

# OpenTheo

## Is Genesis 1-11 Historical or Mytho-History?

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### #STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about whether Genesis 1-11 is historical or mytho-history, why Jesus referenced people “we know never existed” like Adam and Eve, Noah, and Moses, and whether there’s a method by which we can establish which things we can agree to disagree on.

- \* Is Genesis 1-11 historical or mytho-history, and aren’t there significant theological implications if the Fall as described in the Bible didn’t happen?
- \* Why did Jesus reference people we know never existed like Adam and Eve, Noah, and Moses?
- \* Is there a standard method by which we can establish which things we can agree to disagree on and which things we can’t?

## Transcript

[Music] Welcome to the #STRask podcast with Amy Hall and Greg Kockel. Hi, Amy. Hi, Greg.

This is the podcast where you send in your questions on Twitter with the #STRask. Or you can send it through our website. Just go to our #STRask podcast page.

You'll find a link there where you can send us your question. Now, you have to keep the question short. It has to be a tweet link, which is about 280 characters.

So it can be, you know, one, two sentences, trying not to send one too long, or we won't consider it, or sometimes I try to whittle it down. But it's better if you can make it short. So, Greg, today we're starting with a question from Rebecca.

Okay. Is Genesis 1-11 historical or non-historical? Is writing style the biggest indicator for it being mytho-history? Do we lose the significance of Genesis 3-15, the Proto-Evangellium, if viewed as non-historical since the fall as described in the Bible, did not

happen from the mytho-history view? Well, that's a mouthful. Yeah, a lot of questions there.

It takes a lot of unpacking. The most, I'm going to say this. The current voice regarding the mytho-history of the book of the early chapters of the book of Genesis is Bill Craig, Phyllis or William Link Craig.

And I, to, when you listen carefully to what he says, it's mytho-history. So there is history embedded in there, but it's expressed in a mythological, using mythological motifs, all right? So probably what's best, the best way to understand that. So he doesn't deny a fall, even though he holds to the mytho-history approach to exegeting the first 11 chapters of Genesis.

He believes in a fall, and he believes in a literal Adam and Eve that are the progenitors of the human race. All those made the image of God, okay? And the fall happened as a result of their disobedience, okay? So all of these really critical things that are tied to theological considerations. Bill Craig, who is advanced this idea of mytho-history, he holds to those things, okay? The question is, the mytho part, I think, upsets people because they don't understand mythology in its, in the sense of its genre, in literature.

Two people that were probably the greatest minds in the 20th century on mythology were J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis. And of course they were colleagues over at Oxford. And I just finished the biography of Tolkien's life, and I'm halfway done with Jack, which is a biography by about Lewis.

And I was really amazed at how deeply they get into all of this stuff, okay? So mythology is a very specific genre, okay? And the, when we use the word myth, nowadays it's like, oh, that's a lie. That's a myth. Oh, that's a lie.

Here's five myths about balancing your checkbook or something like that, you know? And so what that means is these are all misconceptions. And so that's the way people understand the word myth today is a misconception, right? But that is not the way the term is used in the phrase mytho-history. It's just a literary device that is employed to communicate things in many cases that really took place, all right? And so it's best to think of a mytho-history as the mytho part being a figure of speech, a type of figure of speech.

And so in any case, when you have figures of speech, you have to figure out what the figure is representing, because all figures of speech, though metaphorical, for example, are meant to communicate a literal truth. So if I say to my wife, I say, honey, oh man, you are breath of fresh air here, all right? Well, that's a figure of speech. But it's meant to communicate something that is factually true that I'm experiencing in my relationship with that moment with my wife.

So that's one thing I want to just have in place, understanding how this term is used with regards to Genesis 1 through 11, okay? Then there's another layer here, and that's whether you understand especially the first chapter of Genesis in a concordous kind of way, okay? And a concordous assessment is a way of interpreting Genesis 1, especially that concords with genuine events in natural history that could be in principle accessed by science, all right? And so you could be a young earth concordist like Ken Ham, or you could be an old earth concordist like you Ross, okay? It's different ways of reading it. I'm not going to argue the merits and demerits. I'm just simply saying these are ways to approach that, all right? But notice even in both cases, especially there, they see a history unfolding even though they understand the history to be covering a different amount of time, okay? Young earth and old earth, all right? But there's a history unfolding.

Other people think there's something else being communicated there. It's not a concordous concordous view. There are two or three other ways of understanding it that tell us some actual truth about God's involvement in the creative process, though it isn't happening exactly literally the way some people will take it.

When I say literally, I mean probably like calendar days or solar days, hard to have a solar day when you have no solar until the third day, or it was at the fourth day, can't have evening and morning without a sun either, because evening and morning just is sunrise and sunset, or sunset and sunrise to get in the right order there. So these are questions that you bring to the text. It isn't to dismiss the text at all in terms of its value of telling us something true.

