or an ‘everyman’ parable about why people sin; he is telling us about our actual first parents, back to whom every person can trace his or her genealogy. When he writes about Noah gathering all kinds of animals onto a huge ark to survive a global Flood he is not relating some sort of ancient memory about a really big flood in Mesopotamia; he is telling us about the actual event that

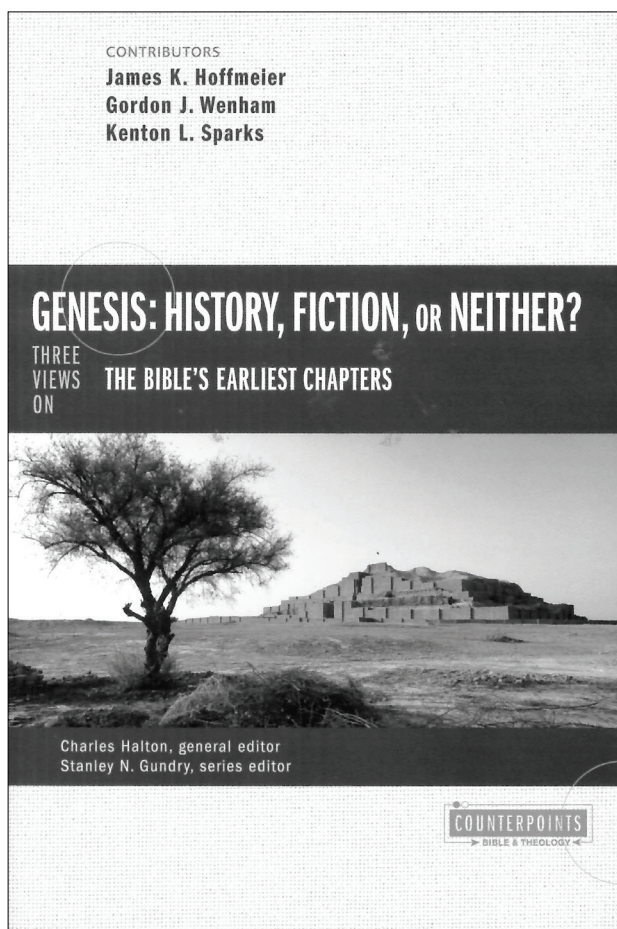


Figure 1. Cover of *Genesis: History, Fiction, or Neither?*

inspired the many flood legends in ancient cultures around the world.

‘Narrative’ indicates that Moses is telling us these historical events in a story form. This is not the only genre that can encode historical information; in fact, many of the psalms speak in a poetic form about what God actually did for Israel in history. But narrative is the most straightforward genre for historical information, and relates facts in a story form without much symbolic language.

So I will be arguing that Moses wrote Genesis as a document which someone in his day would have understood as relating events that occurred in history, and did so using language that should be interpreted literally, unless the context gives a clear reason to do otherwise.

### Indications that Genesis 1–11 is ancient historical narrative

One obvious argument for the historical nature of Genesis 1–11 is that it transitions seamlessly to Genesis 12–50. The latter, sometimes called ‘patriarchal’ history, is universally understood to be intended as historical narrative—more specifically, the ‘origin story’ of Israel. Hoffmeier notes the absence of a break between primeval and patriarchal history, and that this was probably intentional (pp. 24–25). While there are obvious contrasts—for instance, Genesis 1–11 covers a vast period of about 1,500 years, while 12–50 covers only a few generations—the book comes together as a unified whole.

Also, Genesis 1–11 tells about people and events that are grounded in time and space. Eden is described in straightforward geographical terms, so presumably before the Flood someone would have been able to locate Eden geographically (Genesis 2:10–14). The chronogenealogies in Genesis 5 and 11 actually allow us to create a timeline from creation to the Flood and beyond. One may argue that Moses is not relating *accurate* geographical or chronological information, but the presence of these markers alerts the

reader that this is not a ‘fairy tale’ or a myth, but claims to be a real-world history.

