

A biased survey of the history of Genesis interpretation

Since the Beginning: Interpreting Genesis 1 and 2 through the ages

Kyle Greenwood (Ed.)

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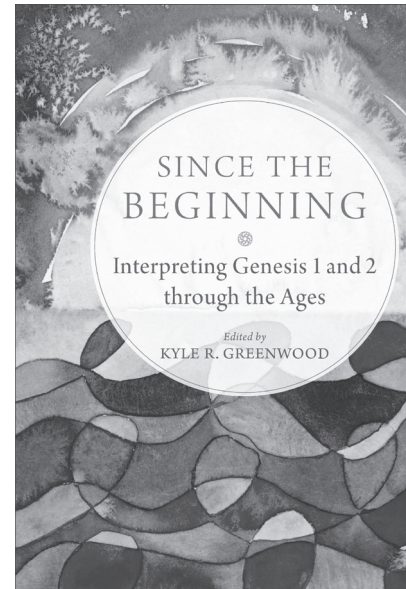
Lita Cosner

Our doctrine of inspiration is primarily Christological, not a result of the academic study of the documents of Scripture. This is because, even if we can point to hundreds of places the Old Testament has been confirmed by archaeological finds and contemporary documents, no amount of proof is sufficient to establish inerrancy. And even if we were able to prove that the biblical documents are completely accurate, that would not mean they were necessarily inspired by God. So Christ's explicit statement that Scripture cannot be broken (John 10:35), and His authoritative use of the Old Testament serves as the foundation for our own view.

Since the Beginning is a very academic book. The contributors span the Jewish, Roman Catholic, and Christian faiths, which is the first indication that the book can have no unified theological outlook. The assumptions at play are nearly uniformly theologically liberal. One wishes for the book at *some* point, at any point, to take a stand against evolution, against uniformitarianism, and against the worldly skepticism that dominates mainstream academia. Unfortunately, you can't always get what you want.

Are all views equally valid?

Since the Beginning introduces us to views across a wide spectrum. As the



editor of the book, Kyle Greenwood, states:

"We will incline our ears to Christian theologians, Greek Sophists, and Jewish rabbis, sometimes in dialogue with each other, and other times with no one in particular. In other words, we will hear the words of prophets, philosophers, and preachers 'since the beginning' to the present day" (xx).

From the believing Christian standpoint, however, not all opinions about Genesis are valid. We believe that Genesis is the inspired Word of God that exists to tell us how God created the world, how mankind fell and sin and death were introduced into the world, and what God promised to do to restore creation. Ultimately, Genesis points us to Christ.

Genesis means nothing

The reader of *Since the Beginning* will be interested to know that apparently we've rediscovered how the ancient Hebrews viewed the



Figure 1. Flavius Josephus in his *Antiquities of the Jews* interpreted Genesis as history.

world, and it was apparently just like the modern-day liberal! For instance, “the highly stylistic prose of Gen. 1 indicates to the reader/hearer that the interests of its author lie in the theological message of its contents, not in its scientific precision” (p. 4). Therefore the days are not literal days. But wait, the discerning reader may ask, what about Exodus 20 and 31, both of which are “predicated on the six-day creation week” (p. 5)?

“[I]t is likely more accurate to speak of an underlying Sabbath tradition behind Gen. 1 than to suppose that Gen. 1 prescribes Sabbath law. That is, Sabbath observance would have likely already been in place before its codification in the Ten Commandments or Gen. 1” (p. 5).

But note what this presupposes—that it was not written by Moses or even close to contemporaneously with him. The context of Exodus claims to be that the Israelites have been newly freed from Egyptian slavery—not an arrangement that is conducive to a tradition of having a day of rest every week. The gift of the Sabbath is an indication that God is not a taskmaster like the Egyptians, but that He is gracious to His people. If *Since*

the Beginning is correct, it is a false history which is based upon a false cosmology—it means nothing.

Adam

It should surprise no one that this book does not view Adam as the literal first man or the man responsible for unleashing sin and death upon humanity. This is not from the biblical text itself, but from the assumption of evolutionary history.

A biased history

Any summary of positions throughout history will be biased, because even in the act of deciding who and what to include, one must exercise discernment. But *Since the Beginning* routinely includes those who interpret Genesis figuratively, while excluding or discounting those who interpret it plainly. For instance, “Philo comments that to consider that the earth was created in six literal days (i.e. twenty-four-hour periods) would be a sure indication of great simplicity” (p. 30). While immediately acknowledging that Philo’s view was that God created *instantaneously*, the book does not

go into his philosophical reasoning that neither the book nor any modern interpreter would agree with.

Josephus (figure 1) is counted in the ranks of those who do not interpret Genesis literally, given that he “indicates no concern with the length of days”. However, anyone who bothers to read *Antiquities* will note that in 1.29, Josephus says, “and this was indeed the first day, but Moses said it was one day”. Furthermore, he says that Moses begins to speak philosophically “after the seventh day was over” (1.34), indicating that the first six days are *not* speaking philosophically.