It's trying to figure out the way in which it's telling us something true, okay? Now, to go back to the mytho history, the way Bill Craig approaches it, I don't agree with his assessment at all, because all the characterizations of mytho history that he gives about seven or eight or nine or ten of them can be applied to all kinds of parts of the Bible. And he thinks, well, he doesn't think there was a snake that was talking. He thinks that's mytho history.

Something happened, there was some kind of a temptation of some sort, whatever, but, and there was a fall, but it wasn't a talking snake. And I don't see any good reason not to believe it was a talking snake, because we live in a supernatural world, and the agents were supernatural, in this case, God on the one hand, and Satan on the other, right? And God walking in the garden. Oh, that's, couldn't be having God can't walk in the garden.

Well, wait a minute. God can't burn in a bush either, right? So we have God there in a burning bush. We have Abraham, the oaks of memory, God visiting him.

And there's three, probably two angels. I don't know, but they seem like men, they're described as men who God can manifest himself in wait. So basically, what I'm saying is I don't buy Bill Craig's mytho history assessment of the first 11 chapters.

I don't think there's any reason to go there. I do think there's reason to be careful how we understand chapter one, because there's a number of different alternatives, and there are problems with all of the interpretive motifs that one, that one adopts. What ought to be really clear in every motif is that what Moses is doing is educating the Jews who are 400 years removed from their roots, and 400 years under the domination of an Egyptian cosmology.

All right. And what Moses is doing is at bare minimum is telling them, no, the sun and the moon aren't people. They're things.

They don't have names. They have functions because they were made by someone for a purpose. And here's three areas that were vacant, and three areas that get filled in that Genesis one account.

The key thing is that God is moving there. The timing, some of the other details, that's interpretive, and that's up to opinion. So though I don't accept the mytho history part, I think it's better to take, especially chapter two and following in a much more straightforward sense, especially since there seems to be a break chapter two, verse four, where they start talking about the Tolidoths or the generations.

It seems like you move into a different genre, a different way of explaining things. And that's why Genesis one and Genesis two look a little different. One seems more general, and the other one seems like a zoom in.

And some people say the two creation accounts, I don't think so. But you do have a more precise characterization. And I have no reason to disagree that the rest of Genesis from chapter two, verse four onto 11 through 11, up until the call of Abraham is anything more than a fairly straightforward account of what took place.

I think they're good reason to think that chapter one, one through two, four, you've got a different genre that's being expressed there, and people can fight about that. But in no case does it take any authority away from the account and the theological foundations, at least the way Bill characterizes mytho history that are essential to Christianity. Rebecca asked about losing the significance of Genesis three, 15 if viewed as nonhistorical.

And that I do agree, there's a, there's a big implication if there's no literal Adam and Eve. And I would, all you have to do is go to Romans to see the whole, the whole gospel depends on our being in Adam who fell and then being in Christ in whom we live. And if there's no Adam, there's no real explanation for what Jesus is doing for us now, or any reason for why we are fallen or, and that's like the very basics of what human beings are now, and you get that wrong.

And there are all sorts of heresies that can spring from not believing there is literal

Adam. So I do think that is key for any, any way someone goes to try to understand Genesis. I think that's something that has to be kept.

Yeah, and there's a group called BioLogos, which is a theistic evolutionist enterprise organization here in Southern California. And I remember at ETS when you're listening to a talk by a bio, by a logos guy, and his first slide was all caps, there was no Adam. Okay.

And, and I got to ask the, he had only time for one question. So I jumped up, I hand up and he called on me. And I asked him what about the fall from innocence into sin? And he essentially said that didn't happen.

And this is ETS, even general theological society. Okay. And the general take is that instead of falling into sin, humans as they evolved fell up into consciousness.

So I'm not saying all the BioLogos crowd hold that view, but this is a real problem with the theistic evolutionist view that they hold, because it makes it very difficult to identify an individual pair of people who were morally innocent and fell into sin, and therefore infected all their progeny, which is the human race with the fall. It's so central to so many things written in the New Testament. And you have to say that it has implications just for inspiration, because Adam has talked about quite a bit in the New Testament.

Okay, Greg, let's go on to a question from Jen. I'm having was that Jim or Jen Jen. Okay, Jen.

I'm having difficulty separating my desire to follow Jesus with the Old Testament. But Jesus references the Genesis creation story to Adam and Eve, knowing the flood and Moses and even talks to Moses. We know none of those people existed, which means Jesus knew too, right? Why did he say those things? Did she say we know none of those people existed? Yeah.

My question is, why would she say that? How do we know none of those people existed? We have an account of it. All right. Now, just because he has an account doesn't mean that, I mean, there's lots of accounts of all kinds of stuff.

