

# The keys to interpreting Genesis: history and genre

Review of  
*Yea, Hath God Said?*  
By Kenneth L. Gentry Jr  
& Michael R. Butler  
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Kenneth Gentry is Professor of Systematic Theology at Westminster Classical College, Elkton, Maryland; and Michael Butler is Associate Professor of Philosophy and Apologetics at the same institution. Both advocate the traditional 24-hour interpretation of Genesis 1, and together they have produced a work which continues the on-going debate surrounding the Framework Hypothesis in Reformed circles, and in particular, in the Presbyterian Church of America.

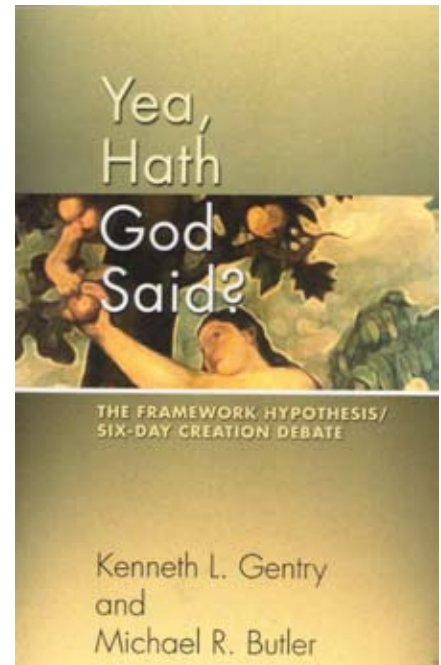
The book is divided into four parts: the first dealing with the definition, origin and history of the Framework Hypothesis, and an outline of the major concerns that have been raised by traditionalists. Part 2 contains three exegetical studies of Genesis 1. The first describes the traditional 24-hour view, along with a list of objections and corresponding rebuttals. The second study is an extensive rebuttal to the Framework hypothesis, and the third looks specifically at the exegetical issues raised by Genesis 2:5. Part 3 contains analyses of the Westminster Confession's affirmation of creation in six days, and Part 4 contains concluding remarks. However, the authors' referencing method is annoyingly inconsistent. They cannot seem to make up their minds whether to use footnotes or in-line referencing.

This becomes very distracting after a while.

*Contra* the authors, the Framework Hypothesis does not demand 'a creational process consuming billions of years' (p. 17); it merely frees the scientist from any biblical constraints regarding the origin of the universe. Of course, this usually means an old-earth creation scenario is favoured, but the Framework Hypothesis itself does not demand it.

In part 2, the authors launch into a relatively detailed exegetical defence of the traditional 24-hour interpretation of the creation days. However, this seems rather pointless given that Framework advocates do not deny that the days refer to normal 24-hour days. They are well aware of the exegetical problems of interpreting the days as ages, and readily accept the days as 24-hour days but deny that these literal days correspond to actual days in history. While Framework advocates believe God's creative acts were historical events, they deny that the Genesis creation account is a chronological, historical record of those events. Thus, the fundamental problem with the Framework Hypothesis is that it divorces the Genesis creation account from actual history. The authors do not really emphasize this point, which suggests they do not really understand or appreciate the fundamental problems of such interpretations.

Gentry and Butler do, however, point out that the Framework Hypothesis relies on extravagant theological analysis and promotes a dangerous hermeneutic. But what this study really lacks is a proper genre analysis. In addition to showing the internal inconsistency of the interpretation and its exegetical and theological defects, the authors need to show that the Genesis account of



creation is history, i.e. that the text is historical narrative.

Often, the book of Genesis has been divided into two sections: Primeval History (chs. 1–11) and Patriarchal History (chs. 12–50).<sup>1</sup> However, as David Clines notes:

'it is most significant that there is no clear-cut break at the end of the Babel story. Clearly, Abrahamic material begins a new section of the Pentateuch, but the precise beginning of the Abrahamic material—and therewith the conclusion of the pre-Abrahamic material—cannot be determined. In the final form of Genesis, there is at no point a break between primeval and patriarchal history.'<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, since the 'patriarchal' history is generally regarded as an accurate historical record, there is no reason why the 'primeval' history should not also be accepted as an accurate historical record.

Note also that the creation account contains all the usual grammatical markers one would expect to find in historical narrative. *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar* states:

'One of the most striking peculiarities in the Hebrew *consecution* of tenses is the phenomenon that, in



*'Now the serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said to the woman, "Has God indeed said, "You shall not eat of every tree of the garden"?"' (Genesis 3:1).*

representing a series of past events, only the first verb stands in the perfect, and the narration is continued in the imperfect [emphasis in original].<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, this is exactly what we find in Genesis 1: The first verb, בָּרָא (bārā', 'created'), is a *Qal* perfect, which is then followed by a series of *Qal* imperfects, including וַיֹּאמֶר (wāyyō'mer, 'and ... said'), וַיִּרְאֶה (wāyyār', 'and ... saw') and וַיְהִי־וַיְהִי (wāyēhî, 'and ... was').

