

Biblical Studies History In Genesis

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History has always mattered to Christians. "If Christ has not been raised," says Paul, "your faith is futile" (1 Cor 15:17, NIV). God's great acts in history must not be the figments of human imagination, fictional illustrations for some ancient writer's theological ruminations. Unfortunately, the Bible's memory for history is not above doubt, and, especially with the rise of modern critical scholarship, many have doubted. When it comes to the facts regarding basic events, their settings, and who was involved, the more distant past is the most susceptible to a global sense that the whole thing is made up, or at least has gone through so many stages of removal from the setting described that the product has lost any connection to its point of origin. Unsurprisingly, such stories of Israel's distant past allow the least possibility for evaluation in light of independent evidence.

Genesis is the hardest case. In the very beginning, the stories of creation and flood represent a problem unto themselves, beyond the reach of controlling historical data, though certainly presented in historical terms. With Abraham, however, the Genesis narrative alights in a world now known by thousands of Mesopotamian, Syrian, and Egyptian texts, somewhere in the second millennium B.C. by any reckoning. Dozens of sites with human occupation in this period have been excavated in the land that came to be Israel. With at least the rough outlines of an historical context available outside of the Bible, the challenge becomes acute. Is there any history in Genesis? And if so, on what terms?

I affirm here that Genesis does indeed remember the ethnic roots of Israel in the Middle Bronze Age, the early second millennium B.C. I summarize new evidence that suggests specific details from the patriarchal stories that appear to be explicable only within this early setting. At the same time, however, our improving knowledge of the patriarchs' Syrian homeland gives us a clearer sense of the real distance between the biblical stories as we have them and the place and time described. These are stories for an audience of Israelites who are now happily ensconced in the land promised to their ancestors. The stories are imbued with the details of their tellers' own time, like Renaissance paintings of Mary and the baby Jesus.

In Christian circles where the inspiration of the Bible is held in high esteem, there is some tendency to read all texts for history in the same way, whet...

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