Doesn't just because you have a written on paper from an old thing doesn't mean it's true. But she must be convinced that the thing that's written down from that time is not true. That's what she said.

So she must have a reason why she thinks is not true. And I don't know why that is. It is hard.

In the case of history, we have a deep time problem. And that is going back 4,000 years or longer as 4,000 to Moses roughly. And trying to figure out, okay, how much of that stuff can we trust? Well, you can't weigh every single line.

You can't do that with any book of history. You've got to look at a number of different things to see whether or not the account, we have a reason to think that the account is reliable. Okay.

And one thing that was mentioned and here I'm just now not doing apologetics to the nonbeliever, but to Jen, the believer, Jesus had an understanding. Now we have only 2,000 years, right? And we got a lot more detail in the record and a lot more reason to trust the historical reliability of the record of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, the primary source documents of the life of Jesus of Nazareth. And it's really clear that Jesus had a very high view of those texts.

He called them God's Word. The Scripture cannot be broken. These are things that he said.

And then he made reference to it's curious virtually all of the real controversial stuff. He made reference to the flood, the reference to Adam and Eve. He made reference to the Jonah and the Great Fish and whatever it was, the sea beast.

I mean, all kinds of references to these really, what are in many people think controversial things. But if Jesus rose from the dead, then he is the Son of God, then he is the word incarnate. Then he tells the truth about everything that he knows that he speaks about.

And he spoke about the Old Testament. So this is a retroductive kind of approach. I heard this first from John Warwick Montgomery.

And you start with Jesus and then once you establish Jesus' credibility, then you see, what did Jesus think about these things? And this becomes a very forceful thing. And even Jen acknowledged that. Well, I know Jesus believed in this.

So why would he believe in things that didn't happen or people who didn't exist? Well, I think the tale is wagging the dog a little bit there. I think if Jesus believed they existed, it's probably because they did. And if he thought they did the things that he said they did, then he must have believed they did.

And he has credibility in virtue of the resurrection and much of other things. So I think we should follow Jesus' lead on this one. Yeah, I agree with you, Greg.

She should be going in the opposite direction, looking at what Jesus believed and then believing what Jesus believed. Now, I guess Jen, you could ask yourself, why do I want to follow Jesus? Why do you want to follow Jesus? Who do you think he is? Why do you think he is who he says he is? And once you answer that question, that will help you to trust what he says. Depending how you answer it.

Right, exactly. Okay, let's go to a question from Jerry. Is there a standard method by

which we can establish those things we can agree to disagree on and those things we can't? I'm mostly thinking of creationism here.

Well, there is a kind of standard method, but my suspicion is he's looking for something that we can all agree on on how to determine what we can agree to disagree on. And that's, that's, I mean, that's epistemology. That's how do we know what we know? That's biblical interpretation.

And good luck. I don't think you're going to find that to Holy Grail. Now, that doesn't mean we can't have really good reasons for holding the views that we hold.

For example, we go to the text and it's very clear that we are to treat people a certain way, especially brethren, people in the Lord. Now, maybe some of these discussions are, well, we don't even know he's really Christian because he doesn't hold our view about Genesis 1. Okay, well, you still have an obligation to treat that person a particular way, even if they're unregenerate. Okay, so there are virtues that we are obliged to show to people that as far as I could tell, there are no ambiguity about in Scripture, especially in the New Testament.

Okay. Then it gets, that's one thing. Then the next thing goes is, is what are our reading skills or hermeneutical principles that we apply? And this is where you're just going to hear different people.

You know, and I understand, let's just since the issue of the age of the earth has brought up for Genesis 1, in the minds of some people, if you do not believe in a young earth, that death of any kind did not happen until after sin, then that undermines the work of the cross on their reading of Romans 5. Okay. Now, I think people are just going to have to read Romans 5 for themselves and see if what the frame of reference in that passage is the entire creation when it talks about death coming through Adam, or is the freedom of reference humankind. The word all doesn't mean all in the sense of every single molecule of every single thing when it's used.

When we have a standard reason barbecue, I said, Hey, everybody was there. They were all there. What? 8 billion people? No, all of our staff.

That's the frame of reference. Okay. And whenever you see terms like all in every, all were down at the Jordan word, John was baptizing.

What was going on in the rest of the country? If everybody was there? Well, it wasn't. That isn't the way he meant it. And so you have to ask the frame of reference.

This is a harmonical tool. Okay. And if you don't ask that, you're going to end up with absurdities, not just in the Bible, but in common conversation.

Okay. So these are the kinds of skills that you need to apply to the text. I made a

reference earlier to one of the reasons why I don't hold to a 24 hour solar day characterization of the creation days because it says evening morning, evening morning, evening morning, but you can't have an evening and morning without a sun, but it still says that.