The grammar of Genesis 1–11 is what we would expect of a historical narrative. One grammatical form that occurs often is the *waw* consecutive, and its purpose “is to present events in a historical sequence. It appears throughout Hebrew narrative, but it is almost non-existent in Hebrew poetry.”<sup>3</sup> In Genesis 1, it occurs 51 times.<sup>4</sup> This indicates that the author of Genesis clearly intended to convey a straightforward narrative.



Figure 2. The geographical details in Scripture have been verified by archaeology to be accurate.



The *toledot* structure is another historical marker—Genesis claims to be a family history, tracing the origin of all humanity from Adam, all post-Flood humanity from Noah and his sons, and Israel from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But Genesis only fulfills this explanatory purpose if it relates historical details. If Adam did not *really* sin, what is the basis for the ‘offspring’ promise (Genesis 3:15; 5:29; 12:3)? If Abraham is not really the descendant of Eber, the descendant of Shem, then who is he? So the author of Genesis intends to talk about people who really existed, and events that actually happened, and he intends the Hebrews to understand their existence as a nation in light of the events that he is recording.

In contrast, there is a lack of poetic or figurative language. “Genesis 1 contains little or no indication of figurative language. There are no tropes, symbolism, or metaphors.”<sup>24</sup> It also lacks the most important markers of poetry, namely, parallelism and figures of speech. There are bits of poetry in Genesis, mostly climactic statements (e.g. Genesis 1:27; 2:23; 4:23–24; 9:6), but they are inserted into the overall narrative as direct quotes from a speaker, sometimes God.

Also, when we look at the rest of Scripture, the authors of Scripture unanimously interpret Genesis historically. The authors of the New Testament point back to creation, the Fall, and Noah’s Flood as precedents for what God will do in the future. Also, they don’t recognize any break between supposed primeval and patriarchal history, since they quote both sections seamlessly (Luke 3:23–38, Hebrews 11:4–38). In fact, Kenton Sparks realizes this, and says that Paul and Jesus were *wrong* to interpret Genesis as history.<sup>2</sup> So for Sparks, even the Son of God cannot be allowed to overrule the current scientific consensus.

### Documentary Hypothesis

The Documentary Hypothesis (otherwise known as the JEDP theory) also came up in the three essays. Hoffmeier rejects the documentary hypothesis, specifically in the context of the Flood narrative, showing how a giant chiasm running from 6:10 to 9:19 shows a literary unity (p. 48–51). Wenham says, “The standard Documentary Hypothesis (JEDP) is much too complex to be credible” and favours a simplified Documentary Hypothesis “like that favored in the pre-Wellhausen era” (p. 60). He has also previously noted the large-scale chiasmic structure, consistent with a single author or editor.<sup>5</sup> Sparks accepts the Documentary Hypothesis as uncritically as he accepts evolution (but insists on coining his own terms; it is rather annoying to keep remembering that by ‘Antiquarian’, he really means ‘Yahwist’, and so on), and excoriates Hoffmeier’s conservative view regarding the authorship of Genesis (70).

The Christian coming to the biblical text with the assumption of inerrancy must seriously regard the entirety of the biblical witness that Moses authored the first five books of the Bible (e.g. Ezra 3:2; 6:18; 7:6; Nehemiah 8:1; 9:14; 10:29; Malachi 4:4; Mark 1:44; 7:10; 10:4; 12:26; Luke 2:22; 5:14; 16:29; 20:37; 24:27, 44; John 1:17, 45; 5:46; 7:19; Acts 15:21; 26:22; 28:23; Romans 10:5; 1 Corinthians 9:9; 2 Corinthians 3:15; Hebrews 7:14). While there may have been *limited* editorial additions (for instance, adding the account of the death of Moses to the end of Deuteronomy, probably by Joshua), the only biblical candidate for the author of the Torah is Moses. So if Moses did not write the Torah, but it was the result of different sources much later, the Bible is wrong. Sparks is no inerrantist, so this is not a concern for him, but it should be a concern for any faithful Christian.