One particularly egregious misrepresentation is the quote from Irenaeus, “to believe in God and continue in his love, than by knowledge of this kind to be puffed up and fall away from love” (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 2.26). They use this as a support to call for ‘hermeneutical humility’. But in this context, Irenaeus is refuting a type of gnostic numerology and other ‘secret knowledge’. That’s why he speaks of knowledge “of this kind”. Irenaeus views the gnostic philosophy as puffed up knowledge, *not* the biblical account, which he takes plainly (for instance, in 5.23), and has no problem drawing both philosophical and historical conclusions from Genesis. So this would seem to be a rather blatant misrepresentation of Irenaeus.

Biased theology

The book calls Jude 14 a ‘non-descript’ verse in reference to its mention of Adam (p. 61). Yet Jude 14 calls Enoch the seventh from Adam. This is *hugely* significant, because it means that Jude believed that Enoch was literally the seventh generation from Adam, indicating that Jude took Genesis as history.

The book argues:

“... the NT writers do not engage Genesis (or any other OT document) as a way to preserve its

‘original’ meaning, much less to verify the historicity of past people and events, but rather they draw out the implications of the central Christian claim that Jesus Christ is risen Lord” (pp. 73–74).

However, this ignores the fact that all of the NT documents were written for specific purposes, none of which include rewriting the Old Testament, which the NT authors assumed their audiences had access to. Furthermore, those documents have many examples of refuting false traditional views, like Jesus contradicting the Pharisaical traditions and Paul’s polemics against the Judaizers. Yet they never hint at reinterpreting Genesis history.

Interpretation in light of Darwin?

No book on the history of the interpretation of Genesis would be complete without a chapter on the influence of evolution on the interpretation of Genesis. And given the overall liberal tenor of the book, one shouldn’t be surprised that the willingness to reinterpret Scripture based on scientific ideas is taken as a mark of ‘humility’ (p. 243). Yet at least the chapter correctly recognizes that creationists “generally allow for at least some derivation to take place within species (or ‘kinds’ or other preferred boundaries) at least by a sort of Lamarckian trait inheritance over time” (p. 242, note 6). Although it’s not clear why he thinks creationists are Lamarckian, at least they acknowledge that creationists allow for intra-species change.

There is a recognition that:

“... one of the challenges posed by Darwinian biology for biblical interpretation concerns the massive time frames required for chance mutation to render known species. Humans come to exist in a differentiated form only over millions of years of gradual development” (p. 244).

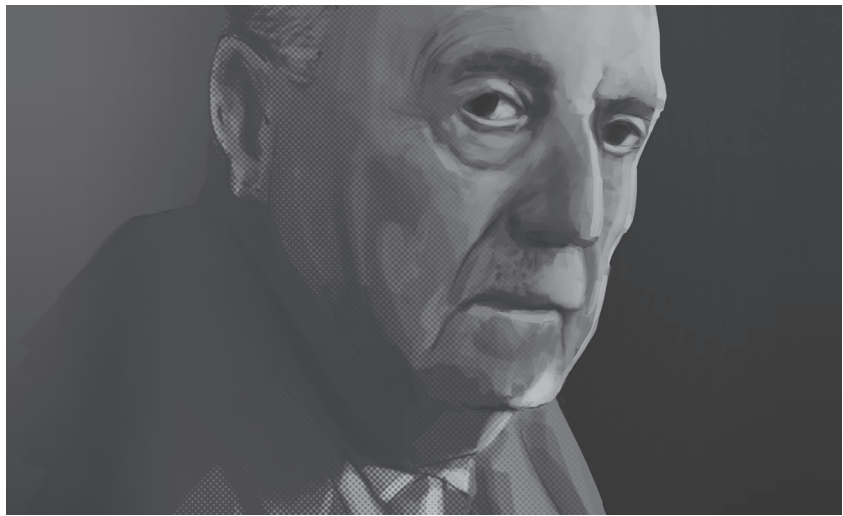


Figure 2. Bultmann’s method of ‘demythologizing’ Scripture is presented as a solution for harmonizing Genesis with evolutionary theory.

Biblical creation is equated with ‘fundamentalism’. Long-age readings of the Bible such as day-age and gap theory as well as progressive creation are viewed more favourably, but it is noted that they are still problematic. The answer, it is argued, is in ‘demythologizing’ Scripture as promoted by Bultmann (figure 2) and following Barth’s ostensibly more ‘incarnational’ theology.

Of course, following Barth’s and Bultmann’s theological methodology allows Genesis to be compatible with evolution or any other following scientific theories—by denying that Genesis speaks about real events that happened in history at all. The six days of creation become nothing; Adam becomes no one, and thus the salvation offered by Christ is solely spiritual and individualistic; and, the *eschaton* is only a personal enlightenment, if even that.

Conclusion

Since the Beginning contains the standard liberal ideas about Genesis, most of which were not covered for the sake of space. Most readers of the *Journal*, for instance, are familiar with the ways in which liberals try to

get around the idea of the six days of creation.

The real usefulness of the book is in its breathtaking honesty about the only way forward regarding a synthesis of the Bible and evolution. It isn’t even a compromising view, because compromise involves give-and-take. This is a unilateral demand that Christians *surrender* completely at every point where evolution contradicts Genesis. What is left is not biblical, and it certainly is not what Jesus and the apostles would have recognized as Christianity.