At the higher literary level, typical elements of Hebrew narrative include (1) point of view, (2) characterization, (3) dialogue, (4) narration framework or glue, (5) plot, and (6) repetition.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, all of these elements are clearly exhibited in the early chapters of Genesis. The point of view is clearly that of an observer on Earth. The Serpent is characterized as shrewd and cunning. Dialogue occurs between God and Adam, Adam and Eve, and the Serpent and Eve. The grammatical constructions outlined above form the narration framework, and the plot involves the creation of mankind in the image of God in a pristine universe, mankind's rebellion against his Creator and the cursing of creation as a consequence. The account also

contains a great deal of repetition. For example, 'And God said ... and it was so', 'And God saw that it was good', 'There was evening and there was morning—a Xth day.'<sup>5</sup>

In addition, many other scriptures make allusions to the historicity of the Genesis account. Some examples are Exodus 20:9–11, 31:17; Psalm 8, 104; Matthew 19:4–6; Mark 13:9; Luke 3:38; John 1:3, 10; Romans 8:19–22; Colossians 1:16; 2 Peter 3:5 and Hebrew 4:4, 11:3. This led Leupold to conclude that:

'The account as it stands expects the impartial reader to accept it as entirely literal and historical. The use made of it in the rest of Sacred Scriptures treats every part referred to as sober fact, not as a fancy-picture.'<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, Allan MacRae considers the passage to be 'as factual and literal as any section anywhere in the Bible'.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, 'Hebrew history taught and accepted the historicity of Adam.'<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, Framework advocates argue that although the genre of the account is not poetry, it is not normal historical narrative either. In light of the cosmic proportions of the text, they claim it is better described as 'exalted prose'. Apart from the fact that this argument ignores the objective grammatical indicators, the distinction made is based purely on content, i.e. the nature of the events covered by text. Given that God's creative acts were inherently unique, this is hardly a valid criterion for distinguishing historical narrative from an unhistorical story.

While the authors present a credible defence of the traditional 24-hour

interpretation, and the book contains much good exegetical, theological and historical material, it does not really deliver that final killer blow to the Framework Hypothesis. Those who wish to engage Framework advocates will also need to consult other works on this topic.<sup>9</sup>

## References

1. See, for example, LaSor, W.S., Hubbard, D.A. and Bush, F.W., *Old Testament Survey*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1996; Edersheim, A., *Bible History: Old Testament*, Hendrickson, Peabody, MA, 1995.
2. Clines, D.J.A., Theme in Genesis 1–11; in: Hess R.S. and Tsumura, D.T. (Eds.), *I Studied Inscriptions from Before the Flood*, Eisenbrauns, Winona Lake, IN, p. 305, 1994.
3. Gesenius' *Hebrew Grammar*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., trans., Cowley, A.E., Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 132–133, 1910.
4. *Point of view* is the perspective from which the narrator is describing the events. *Characterization* refers to people who are represented in the story. *Dialogue* is the reported direct speech of the characters. *Narration* is the explanatory text which either provides additional background information regarding the events or facilitates the unfolding of the plot. *Plot* is the interaction between characters in their circumstances directed toward a goal. See Parker, D., *Using Biblical Hebrew in Ministry*, University Press of America, Lanham, MD, pp. 120–131, 1995.
5. Richard L. Pratt adds: 'Perhaps the most common technique Old Testament [narrative] writers employed was *repetition*' [emphasis in original]; *He Gave Us Stories*, P & R Publishing, Phillipsburg, KS, p. 245, 1990.
6. Leupold, H.C., *Exposition of Genesis 1:104*, Baker Book House, MI, 1942.
7. MacRae, A.A., The principles of interpreting Genesis 1 and 2, *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 2(4):2, 1959.
8. Eichhorst, W.R., The issue of biblical inerrancy in definition and defense, *Grace Journal* 10:14, Winter 1969.
9. See especially Kulikovsky, A.S., A critique of the literary framework view of the days of Creation, *CRSQ* 37(4):237–244, 2001; and Pipa, J.A., From Creation to chaos: a critique of the non-literal interpretations of Genesis 1:1–2:3; in: Pipa, J.A. and Hall, D.W. (Eds.), *Did God Create in Six Days?* Southern Presbyterian Press, Taylors, SC, 1999.