However, the concepts of inerrancy and inspiration of Scripture do not exclude the possibility that *Moses* used pre-existing sources. In fact, the internal evidence of Genesis suggests the use of pre-existing sources. Pre-Flood geography is given in detail, while these landmarks would have been obliterated by a global Flood. The patriarchal narratives cite cities that were prominent in Abraham’s day, but not Moses’. For example, Genesis 10:19 says, “The territory of the Canaanites extended from Sidon as you go toward Gerar, as far as Gaza; as you go toward Sodom and Gomorrah and Admah and Zeboiim, as far as Lasha.” This points to an original document written when these cities, some of which were long destroyed by Moses’ time, were helpful landmarks. Thus, it is not inconceivable that there were some sort of written records passed down and preserved.

Yet, even though there is internal evidence of pre-existing sources, Moses obviously was crafting the narrative. It shows many marks of unity, such as the chiasms and repeated themes. The end result is that “... the rhetorical features of Gen. 1–11 are so distinctly woven into one tapestry as to constitute an unassailable case for the unity of the section, and most likely composition by a single hand.”<sup>6</sup>

### Is Genesis a myth?

When discussing the genre of Genesis, each of the contributors discusses whether it is appropriate to call Genesis a ‘myth’. As Hoffmeier notes, there is no consensus as to how the word ‘myth’ should be defined (27), so whether one defines Genesis as a ‘myth’ depends a lot on the definition. However, it seems that to call Genesis a myth would make the term meaningless. Genesis is grounded in time and space, claims to talk about real people, places, and events, and claims that they have real explanatory power for our experience today. Genesis is not myth; it claims to be an etiology—and it can only function in that way if it is *history*.

### The account of the Nephilim as ancient historical narrative

The first passage the contributors were asked to examine as a case study was Genesis 6:1–4; the account of the Nephilim. The identity of the ‘sons of God’, ‘daughters of men’, and ‘Nephilim’ has already received a thorough creationist treatment elsewhere,<sup>7</sup> so this essay will focus specifically on aspects that indicate that the passage is ancient historical narrative.

The passage occurs directly after Adam’s genealogy, which gives a straightforward lineage of descendants, as well as a directly implied chronology. It is not a stretch to characterize the genealogy as an account of the multiplication of mankind on the earth. Then Genesis 6 begins, “When men began to multiply on the face of the land” (6:1). So there is a continuity in the narrative, and it is placed within the same history as the genealogy. There are also distinct chronological markers in the passage itself—Yahweh states, “My Spirit shall not abide in man forever, for he is flesh: his days shall be 120 years” (6:3). This allows us to place this statement specifically 120 years before the Flood—in other words, Noah would have been 480 years old at the time of this pronouncement, and his first son would not have been born for another twenty years. Genesis 6:4 states, “The Nephilim were on the earth in those days, and also afterward”—again, giving a timeframe for the existence of the Nephilim. Mythological writing is not normally marked with this sort of chronological precision.

The passage has an explanatory function: the account is an example of the wickedness that caused Yahweh to judge the entire world by the Flood. It also has grammatical markers of historical narrative—the four verses have five *waw* consecutives.

The New Testament includes several passages that are very helpful to us in interpreting this passage as history. In 2 Peter, when Peter wants to assure his readers that God will judge the ungodly and preserve believers, he draws some historical parallels to show how this happened in the past (2:4ff). First, God cast disobedient angels into Hell and chained them to await judgment, as well as deluging the world, but saved Noah and his family. Second, He judged Sodom and Gomorrah but saved righteous Lot.

We do not specifically have the image of chained angels in the Old Testament, but the Book of Enoch shows that Peter must be referring to the judgment of the angels, otherwise known as ‘sons of God’, who married human women and had children with them. Enoch 10:15 says, “To Michael likewise the Lord said, Go and announce his crime to Samyaza, and the others who are with him, who have been associated with women, that they might be polluted with all their impurity. And when all their sons shall be slain, when they shall see the perdition of their beloved, bind them for seventy generations underneath the earth, even to the day of judgment, and of consummation, until the judgment, the effect of which will last forever, be completed.”

This also shows why the judged angels in Peter’s list do not have their own contrasting saved individual. The judgment on the angels and the world happened at the same time, and Noah and his family were the individuals preserved from the judgment.

