

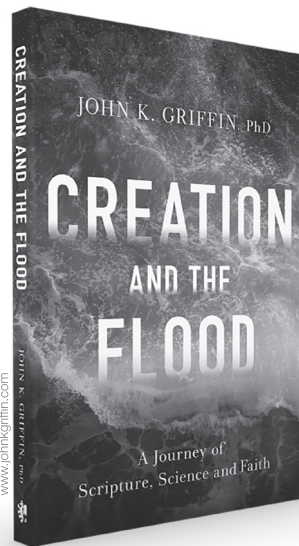
Book Review:

CREATION AND THE FLOOD: A JOURNEY OF SCRIPTURE, SCIENCE AND FAITH BY JOHN K. GRIFFIN

BY BRYAN NESS

When I saw this book, which was just published in the fall of 2020, my first thought was, do we need another book on this topic when there are already some excellent books available? As I began reading, however, I found Griffin's first-hand account of confronting his crisis of faith in the Bible refreshing. John Griffin is not a trained scientist, nor is he a credentialed theologian. Ordinarily I cringe when I read material written by less well-informed authors about the creation/

evolution and Noachian flood debates. So often, such authors have not educated themselves enough to grasp the scientific data, which overwhelmingly support an old-age earth and provide no support for a global flood. So often, such authors have just enough theological knowledge to sound confident in defending traditional views and far too little knowledge of science to recognize the glaring clash between Young Earth Creationist (YEC) models and modern science. Griffin is



well educated, with a PhD in economics from Fordham University, and even though he does not possess a science degree, thankfully he seems to know his science well enough to recognize the long-overdue need for Christians to confront fundamentalist dogma about creation and the flood. Usually, such confrontations are left to outsiders who are more intent on tearing down belief in God than in finding ways to be true to the well-established scientific facts while preserving a genuine, Bible-based faith in God.

The book should be refreshing to the average reader, as Griffin presents his ideas in the form of his own experiences of researching these difficult topics step by step. He begins by recounting a question his son asked him about whether dinosaurs existed. He was about to blurt out that they did exist 65 million years ago, when he stopped himself, concerned about how his son might relate to such information, considering he was attending a Christian grade school that taught YEC views. Griffin

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grew up attending a church that had more flexible views about interpreting Genesis, but more recently had joined a conservative, non-denominational, evangelical church which holds to a 6,000-year age of the earth, literal seven-day creation week, and recent worldwide flood. He found the community very spiritually invigorating, but given what he knew about science, was troubled by its support for YEC and a worldwide flood. He had also recently married a woman from the same faith community and was concerned that his looming crisis of belief could affect their relationship. The confluence of his church's insistence on reading Genesis literally, his limited knowledge that science suggests such an interpretation is untenable, and his deep faith in God and the Bible, led him to study carefully to see if there are ways of interpreting Genesis that preserve the Bible's integrity but that are also true to science.

Griffin's approach is primarily grounded in Fundamentalism:

I trust that the Bible is true in all that it intends to teach—that the Bible is God's Word, spoken through human authors, and that the authors were inspired by the Holy Spirit. This is ultimately a matter of faith. I believe that God gave us the Bible so that He could reveal Himself to us, and that He therefore gave us a Bible that is free from error in its teachings. He achieved this through miracles of the Holy Spirit, both inspiring the human authors and later directing which books made it into the Bible.¹



*John Griffin, author of *Creation and the Flood: A Journey of Scripture, Science and Faith**

Griffin claims inspiration for his approach from Galileo, who considered that God reveals Himself through both the Bible and His creation, and that when a well-established scientific fact seems to contradict scripture, it likely means scripture needs to be reinterpreted. He also references Augustine's famous quote in which Augustine cautions Christians against using Scripture to argue against things generally known to be true about the physical world, thus making Christians a laughingstock. Like many before him

who faced such a crisis, he began systematically to explore alternative ways of interpreting Genesis to preserve his faith.

Griffin is up-front from the beginning that science cannot support the YEC model or a worldwide flood. He acknowledges that the Bible is complex and that it is not always easy to interpret its meaning, but that its primary goal is to teach theological truth, not science. Genesis can be especially difficult, since there is such a long tradition of interpreting it literally, rather than figuratively. In fact, a slight majority of pastors interpret Genesis literally and adhere to YEC views,² and 40% of the American public support YEC.³ Even though Griffin himself sees such views as untenable, he does not believe they need to be rooted out, since many sincere believers are fully convinced of such views, but he does believe that churches need to allow room for a diversity of views. Many believers, when confronted with the choice between YEC and science, are put in a bind. They must either adhere to unscientific views they cannot accept intellectually, or they must assume that since the Bible is clearly wrong on these things, they have no choice but to discard the Bible. Griffin proposes that churches

allow for more figurative interpretations of Genesis that could prevent such damaging crises of faith. He also sees the acceptance of non-literal interpretations of Genesis as making evangelism more effective. When potential converts are confronted with a requirement to interpret Genesis literally, knowing what science says about earth history, they may decide the Bible is not a valid source of truth, leading them to discard the Bible's teachings about the plan of Salvation, Christ's resurrection, and the Second Coming as well.

