

Thoroughly predictable compromise

Genesis, The Story of God: Bible Commentary

Tremper Longman III

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Sometimes it's predictable that an author is going to compromise regarding Genesis and even what compromises he's going to make. If he's not strong on the length of the days of creation, for example, he will probably bring out the old argument, "How can there be normal-length days before the sun?" If he believes that Genesis 1–2 tells us nothing about the age of the earth, he probably won't think that Genesis 5 and 11 can tell us anything about chronology, either. This sort of predictability makes Tremper Longman's Genesis commentary in the Story of God series a tedious read.

The commentary uses the NIV 2011 translation of Genesis; a translation which, in some places, has been criticized by many as having problems with the gender-neutral language. The main translation problem of interest to creationists would be its interpretation of Genesis 2:5: "Now, no shrub had appeared on the earth and no plant had yet sprung up, for the Lord God had not sent rain on the earth and there was no one to work the ground". This is problematic because it introduces a contradiction between Genesis 1 and 2 that does not occur in the Hebrew. The ESV correctly translates Genesis 2:5 as "When no bush of the field was yet in the land and no small plant of the field had yet sprung up ..."—i.e.

the sorts of plants that did not yet exist depended on human cultivation, and may even be associated with the Curse of Genesis 3. But the NIV 2011 translation could be taken to say that Genesis 2 places the creation of mankind before plants, while clearly Genesis 1 places the creation of plants on Day 3 and humans on Day 6.

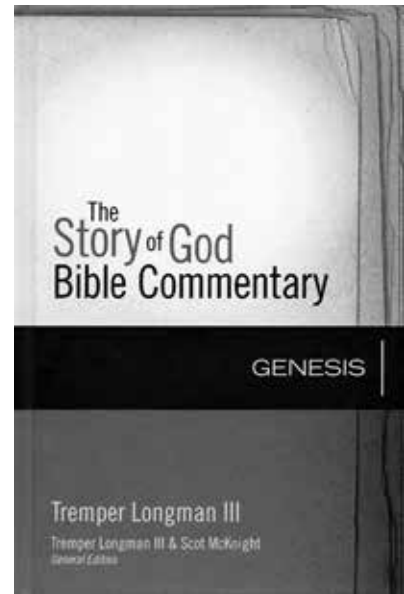
This commentary series seems to be aimed at interested laypeople, though pastors will no doubt use it as well, especially for sermon application. The discussion of the Hebrew in any given passage is limited, and usually emphasizes the author's own preference rather than listing the interpretive options. Clearly it is assumed the readers do not know Hebrew nor have the tools available to weigh the options.

Affirms Mosaic authorship

Longman is surprisingly good when it comes to affirming Mosaic authorship. He notes,

"Taking seriously the indications within the Pentateuch itself, along with the post-pentateuchal references to the Book/Law of Moses, one might conclude that the Pentateuch finds its origins in Moses, who used sources particularly in the writing of Genesis. The postmosaica indicate that there were editorial additions. These additions may only be the most obvious examples of textual material added after the time of Moses and we cannot determine precisely what was authored by Moses or added by later inspired editors" (p. 6).

While a less enthusiastic embrace of Mosaic authorship than one might



wish for, it seems best to be charitable when possible, given that there is so much wrong with the rest of the book.

Long-age interpretation

Longman gives a standard long-age interpretation of Genesis 1–11. One does not have to read far to get a clear statement of where Longman's priorities lie. He says,

"Based on our present knowledge derived from science, the origins of the cosmos are to be located in the Big Bang that happened approximately fourteen billion years ago. The creation of *homo [sic] sapiens sapiens* occurred about two hundred thousand years ago. Certainly the biblical author had no knowledge of this expanse of time, but a modern reader knows the story of creation of the cosmos and human beings is a depiction of events that happened in the deep past" (pp. 7–8).

We can only guess about what the Bible tells us about origins, but we *know* what science tells us, and we must bow the knee!

While Longman admits to not knowing what symbolic theological



Tremper Longman III, author and professor

significance the lifespans in Genesis 5 and 11 might serve, he dismisses taking them literally fairly quickly (pp. 98–99), and even calls a literal reading of the Genesis 11 genealogy ‘stilted’ (p. 152). It is perhaps unfair to expect significant interaction with other viewpoints in what is obviously a very layperson-oriented text. But when one’s own interpretation is vastly out of step with the historical Christian interpretation and with that of a good number of Christians today, one might look for some *indication* that there might be other ways to read the text. Instead, we find a self-assured statement that “Ancient genealogies did not function like modern ones and are often constructed for literary and theological purposes rather than historical ones” (p. 152).

In fact, it is uncertain how much historical data Genesis 1–11 can give us at all, in Longman’s view. He never affirms one way or another whether he believes Adam and Eve were historical individuals, but he seems ambivalent about the *necessity*

of a historical Adam and Eve who behaved in the way that Genesis relates.

Global Flood

Interestingly, Longman affirms that Genesis intends to teach a global flood, but immediately argues that there is no geological evidence of such an event.

“Of course, the problem for the position that this is a worldwide flood is that there is not a shred of geological or archaeological evidence for such a flood and, in this case, one might expect there to be. Again, the problem may not be with our translation of the Hebrew text as a worldwide flood or with the lack of evidence for such a flood as it is with an inaccurate understanding of the genre of the text that would wrongly lead one to expect precise and literal historical reportage” (p. 119).

Tepid on homosexuality

Today, the traditional biblical teaching on sexual ethics is under attack, so it is important for commentaries to help equip Christians to answer the apologetic and pastoral questions relating to homosexuality. While Longman does recognize that other passages in Scripture clearly teach that homosexuality is a sin, he (wrongly) identifies the sin of Sodom not as homosexuality but primarily as a lack of hospitality, limiting the apologetic usefulness of his comments on this passage.

Give this one a miss

This review focused mainly on Genesis 1–11 as the section that would be of most immediate interest to the

readers of this journal. There are few really problematic comments on Genesis 12 and following, but there are few insights that would be new, even to people who have access to other commentaries. Some of the applications he draws from various passages are good, but overall I found myself wanting more depth in the discussions.

Then there are the occasional bizarre, out-of-left-field statements such as, “In keeping with biblical practice, it is wise to refer to God as ‘he,’ though not heretical to call God ‘she,’ as it would be to refer to God as ‘it’” (p. 39). While I was grateful that Longman referred to God as ‘he’ (making my read-through of the commentary more bearable!) throughout his commentary, one wonders why he felt the need to make this point at all. And in case one is wondering whether this is an out-of-context quote, he did not defend this innovation except by saying that God is spirit and is thus not biologically male or female (although He has revealed Himself consistently in Scripture as relationally male, and Jesus was a human man, not a woman).

In short, it is difficult for me to think of an instance where this commentary would be a useful resource for better understanding the text of Genesis. While the idea of a new commentary aimed at the ‘average church member’ level of knowledge is admirable, this commentary is too full of compromising views for me to recommend it to anyone.