So it can't be referring to sunrise and sunset. If there's no sun, it must be using them in a figurative way, which by the way, those two Hebrew words can be used that way to be beginning and ending, beginning and ending kind of thing. Now that may not be persuasive to some people.

I get that, but I am going to adopt a virtuous attitude as much as I'm able of being kind to those I disagree with, acknowledging even if somebody doesn't agree with me on that particular passage, there's still a brother, a sister in Christ and treat them with grace. Now, if they don't think that I'm a brother in Christ because I disagree, well, I can't do anything about that. They're not going to agree to disagree.

They're going to agree among themselves that I'm dead wrong and I'm probably damaging the faith or I'm a compromise or something like that. And this is the way some people have been characterized. I think that's uncharitable, but there's not much you can do about it.

There is no Holy Grail. You just got to do your best to discern the things that are most important. By the way, the Romans five thing is most important.

The sacrifice of Christ and dying on behalf of all of those in Adam is the only rescuer for those in sin. That's really important. Does it tie to Genesis one, the exact same way as young earth.

Here's our character. That doesn't seem to be the frame of reference at all. And there are all kinds of other problems with that view.

Frankly, the the fall would have had to happen like immediately for just multiplying amoebas that never died prior to the fall would cover the earth. Never mind. Everything else that was multiplying, they divide every 20 minutes or something like that, do the math.

But what I've done is given my reasons and people can accept them and reject them. And I am going to seek to be kind and charitable even in the midst of disagreement. I think one one way you can find common ground or figure out if you have common ground is to establish whether or not the person you're disagreeing with actually takes the Bible as the highest authority as the inspired word of God.

Now, a lot of young earthers think that they're that if you're an older, you do not trust the Bible. You do not hold the Bible as the highest authority. Now, that can be the case with some people who believe in an older, but it's not the case with everyone.



So a place to start would be to talk about what your view of the Bible is. And if you agree on that, now you can discuss interpretation charitably and disagree on it. But now you're talking about an issue of interpretation.

Right. If you both agree that the Bible is the highest authority, the inspired word of God, the inerrant word of God, then that is the bedrock. Now you are on the same team.

Yes. And so now you can talk about what the interpretation is, what the implications are for interpretations, what this would mean for all the other aspects of the Bible. But you have a place to to start your conversation.

Because if you're if you're talking to someone who doesn't believe in the inspiration and authority of the Bible, there's not really a place where you can go from there. Because what? How are you going to decide between your views? Like a progressive Christian, for example, that would for their reasons reject the authority of scripture. Now you're really talking with two different authority bases.

And so you're not going to get very far with that. But this is usually in house. Just a clarification to her warning, actually, if you're asking what you think of the scripture, what's your view of the scripture, to say that I read the scripture literally is not helpful.

Because this is a completely unhelpful term. I ask people, do you take the Bible literally? And I said, of course we do. Do you think Jesus is a stick? What do you mean? Well, John 15 says, I am the vine, you're the branches.

Are we all sticks? Well, no, he doesn't mean that literally. Oh, then you don't take the Bible literally. Well, wait a minute.

That's not what I meant. Well, that's what you have to clear up. What you mean? I think the whole phraseology of taking the Bible literally is not helpful.

It creates confusion. What I try to do is I try to read the scripture with the precision that the author intended. I try to read it the regular way.

Same way you read the newspaper, the sports page, whatever, take metaphors as metaphors, etc, etc. So that's very important distinctive. If somebody just says, well, I take it literally, you're not going to get anywhere there because that is very confusing and biguous and problematic to characterize it that way.

You have to find a different way to characterize it that allows the Bible to be a work of literature that communicates with all different means straight forward facts, also figures of speech, storytelling, proverbs. What do you call it? Parables. What are the Jewish parables called? I'm trying to think of the word.

I don't know. Yeah, you know, if I said it, you'd recognize it. But Mishnah, is it? No, not

Mishnah.

I can't think of the word. But are these some of these stories are Jewish parables too. So these are all forms of communication that are literary in in order to understand the factual information they mean to communicate that the author means to communicate.

You have to properly understand the genre. Okay. So the bottom line is if you have the same view of the Bible, then you have a standard by which you can measure your particular interpretations.

If you don't share that view of the Bible, then you have nothing to compare your views to and you have no way to argue for one view or the other. So I think that would be the place to start if you're trying to figure out if you're agreeing to disagree on the same team or if you've got some irreconcilable differences in your views. Midrash.

Midrash, that's the word. Now you know that is. It's kind of like a Jewish parable.

Midrash. Alright. We are.

We've gone way over again. Alright. Thank you, Rebecca, Jen and Jerry.

We appreciate hearing from you and we hope to hear from you if you have questions through Twitter with the hashtag #STRAsk or you can go through our website. This is Amy Hall and Greg Cocle for a stand to reason.