After his broad introduction in Part I, Griffin divides the remainder of the book into a Part II, which covers creation, and a Part III, which covers the flood. In Part II, Griffin briefly gives the evidence used to support YEC, which, in a nutshell, is simply the tradition of interpreting Genesis literally. Given that not even all the early church theologians agreed about how to interpret Genesis, and given their lack of access to the scientific information we have today, Griffin believes tradition is a weak basis for insisting on a literal approach. The primary evidence used in support of a young earth age is the genealogies as interpreted by Bishop Ussher, and later revisionist views that have expanded the potential age of the earth to maybe 10,000 years if the genealogies in the King James Version are assumed to be incomplete. Griffin contends that the genealogies were never intended to be used this way and were placed there for the more culturally important tracing of Israel's origins as a people. The long lives of many of the earlier individuals are symbolic, rather than literal, similar to long lifespans seen in the kings lists of other Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) creation epics.

Then he lays out the evidence that shows that the universe and the earth are much older. Much of this will be familiar to scientists and informed lay people and includes evidence from cosmology that the universe is approximately 13.8 billion years old and radiometric dating of asteroids that estimate the age of the earth to be 4.58 billion years. He lays out a good layman's explanation for why radiometric dating is dependable—an important exercise, since simplistic YEC arguments are sometimes used to imply that radiometric dates are wildly inaccurate. He includes other kinds of evidence that do not depend on radiometric dating, such as sediment layers in lakes that can be dated by counting the layers giving ages of over 50,000 years, and the analysis of coral reefs that, using

known growth rates, can be dated to as old as 800,000 years. He dispenses with the “apparent age” theory used by YEC proponents to explain away all the evidence of an old earth by pointing out that such a theory would require God to do things like embed the bones of dinosaurs that never lived in the appropriate sediment layers.

The remainder of Part II outlines why a figurative interpretation of Genesis 1 is the only interpretation consistent with the scientific evidence for an old earth. To make his case, Griffin ponders the appropriate genre of Genesis 1:

From my own standpoint, Genesis 1 is not quite poetry, but not quite narrative prose either. It has a lyrical aspect to it and is deeply concerned with theological questions. The author does not show concern with imparting precise scientific knowledge and has not offered a detailed and scientifically precise account of creation. The account here is similar to narrative, but the language and structure are artful, and the content is highly symbolic. Perhaps it is best described as *sui generis*—its own unique class or type. Whatever the best generic descriptor is, I am confident in naming one thing that it is not: modern journalism. Once I made that determination, I allowed myself to consider figurative interpretations.⁴

To be thorough, he also shows why he believes that the Old Earth Creationist (OEC) model does not work either. In brief, the OEC model postulates that the earth and universe are as old as scientists estimate and that the creation account in Genesis 1, although a literal telling of the events, takes place over billions of years rather than seven literal days. Both the YEC and OEC models assume that the author of Genesis is giving an historical, scientifically accurate account of creation. Griffin sees both approaches as failures, because he believes Genesis is intended to teach theology, not science. The cultural world in which the story was written was pre-science, and even if God were intending to teach them science, which era's science would he teach them?

Rather than teaching science, God instead uses the pre-scientific understanding of the ancient Hebrew culture

to tell the story of creation. This is why the descriptions in Genesis of the separation of the waters above from the waters beneath, and the dome of heaven, sound so odd to modern ears—God was using the cosmology of ancient cultures where, looking up at the blue sky, it was obvious that there is water above, which is held back by a solid dome, and there are waters beneath, on which the solid ground “floats,” which represents the middle ground between the waters above and beneath. God is not endorsing their ancient cosmology, he is simply using their understanding of the universe to teach them the theological truths of Genesis, that there is one God, the creator of all things, who was before all things.

The theological truths of Genesis become even more apparent when compared with the origin stories of other ANE cultures. Griffin compares the Genesis account with the other ANE narratives such as the *Gilgamesh Epic*, *Enuma Elish*, and *Atrahasis*. The many similarities between Genesis and these other accounts suggest that the author of Genesis knew of them, and may even have borrowed some elements, but intended Genesis to be distinctly different in ways that spoke truth about the God of Israel. Instead of the many Gods of the other accounts, Genesis has one God who, instead of working with already existing material, created the universe ex nihilo. Humans in the other accounts were created to be servants to the Gods, whereas Genesis places the creation of humans at the apex of creation, and God provides for man and wants to develop a loving relationship, rather than the consistently confrontational relationships in the other ANE accounts. A proper understanding of the role of Genesis should focus on these differences and what they say about God.