Jude likewise cites three examples of God’s judgment: God brought his people out of Egypt but destroyed those who didn’t believe (1:5); He chained angels in gloomy darkness who left their proper position (1:6); and He burned Sodom and Gomorrah, “which likewise indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural desire” (1:7). Sodom and Gomorrah’s sin is said to be analogous to the sin of the angels—meaning that the angels’ sin had to do with unnatural sexual relations. Clearly Jude, like Peter, believed that the ‘sons of God’ were angels who married human women,

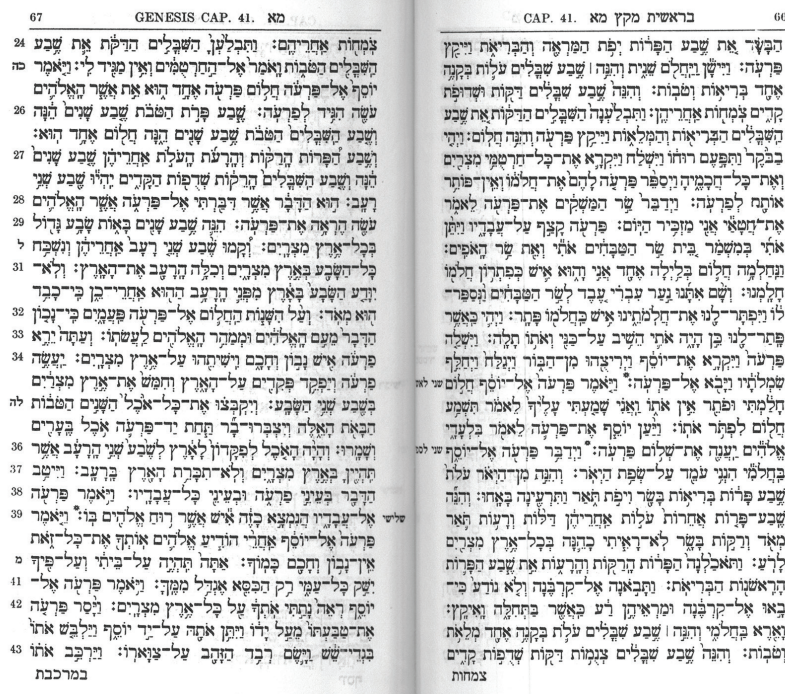


Figure 3. Genesis clearly intends to convey information about historical people, places, and events.

and that this was one of the sins that caused God to send the global Flood in Noah's day.

It is important that both Peter and Jude assert that God's judgment on the angels who sinned was a real event. If God did not really judge sinning angels, it would make no sense for them to cite it as a precedent of God's judgment of sin. So if one interprets this as a myth or in an unhistorical sense, we have a serious problem when we come to the New Testament text, which interprets it in a historical sense.

Wenham has previously supported the above view, stating:

"The 'angel' interpretation is at once the oldest view and that of most modern commentators. ... The Sethite interpretation, for a long time the preferred Christian exegesis, again because it avoided the suggestion of carnal intercourse with angels, has few advocates today."<sup>8</sup>

### Noah and the Ark as ancient historical narrative

The second case study is Genesis 6:9–9:28, which includes the story of Noah and the Flood as well as the account of Noah's drunkenness, Ham's sin, and the curse of Canaan. It is impossible to give a thorough treatment to such a large passage in this essay, but it has clear indicators of historicity.

The level of detail in the account is notable. The dimensions and specifications for the Ark are precise, and modelling has shown that the Ark would be a stable vessel.<sup>9</sup> This is in contrast to the vessel in Gilgamesh, which was a cube<sup>10</sup>—a vastly more unstable design—or the 'coracle' ark.<sup>11</sup>

The chronological details are precise, and not all the numbers are obviously symbolic. Noah and his family entered the Ark a week before the Flood came (7:4). The Flood came when Noah was 600, on the seventeenth day of the second month (7:11). The Flood lasted for forty days (7:12), and the water covered the earth for 150 days (7:24). The water receded for 150 days, and the Ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat on the seventeenth day of the seventh month (8:3–4). The tops of the mountains were visible on the first day of the tenth month (8:5), and Noah began sending the birds 40 days later. In the first day of the first month in Noah's 601<sup>st</sup> year, the earth was dried out, and on the twenty-seventh day of the second month, they disembarked the Ark (8:13–14). This level of chronological detail is *consistent* with a historical narrative.

