

Genesis, our story ...

What kinds of writing can observe in the Scriptures, specifically Genesis?

This video introduces the Old Testament book of Genesis for those about to study any part of it or the whole of it. The first question we should ask is: “*what kind of book is Genesis?*” Before we answer that question we first need to ask two others: what kind of book, or rather books, constitute the Scriptures, the Bible, and, when was Genesis written, and by whom? The Bible contains many different kinds of book and within the books themselves many different literary forms. Here are some examples ...

1. **Historical events:** the truth of which, as recorded, depend upon reliable witnesses, preferably more than one; for example the empty tomb of Christ’s resurrection.
2. **Poetry or poetic hymns:** for example, the Song of Songs or the Psalms.
3. **Teachings:** either in the form of the apostolic letters to churches, prophetic utterances or revealed law. Teachings invariably reference historical events which are interpreted as God’s saving actions in history and those human responses called for in the various covenants between God and His people.
4. **Wisdom literature:** in which we find wise saying or stories with a moral or spiritual message. Examples in the Old Testament include Job and Proverbs; in the New Testament many of the parables of Christ.
5. There may be historical elements in the wisdom narratives but these are often combined with **truth-telling myths or fables**. A myth or a fable is simply a different form or vehicle of truth. *Myths are not falsehoods when understood correctly!* Myth and fable only become false when they are mistaken for literal history; for example, Aesop’s tale of the hare and the tortoise does not refer to two specific animals having a race in the historical annals of the animal kingdom!
6. **Dreams and visions**, often of an apocalyptic type; for example the prophecies Daniel in the Old Testament and Revelation of St John in the New Testament.

When was Genesis written and by whom?

Although for the Orthodox Church the Scriptures are divinely inspired and authoritative they remain the work of human beings as well, within of course the community of faith, the Church. If, therefore, we want to discover truth in the Scriptures we need firstly to acknowledge the human hand in the writing as well as the divine hand in the revelation. Secondly, we must correctly identify what kind of literary genre we are dealing with in studying the text ... history? myth? wisdom? ... what? Let us now begin our exploration of these holy words and their meanings for our lives; first authorship.

The first 5 books of the Old Testament, referred to as the Pentateuch, are often ascribed to Moses but this heading written in Bibles is not part of the original tradition in the text itself. Indeed the death of Moses is itself described in Deuteronomy 34:5-8. More than one human hand has therefore contributed both to the Pentateuch and to the book of Genesis in particular. How do we know then that there is multiple authorship of these texts? The evidence is clear from a close examination of the Hebrew text; for example, God is referred to as both “Elohim” and “Yahweh” and the layers of tradition strongly align to each of these divine names separately but also from a later generation, together. In the patriarchal narratives (not under consideration here) there are duplicated accounts of the same event, more or less different. As to creation in the primeval history there are *two* different accounts to be found in Genesis 1:1-2:3 and 2:4-7.

In the first account of creation there is an orderly progression from day to day and God is referred to in the generic plural form, the Elohim; often taken by Christians to refer to the Holy Trinity. This first account has a rational, almost “scientific” orderly sequence. In the narrative, the earth itself has agency in the creative process (“let the earth / water bring forth” ...11-13; 20, 24) which means that although people at the time knew nothing of evolution, something similar is suggested in that creation itself was involved in the emergence of life. This first account of creation was most likely to have been written by a member or members of the priesthood around the time of the exile to Babylon, or, more likely, after the rebuilding of the Temple towards the end of the 6th century BC.

In the second account of creation, remarkably, only the creation of humankind is described and the narrative moves swiftly on to the events in the paradisaal Garden of Eden. God is referred to as “Yahweh” from the divine name disclosed to Moses from the burning but unconsumed bush in Exodus 3:14 (c.1200 B.C.) For this reason the author or authors of this arguably more primitive creation account belong to the Yahwist school writing probably around the time of the building of the first Temple in 10th or 9th century B.C. We may conclude that the bulk of the Genesis narrative from Genesis 2:4f is therefore more primitive than the Priestly account some 400 years later as it uses anthropomorphic language for Yahweh. He walks in the Garden for example (Genesis 3:8) causing our first parents, Adam and Eve to hide after their fall.

In conclusion, Genesis is the work of multiple authors from different traditions spanning many centuries. The fusion into one narrative was accomplished quite late in the process of the formation of the Old Testament canon, certainly no earlier than the 6th century B.C. and maybe even much later.

We now have enough background in the writing of Genesis to return to our opening and most important question; most important because answering it has been the occasion of much division and controversy in Christian traditions going back over 300 years. What kind of book is Genesis, exactly?

What kind of book is Genesis? – not a science textbook!

The first observation we must make is that Genesis is not an enduring scientific textbook when it deals with **how** creation was made. Religion does not deal with how questions. Science, which is always changing with improved understandings of natural phenomena, deals with all the *how* questions. Religion, any religion, deals with questions of purpose and meaning. Science cannot address these questions. It is not set up to do so. Consequently it need not detain us here that the first Genesis account of creation presupposes a process complete in 144 hours rather than the billions of years

it actually took for complex life to evolve on earth. If religion sets itself up in competition with science to explain something, that is, how things are made or work, then it will always eventually make itself redundant as science continues to make advances. Religion has no business competing with science on its territory; but neither has science any business competing with religion for the prize of an all embracing truth either. Faith cannot submit itself to experiment and vice versa.¹ If only this was more clearly understood by those who suppose a conflict between religion and science we would have more light and less heat in the discussion of this topic. It seems, however that this phoney war between religious and scientific fundamentalism goes back a long way, even to St Augustine and his frustration with fellow believers who were needlessly bringing Christianity into disrepute with the natural philosophers (scientists) of his time in the fourth and fifth centuries. He writes in his commentary on Genesis ...

