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BOOK REVIEW

Charles Halton, ed. *Genesis: History, Fiction, or Neither? Three Views on the Bible's Earliest Chapters*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015. 173 pp. Pbk. ISBN 0310514940. \$16.99.

Genesis: History, Fiction or Neither? Three Views on the Bible's Earliest Chapters tackles one of the thorniest and most contentious topics facing Christians today, namely, the genre of Gen 1–11 and its historicity. The three contributors differ significantly on this issue: James Hoffmeier, professor of Old Testament and Near Eastern archeology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois, champions the “Genesis as history and theology” view; Gordon Wenham, tutor in Old Testament at Trinity College, Bristol, England, and professor emeritus of Old Testament at the University of Gloucestershire, the “proto-history” position; and Kenton Sparks, professor of biblical studies and vice president for enrollment management at Eastern University, the “ancient historiography” view. Charles Halton, assistant professor in theology at Houston Baptist University, provides introductory comments and closing remarks.

As the latest addition to the ever-expanding and helpful Counterpoints series from Zondervan, this volume provides an accessible introduction to a hotly debated and controversial subject. Each chapter consists of a brief introduction, the author's main defense of his position, and a concise summary. It is worth noting that each of the contributors was asked to perform four tasks in their essays: (1) identify the genre of Gen 1–11; (2) explain why this is the genre of Gen 1–11; (3) explore the implications of this genre's 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—9:26), and the Tower of Babel (11:1–9). Following each author’s main essay is a rejoinder from the other contributors who raise further questions, offer additional comments, and delineate specific points of agreement and contention. The introductory and concluding chapters seek to place the discussion within the greater context of biblical interpretation, church history, and pastoral ministry.

Hoffmeier is persuaded that the Hebrew term *tôlēdôt* is best rendered as “this is the family history of X” (31), in order to highlight the text’s historical nature. He also believes that “the author of the narrative goes to great lengths to place Eden within the known geography of the ancient Near East, not some made-up mythological, Narnia-like wonderland” (32). Given the above rationale, Hoffmeier concludes that there is good reason to believe that Gen 1–11 describes “real events” and that the Christian “committed to Scripture need not commit intellectual suicide by embracing the historicity of the events described in early Genesis, for the text itself is written in such a way to reinforce this view” (58).

Wenham responds with general agreement to Hoffmeier, in particular his belief that the *tôlēdôt* formula betrays the author’s interest in history. However, Wenham is persuaded that “we need a more nuanced characterization of the genre of Genesis” (62). Sparks has more than minor quibbles with Hoffmeier. The starkest point of contrast concerns “the external evidence which bears on the historicity of Genesis” (72). In other words, Sparks asserts that the “scientific evidence (biological, geological, anthropological, linguistic) makes clear that, in the end, most of Genesis 1–11 simply *cannot* be accurate history” (72). Sparks also charges Hoffmeier with being circuitous in his arguments in that he “hints at points that he knows Genesis cannot be straightforward history in every detail,” but “meticulously avoids admitting that anything narrated in Genesis did not happen as narrated” (72).

In Wenham’s section, though he argues that “the first aim” of the reader should be at gaining an emic (from within) understanding of the text, that is, to enter into the thought-world or cognitive environment of the author of Genesis, he recognizes

that the very title of the volume at hand actually invites an etic (from outside) interpretation as well. Wenham hopes that, “by embracing orthodox Christian assumptions,” he will be able to “recover an approach to the text that does it justice in its biblical and theological contexts as the opening chapter of Holy Scripture” (75). He stresses that Gen 1–11 should not be viewed as a myth, that is, a “fiction, whose basis is in the author’s imagination rather than stimuli from the external world,” nor should it be viewed as “ordinary history” (87). Rather, he coins the term “proto-history,” which he likens to a “portrait of the past” (87). Wenham also contends that the “backbone of Gen 1–11 is an expanded linear genealogy: ten generations from Adam to Noah and ten generations from Noah to Abram” (95). Lastly, Wenham emphasizes that recovering the message of primeval history is more important than defining its genre.