The remainder of Part II is a verse-by-verse analysis of Genesis 1. Griffin seems to have done his homework well and often references dependable sources such as John C. Lennox,⁵ John H. Walton,^{6,7} and Tremper Longman⁸ to buttress his points. One compelling figurative interpretation endorsed by Griffin is the “universe as God’s temple” model. Many ANE temple dedication

ceremonies were planned to last over a seven-day period, with the deity entering the temple on the seventh day. The temple/cosmos connection is used by the author of Genesis 1 to organize the events in the creation process, with the climax of the seventh day being the blessing of that day by God as a day to rest from the work of creation. This lends power to God’s command in the fourth commandment to honor the Sabbath day and rest on it, and even though the Genesis account is figurative, the way the story is told gives no less weight to the sanctity of the Sabbath. This is an especially important point for Seventh-day Adventists, who often claim it is essential that Genesis 1 be a literal creation account spanning seven literal days, or the Sabbath is not properly established. Griffin and other scholars see no such dilemma; the Sabbath is just as well established, even if the account is interpreted figuratively. As an additional proof of this, Griffin points out that the second version of the fourth commandment in Deuteronomy makes no mention of creation at all, yet still holds Sabbath observance as binding.

Part III deals with the Genesis flood. Griffin takes much the same approach as Longman and Walton in *The Lost World of the Flood*, recognizing that although a worldwide flood clearly did not happen, the author of Genesis still portrays it as a universal flood, but does so as a literary device to emphasize its importance. The descriptions of the size of the boat (larger than any wooden boat ever made, and according to shipbuilding engineers not even remotely seaworthy), the gathering of animals of all kinds, the depth of the floodwaters, and the destruction of all living things not on the ark, are all examples of hyperbole in service to making it an epic story. Since so many aspects of the flood are simply impossible, the story must be interpreted in a figurative fashion, much like the creation account, where the story is to teach theological truths not history. Also like the story of creation, many other ANE sources contain a flood narrative with many parallels to the Genesis version, including a single man and his family building some sort of boat, gathering animals together, all

Many of the truths taught by the flood story are the same whether the account is taken literally or figuratively.

other life being destroyed by the flood, the sending out of a bird to look for land, a sacrifice after the flood, and a vow by the gods to never allow another such flood. The author of the Genesis flood account almost certainly knew of and likely borrowed elements from these other stories, many of which predate Genesis, but, as for the creation account, changes certain elements to teach theological truths about Israel's one true God.

Many of the truths taught by the flood story are the same whether the account is taken literally or figuratively. Mankind had become impossibly sinful, to the point that God decides to destroy them all, but He finds one man who is true to Him and shows him a way to survive the coming flood, by building a boat to weather the storm and preserve his family and animals. The story is on the age-old theme of sin and redemption writ large. The destruction of the earth by flood, as portrayed in the story, allows God to, in a sense, recreate the earth. Remember, God's original creation began with water, then dry land, and the filling of the dry land with plants and animals, as does the end of the flood story when Noah and his family leave the ark and walk again on dry land, allowing the animals from the ark to repopulate the earth. Probably more disturbing than whether the story is literal or figurative, is the picture it paints, of a God who is so vindictive He is willing to destroy all living things except a single family and what animals they can save on an ark. This very dark image of God is clearly troubling to Griffin and he spends many pages arguing that the story emphasizes not just God's sovereignty and divine justice, but also His mercy and forgiveness. No matter what is said to take the edge off the raw vindictive nature of the story, the flood story is troubling and seems to paint a picture of a less than loving God.

After concluding that both the creation and flood stories, in light of modern science, must be interpreted figuratively, Griffin meticulously visits other Biblical references to these stories and concludes that none of them endorse or require that these two accounts be interpreted literally. Nowhere in the Bible does God intend to teach science, Scripture is for teaching truths about God, not about the natural world. God has given us brains and other tools with which to understand the natural world.

Griffin concludes the book with a discussion about what to tell children about these two epic stories. Do we

present a literal telling of creation to children, because children do not possess the intellectual tools to understand figurative interpretations, and then as they get older help them recognize the figurative nature of the stories? Do we tell our children that the flood was worldwide, or do we tell them the truth, as known by science, that there has never been a worldwide flood and that Noah's flood was just a local, albeit unusually large, flood? And if we do begin by telling young children the stories in a literal sense, at what age should they be informed about the more appropriate figurative interpretations? Griffin tells of his own personal struggles with what to tell his own children, and ultimately is uncertain how best to proceed. One thing he does believe is certain, however—at some point young people will likely be ready to explore the alternative ways of interpreting these stories, and we should help them with this to assure them that the figurative approach does not negate the truths of the Bible. The Bible is still God's word, written by the prophets and apostles, and is valuable for teaching us the truth about God. That the Bible might fail as a science or history textbook is no reason to distrust its relevance as a guide to salvation.

Endnotes

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6. J. H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (InterVarsity Press, 2010).
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