Even a non-Christian knows something about the earth, the heavens, and the other elements of this world, about the motion and orbit of the stars and even their size and relative positions, about the predictable eclipses of the sun and moon, the cycles of the years and the seasons, about the kinds of animals, shrubs, stones, and so forth, and this knowledge he holds as being certain from reason and experience.

Now, 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.

¹ There is a comprehensive treatment of the issues here:

https://www.aidanorthodox.com/files/ugd/459d3c_60364dae2dc2456e92f2f76dbc4ad9b9.pdf

The shame is not so much that an ignorant individual is derided, but that people outside the household of faith think our sacred writers held such opinions, and, to the great loss of those for whose salvation we toil, the writers of our Scripture are criticized and rejected as unlearned men.

If they find a Christian mistaken in a field which they themselves know well and hear him maintaining his foolish opinions about our books, how are they going to believe those books in matters concerning the resurrection of the dead, the hope of eternal life, and the kingdom of heaven, when they think their pages are full of falsehoods and on facts which they themselves have learnt from experience and the light of reason? [Saint Augustine, On the Literal Meaning of Genesis, Book 1, Chapter 19]

Noting then that the Bible is not a science textbook, we can move on to consider a more important matter, namely the relationship between history, myth and belief.

What kind of book is Genesis?

– the relationship between history, myth and belief -

Remembering that there are different genres of biblical literature and that myths are not simple falsehoods, unless misunderstood, we can now more wisely address the question of the relationship between history, myth and belief in Genesis, specifically in the Primeval History of the first eleven chapters. First we need to define our terms:² Comments will follow each definition.

HISTORY: Definition: *a continuous, systematic narrative of past events as relating to a particular people, country, period, person, etc., usually written as a chronological*

² All definitions from <https://www.dictionary.com/>

account; chronicle. **Comment:** History is established objectively by cross referenced sources, records from eyewitnesses and reputable recorders.

MYTH: Definition (first part): *a traditional or legendary story, usually concerning some being or hero or event, with or without a determinable basis of fact or a natural explanation.* **Comment:** Myth is not factual history (as defined above!) but a story communicating (often) timeless truths. It may contain in its narrative persons or events that are historically reliable or verifiable, but the meaning of that historical kernel is embedded in a story that will have mythological components or symbolic references. The *whole* is true, not just the history but the myth also in its own genre. The myth makes the ancient history accessible for the purpose and meaning of our contemporary lives.

BELIEF: Definition: *confidence in the truth or existence of something not immediately susceptible to rigorous proof:* **Comment:** From a religious perspective, belief is inadequate for salvation (“even the demons believe and shudder” – James 2:19); there must be also faith, hope and love, worthy of trust in God.

The simple answer to our question must be that Genesis has all of these references. Some of the events recorded did not have witnesses to authenticate them; most notably of course God’s creation of the Cosmos. This was the beginning of history strictly speaking but nobody was there to witness that beginning. The creation of the world by God, therefore, belongs to realm of belief, albeit based on plausible evidence of His activity in creation itself (ongoing). The story of Adam and Eve our first parents is mainly mythological but NOT FALSE ... for these two important reasons:_

1. The Fall is an explanation for our sense of alienation from God going back into the impenetrable history of our origins. At some point in the evolution of hominids, our distant ancestors became self-conscious and God-conscious. Soon after that point they transgressed and squandered the promise of immortality through communion with God and obedience to His Word (the Logos). They were expelled from the Garden into the realm of death for their own protection, lest their perilous state became permanent, incapable of salvation and restoration to communion

with God. The Fall, therefore, is *our* story, mythologically dressed AND profoundly true. We must discover our identity and state in our primal parents, Adam and Eve.

2. In support of this understanding of myth and symbology we note the etymology of the names Adam and Eve in Hebrew, respectively “Adamah” meaning earth or soil (earth-man) and “Hawwah” meaning living one or source of life. These names, therefore, have the symbolic sense of the inclusion of all humanity. Once we realise that *we are Adam, we are Eve*; everything expressed mythologically in Genesis becomes astonishingly vivid and real and true to our own experience. We have become alienated from God. We need salvation and restoration to our original beauty; more than that: to partake of the divine nature, or rather the divine energies. For this, our salvation, Mary became the New Eve, obedient to God so that He, the Logos, could attain our flesh and nature in her womb, coming among us as the new and final Adam, the Alpha and the Omega of our redeemed humanity. Myth makes ancient history accessible to us and powerfully saving.

Faith then, not mere belief alone, completes the picture. It is by faith in the gracious, loving action of God in Christ that the Holy Spirit is kindled in our hearts, burning more and more brightly. Belief, as we have discovered, is not enough. There must also be a relationship with God forging trust in our souls, strengthening the service of God and neighbour in our lives. All of these saving truths are lost if we think that Genesis is only a mere historical record of fantastic facts. It is much, much more than that!

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