As expected, Hoffmeier concurs with much of Wenham’s work. Despite offering little critique, Hoffmeier does wish that Wenham had clarified precisely what he meant by “orthodox Christian assumptions,” though he ventures a guess or two (98). Sparks states that, although he prefers Wenham’s approach to Hoffmeier’s, he also affirms there are difficulties. Chief of which, Sparks asserts, is Wenham’s reticence to make explicit “what stories in Genesis did not happen as narrated” and “how should we read and interpret those parts of the text” (109). In addition to this, Sparks claims, “irrespective of the label we put on it, Genesis is very much like the ancient myths, legends, and tales. Its authors were trained in and wrote using standard Near Eastern literary conventions” (109). Thus, Sparks states that, as “valuable” as their texts are as “theological voices,” the “early chapters of Genesis do not narrate closely what actually happened in natural and human history” (109).

Sparks’s position is perhaps the most distinct (and dogmatic?) of the three voices in this volume. Prior to outlining his actual defense, Sparks opines that “time has only widened the breach between science and Genesis” and that “it is no longer possible for informed readers to interpret the books of Genesis as straightforward history” (111). For Sparks, there was no Garden of Eden, “nor trees of life and knowledge, nor a serpent that

spoke, nor a worldwide flood” (111). Sparks states that, “if Genesis is the word of God, as I and other Christians believe, then we must try to understand how God speaks through a narrative that is no longer the literal history that our Christian forebears often assumed it to be” (111). In brief, Sparks postulates that “historical queries have often conflated several closely related issues into one,” and strongly emphasizes that “I have tried to tease out these issues by focusing on three different questions: (1) Did the biblical authors intend at every point to write historically reliable narratives? (2) Did the authors believe that history stood behind their narratives? (3) Did the authors accept as history anything which cannot in fact be historical?” (138). Sparks’s answers? (1) No, (2) Yes, but the “authors were not so transfixed with history that this prevented them from reshaping the story to advance their theological message,” and (3) Yes, but “we will look as confused in a thousand years as they do now” (139). Sparks concludes by stating that “humanity will not be saved by accurate historical recollections or scientific facts” but only through “the person of Jesus Christ,” and that Gen 1–11, if it is read well, “points us to him” (139).

Space does not permit a full recapitulation of either Wenham’s or Hoffmeier’s rather extensive responses to Sparks. Suffice it to say that Hoffmeier does not think much of Sparks’s *Wissenschaft über alles* (i.e., science triumphs over all!) hermeneutic, and that Wenham repeatedly emphasizes “the importance of interpreting the final form of the text, not putative earlier versions” with respect to Sparks’s discussion of the Anthologist (151). To clarify, Sparks opines, “because of his impulse to collect in one document the lore and tradition of Israel, I would describe the editor of Genesis as the Anthologist and his work, the Pentateuch, as an *ethnic anthology*” (137, emphasis original).

Due to the limited scope and nature of the volume itself, this book cannot be considered a primary source for understanding the representative theories. Be that as it may, one may still profit from consulting the references throughout. Two rather striking omissions, however, may be noted. There is no mention of Brevard Childs’s *Myth and Reality in the Old Testament* (1960),

which is still considered by some to be the best book on the subject, nor is there any interaction with W. A. Van Gemeren's "The Sons of God in Genesis 6:1–4 (An Example of Evangelical Demythologization?)," published in the *Westminster Theological Journal* in 1981. One might also wish for a more exhaustive author index, as finding the text's references to Barker, Barr, Batto, Brueggemann, Gorny, Iser, Skinner, Walton, or Zimansky, to name a few, requires an onerous amount of time.

Also worth noting is the absence of any Young-Earth creationist position. While the purpose of this volume is not to delineate the age of the earth, it would have behooved the editors to include among the contributors an adherent to a literal "six-day" view of Genesis. Incontrovertibly, there are few "literalists" who would find Hoffmeier's reading "truly historical" so long as it is held in conjunction with an old earth.

Given that the Counterpoints series exists to provide a forum for comparison and critique of different views on issues important to Christianity, it is not an insignificant shortcoming when a major view is either absent altogether or inadequately represented. These deficiencies notwithstanding, this volume is a welcome addition to the ongoing discussion concerning the Bible's earliest chapters. Its clear layout, irenic contributors, and up-to-date content will equip the reader to positively engage this much-debated topic from an informed perspective. Its primary readers will be laypersons, pastors/ministers, and undergraduate/graduate students. To conclude, I echo the words of Halton, who asserts, "may our God forgive us if this topic and even this book spur division in place of unity and strife instead of love" (163).

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