

Is Genesis Real History?

Often the question about the historical nature of Genesis is posed in juxtaposition to “myth” or to “poetry.” These are false dichotomies and will not lead to useful affirmations or to deeper understanding. The question as worded in the title misdirects. In many ways it is just the wrong question because it forces us to operate with our modern categories, definitions and worldview regarding what constitutes “history.” When we become locked in our own ways of thinking, we potentially distort what the ancient literature is doing. We can explore the issue in a number of brief observations.

1. When we use the term “History,” what we are thinking about is a modern construct not known in the ancient world. Our category term is freighted with modern meaning, interests and values and cannot be used casually.
2. No such thing as a historian existed in the ancient world. Ancient Near Eastern monumental inscriptions, often considered the primary source of history, were written in order to preserve the king’s legacy, either for future kings or for the gods. Therefore we might say that in these documents, talking about events is a means to an end to talk about the king. This is why their truth and falsity is evaluated on the basis of what they say about the king, not on what they say about the events.
3. Even when the referent of a narrative is an event, the event is a means to an end. Even though the narrative has an event as referent, the narrative should not be considered *event-oriented*. Larger issues are at stake.

4. That which is important about events in the ancient world is not empirical in nature. They are more interested in what the observer could *not* see. That is, they are more inclined to use a metaphysical lens for reality, rather than an empirical one as we do. When we accept the truth of such narratives we are accepting the metaphysical affirmations, which transcend the empirical. Events in their view therefore comprise more than what we refer to as history. Yet, for all of that expanded view, that does not make the view of events any less real to them. They can have events as the referents to a narrative account, yet view the events in a very different way than we do. The ancient world as a whole has different ways of knowing than we do.
5. We can't read history; we live history. We read narratives about events. What narratives say *about* events or other forms of reality is most important, and by nature, is intentionally interpretive. In Genesis, the narrator's interpretation has authority, not any event.
6. Not everything that is real is history. When we attempt to frame narratives in historical terms we potentially diminish their truth and limit the nature of their reality.
7. Genesis is better understood as narrative rather than as a record of historical events. Narrative uses events but it shapes them to its purposes. History is made up of events. Events cannot be recovered wholesale. We only have the narratives with their particular perspectives and interpretations.
8. Genesis narratives are not God's narratives (that would require dictation theory); they are human narratives that carry God's authority. Consequently they will always carry the human perspective and will be based on human observation and interpretation. In Genesis 1 we have an Israelite author's interpretation of creation communicated to an Israelite audience. The narrator is not an eyewitness and therefore does not present it as history that he has lived

through or witnessed. That narrative should therefore not be categorized as history. But like history it has an anchor in real events. We need to recognize, however, that such narratives are not “about” the events they describe. They are about the present not the past. They offer the understanding of the world that the narrator wishes to convey to his audience. We believe that the understanding of the narrator in Genesis is God-given and therefore we accept it as offering an authoritative and true understanding of the world. It is not provided so that we can reconstruct the creation events addressing the scientific understanding of today or meet the demands of our modern worldview. Authority is vested in the interpretation of the narrator, not in the event or in our ability to reconstruct or verify the event.

9. Selection, collection into a narrative, interpretation and perspective shape the intended truth—not just the blunt fact of the event. Narratives that use events have purposes and perspectives.
10. An observational report is different from a narrative. Narratives are not written to report the past but to interpret the past in order to understand the present. This property of definition thereby offers the audience a means of understanding identity, not the doings of the past, but the state of affairs as they stand in the world of their present. It is the significance for the present, not the depiction of the past, that gives history its value, and is the reason why anybody took the trouble to write about the events or to read the narratives. Consequently, the truth or falsity of the narratives has less to do with the accuracy with which they describe the events of the past (often not able to be assessed since we have no independent witness), and more to do with the accuracy with which they describe the state of the present. These sorts of narratives presume an event (e.g. cosmogony: the world is here so it came into being somehow) but those events occur so far in the primordial past or in the cosmic realms that no

historian can legitimately claim the necessary experience needed to speak on them authoritatively. Thus they are not "history," but like history they are not really "about" the events they describe either.

11. Many of the narratives of Genesis are “identity” narratives. Broadly, we might say that the purpose of such narratives is to describe something about the nature and character of the people and/or community that the story is a narrative of. The reality check comes by asking “Is that what X really is?” instead of asking “Is that what really happened?” The latter assessment is not accessible through the narrative.
12. The narratives of Genesis focus on conflict and resolution. The problem is that the order established by God’s presence was forfeited and needs to be recovered. That is the narrative quest. Order is established (Gen 1-2), lost (Gen 3), degenerates (Gen 4-6), is reset (Gen 6-9) and there is a human initiative to restore God’s presence (Gen 11) before God launches his own initiative (the covenant). Genesis 1-11, then, is the backstory for the covenant. The backstory narratives give a true and real assessment of the human plight and the covenant is God’s real solution.
13. We need have no interest in reconstructing events—we accept the interpretation of events. Apologetics seeks to reconstruct events to combat skepticism. Those seeking the truth of Genesis have no need to reconstruct events; they seek the message of the author.
14. Many believe that the genre of “history” is essentially a presentation of objective data that readers are meant to draw on in order to forensically reconstruct events. This approach takes the text’s details as if they were a series of objective data points that can be used to forensically reconstruct what a camera present at the event would have recorded. In fact, however, it is impossible to forensically reconstruct events using the information that the

Bible provides. Reconstructing the event is not the pathway to truth because the target truth is not inherent in the event but in the interpretation of the event.

15. Genesis narratives are interested in a deep reality that transcends events and history. Their significance is found not in their historicity but in their theology; not in *what* happened, or even in asserting that something *did* happen, but in *why* it happened. What was God doing? That is where the significance is to be found. When we turn our attention to defending historicity, we are engaging in reductionism if we become too focused on proving the reality of events rather than on embracing the interpretation of the theological significance that is being tracked by the author.

The question is not whether Genesis is history or myth, or whether it is historical or poetic. Behind the question of whether Genesis is “real history” is a concern for the truth of Genesis. Truth is found in the narrator’s interpretation, which we accept by faith, regardless of whether or not we can reconstruct the events. His interests are not concentrated on human history but on God’s plans and purposes.