

Resource Guides on Genesis 1–2 and Science: Kevin L. Spawn

3. What Kind of Literature is Genesis 1–2?

As evidenced by the previous resource guide, differing views of the genre of the early chapters of Genesis typically result in distinguishable interpretations of Gen 1–2. To read a document well requires the reader to identify the kind of literature (genre) that is at hand. This guide offers a brief summarization of a recent dialogue in 2015 about the proper identification of the genre of the literature in Gen 1–11. The issues related to the creation accounts in Gen 1–2 are featured below.

Charles Halton edited a collection of essays entitled, [*Genesis: History, Fiction or Neither: Three Views on the Bible's Earliest Chapter*](#) (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2015). The contributors to this collection are as follows: James K. Hoffmeier, Kenton L. Sparks, and Gordon J. Wenham. In addition to this collection, Wenham has recently published his Didsbury Lectures (2013) in [*Rethinking Genesis 1–11: The Gateway to the Bible*](#) (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade, 2015).

James K. Hoffmeier, Genesis 1–11 as History and Theology

According to Hoffmeier, the “organization program” of the entire book of Genesis (see *toledoth* formulations in the previous guide) indicates that the earliest chapters of Gen possess more historical content than is commonly viewed by many scholars. Based upon its “genealogical-historical framework” (e.g., “These are the descendants of Shem” 11:10 NRSV), the entire book of Genesis consists of family histories of real, not fictitious events and people. In the narrative of the Garden of Eden (2:8–3:24), for example, Hoffmeier argues that the author used the identifiable locations of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in the narrative to place the garden in historical ancient Mesopotamia.

Gordon J. Wenham, Genesis 1–11 as Protohistory

The genealogies are the backbone of the book of Genesis and mark a careful organization of family histories for both didactic and historiographic purposes. However, the elevated prose of the introduction of the book (Gen 1:1–2:3) gives it a “different character” compared with the rest of the book. For instance, this introduction includes poetic features (e.g., a chiasm, multiples of seven, two sets of three days). Consequently, Gen 1:1–2:3 is positioned outside of the subsequent sections of Genesis headed by the *toledoth* formulas (2:4–50:26). According to Wenham, Gen 1 functions as a rhetorical account over against alternative creation accounts in the ANE. In his recent Didsbury Lectures, Wenham stated, “an ancient oriental from outside of Israel encountering Genesis 1 for the first time would be particularly struck by the *differences* between the theology of Genesis and the usual Near Eastern beliefs” (*Rethinking Genesis 1–11*, 17). Nevertheless, “Genesis . . . traces the family tree of the sons of Jacob right back to Adam (see

Gen 5, 11, and sundry genealogical notes from chapters 12 to 50)” (*Genesis: History, Fiction, or Neither*, 85).

The mixture of both paradigmatic events and unique features in Gen 3 suggests to Wenham that the early chapters of Genesis should be viewed as protohistorical. For example, in Gen 3, sin consists of paradigmatic concepts of disobedience, alienation and suffering, but unlike the couple there all subsequent sinners are not naked or in Eden. The early chapters of Gen “may not be datable and fixable chronologically, but they were viewed as real events” (84-85). These chapters are cosmologies not myths. The comparative study of Gen 1–2 with other creation accounts of the ANE in the 2nd and 1st millennium BC further clarifies the early chapters of Genesis as a protohistory. In its ancient setting these chapters refuted several aspects of alternate forms of creation in the polytheism of the neighbors of Israel.

Kenton L. Sparks, Genesis 1–11 as Ancient Historiography

Sparks attempts to push beyond the mere identification of the genre of Gen 1–11 to determine whether or not “the author’s representation is accurate and successful” (114). Since the authors of the book of Genesis were not modern scholars (historians or scientists), according to Sparks, this literature is neither a “straightforward history” nor a “*reliable representation*” of what happened (115, emphasis original). His assessment is based upon a composition theory of Gen 1–11 that is unique. For instance, Gen 4 and 5 are alleged to consist of two different versions of an original genealogy, based upon the thin evidence of names that are “almost identical” and “in nearly the same order” (118). The family tree in Gen 5, which includes Adam and his descendants, becomes key to his evaluation of the accuracy of the early chapters of Genesis. According to Sparks, the list in Gen 5 concludes not with v. 32 or 6:8, but with Abraham, *the father of Israel*, in chapter 11 (119). According to this approach to Gen 1–11, the family tree in Gen 5 (“This is the list of the descendants of Adam” Gen 5:1a) was written to narrate *the origins of Israel alone, but not those of humanity*. He concludes that the names of the pre-flood genealogy in Gen 5 are “*certainly* symbolic” (120, emphasis added). As here, his chapter is characterized by a rigid certainty of not only the correct interpretation of the text, but also the specific convictions of its authors. According to Sparks, the author of Gen 2–3 “believed nothing” of his representation of history (127). Since Gen 1–11 does not offer its reader reliable history or science, evolutionary biology provides the best explanation for the origins of humanity (111-12).