The history of Noah and the Flood is intended to be taken as a sort of second 'origin story'. Not only is Israel (and all humanity) descended from the first man Adam, Israel (and all humanity) are also descended from Noah and his sons. The national divisions of the ancient world are explained in terms of descent from Noah's sons (10:1–32).

The New Testament is also full of examples of Noah's Flood as a historical precedent of God's judgment. Jesus says, "For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the Ark, and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man" (Matthew 24:38–39, parallel in Luke 17:27). 2 Peter 2:5–6, discussed above, uses the Flood as a precedent that God will judge the wicked and spare the righteous, and the epistle continues this theme in 2 Peter 3:3–7. Hebrews 11:7 cited Noah as an example of faith in the unseen. Again, these sorts of uses make no sense unless the New Testament authors believed Noah was a historical man and the global Flood was a historical event. And if we say that Noah was not a historical person, or the global Flood was not a global event, we must conclude that the Apostles, and even Jesus Himself, were wrong (as Sparks does).

### Tower of Babel

The story of the Tower of Babel is an etiology—it claims to tell us where the modern language divisions come from, since we all are descended from Noah and his sons. The passage is clearly narrative, with ten *waw* consecutives.

The Tower of Babel is geographically and chronologically placed in the 'real world' in the narrative. It took place in the plain of Shinar, and 10:25 tells us that it happened during the lifetime of Peleg.<sup>12</sup> They built the tower using plausible technology for their day, no 'magical' or miraculous intervention would have been required to burn bricks and use bitumen for mortar. Their motive is also believable: they did not want to be separated from each other. The post-Flood population may have felt there was 'safety in numbers'.

However, their intention to stay together was contrary to God's command to Noah and his sons to spread out and fill the earth (9:1). And their intention was to build a tower with its top in the heavens—the intention to trespass the divine realm is clear. So God gives a judgment that simultaneously forces them to obey His command—He confuses their languages.

Is there evidence that the Tower of Babel was a real structure? Ancient writers claimed that it was still standing in their day. We know that it was not beyond the capability of ancient men to build very large structures with limited technology.

### Disingenuous and spurious theistic evolutionary arguments

While I have not endeavoured to review *Genesis: History, Fiction, or Neither?* in a conventional way, I cannot fail to mention the serpentine, spurious way that Kenton Sparks argues in this book. Again and again he refers to 'public



knowledge' about evolution and the ancestry of human beings. At no point does he question the evolutionist narrative. In fact, he looks down on Christians who do not blindly accept the evolutionary story.

Curiously, he has a glaring double standard when it comes to the Resurrection:

"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" (p. 114).

But the very same 'science' that says that God could not create in six days also says that dead people don't rise again. Clearly, 'public knowledge' about the process of death and the decay of corpses isn't as compelling to Sparks as the 'public knowledge' regarding evolution.

Of course, Sparks has a very un-Christian attitude towards Scripture. He says:

"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. Every elder has insight, but no elder has all of the answers, nor are any of 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" (p. 116).

But how is the reader of Scripture supposed to differentiate between where Scripture is correct and where Scripture has been corrupted by humanity's broken, sinful condition? One guesses, by relying on uniformitarian 'science', which Sparks seems to exempt from the influence of sinful humans.

### Ancient historical narrative as a superior apologetic stance

*Genesis: History, Fiction, or Neither?* is instructive in showing how two otherwise solid scholars might go to extraordinary lengths to reconcile the text of Genesis with their compromising views. But such compromise is simply unnecessary: Christians can stand on the biblical foundation of Genesis without embarrassment or apology, and Christ and the Apostles give us an excellent example to follow.

Viewing Genesis as ancient historical narrative—an accurate account of things that actually happened—is the most consistent Christian reading of Genesis, and it allows

us to take later authors at their word when they use Genesis assuming that it is history.

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12. In context, the 'earth' that was divided in Peleg's day is the same as that a few verses later in 11:1: "the whole earth had one language and the same words".

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