

A Review of *The Genesis Account* by Jonathan Sarfati

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Book: Jonathan D. Sarfati, *The Genesis Account: A Theological, Historical and Scientific Commentary on Genesis 1-11* (Powder Springs, GA: Creation Book Publishers, 2015)

Introduction

The Genesis Account is a commentary of Genesis 1-11 written by Young-Earth Creationist (YEC) scientist and Christian apologist Jonathan D. Sarfati. Dr. Sarfati seeks to write this commentary as a defence of the truthfulness of Genesis, especially concerning its first eleven chapters (pp. 1-2). From a chemistry background with a working knowledge of Hebrew, Greek and theology, Sarfati seeks to write a commentary that is faithful to the biblical text, while using science ministerially to explicate how scientific findings can be seen to buttress the claims of Scripture (p. 4). Such is a monumental task indeed, seen in the fact that this commentary is 700+ pages in length for a mere 11 chapters of Genesis.

The commentary is arranged with a preliminary section covering issues like author, date, structure and genre, where the 11- *toledot* (תולדות) structure in Genesis was explicated. Sarfati here argues that each *toledot* introduces a “family document” and thus they correspond to 11 sources for the book of Genesis (p. 17). Genesis 1:1 – 2:3 is the prologue and comes direct from God, and thus there is no *toledot* introducing it. Sarfati then begins the commentary, splitting it into 7 sections corresponding to the prologue and the 6 *toledots* in Genesis 1-11. Throughout the commentary, Sarfati interacts in depth with the Hebrew text, addresses various arguments of opponents of the 6-24, YEC position, and subsequently brings in scientific material to propose how the various scenarios might have played out in history.

Strengths

1) Biblical and scientific commentary

A major strength of this commentary is that it seeks to bring the latest in scientific knowledge to bear on the topic of origins, while acknowledging the fallibility and contingency of such scientific knowledge. Most other commentaries seem almost fearful of science and consequently either ignore the scientific issues, or just take the current scientific consensus as default. While Christians may wish to ignore the creation/ evolution debate, the debate certainly is not going to ignore them. As a book dealing with origins, one question that readers of Genesis will definitely ask is the Bible’s teaching with regards to origins and thus the Creation/ Evolution debate. It is also abundantly clear that the plain teaching of Genesis seem to lend itself to certain propositions that conflict with the supposed “facts” of modern science, and thus theologians have to answer these

questions. One can of course dismiss the teachings of Genesis 1-11 as myths, but still an answer of some sort must be given.

Dealing with the scientific issues is of course tricky, since scientific “truths” by nature are always fallible and contingent. Sarfati sets forth to use science ministerially (to support Scripture) as opposed to using it magisterially (over Scripture). This is of course easier said than done, yet in the commentary by and large Sarfati has engaged the biblical text first before the science.

As such, this commentary occupies a unique spot in its synthesis of theology and science, which many other commentaries do not do.

2) Interaction with ancient Christian interpretations

The Church is catholic (universal). Sarfati thus bring in the interpretations of the early church fathers, the Reformers and even John Wesley. From the Jewish side, the interpretation in the Targums are brought to bear on the issue as well. Sarfati establishes that the overwhelming consensus in ancient times is the position taken by modern YEC advocates. Sarfati looks at supposed dissenters like Origen (182-251) and Augustine (354-530) and proved that they held to a creation that is at most 10,000 years ago (pp. 131-2)

The citations from Origen and Augustine are especially helpful since many have put forward the allegorists like Origen to attack the historical pedigree of the 6-24 day position. Augustine, due to a mistranslation of a non-canonical book, thinks that creation was instantaneous. But the key issue here is that none of them countenance the notion of deep time that is ubiquitous in evolutionary thought, and that should be sufficient to refute the move to undermine the historicity of the YEC interpretation of the first eleven chapters of Genesis.

3) Interaction with ancient literature and cultures

One thing that is good is the seriousness with which Sarfati approaches ancient myths and legends, not necessarily discounting them as many moderns have done. While certainly they are false, yet it is unusual for commentators to attempt to take them seriously to explain them, instead of just derisively discounting them as mere fairy tales created *de novo* by “primitive cultures.”

One example is the flood myths in the various cultures of the world. It is not unusual for proponents of theories such as the “Local Flood” theory to deal only with flood myths of Mesopotamia such as the Gilgamesh Epic. Sarfati however brings up Flood legends around the world (pp. 509-10). Most certainly, he dealt with Gilgamesh, particularly how the cuboid shape is just plain ridiculous, and show therefore how it is more understandable that Gilgamesh is a devolution of the true Flood account preserved in Genesis (p. 508). By looking beyond Mesopotamia, the universal extent of the Flood becomes more evident, whereas it is less so when scholars focus only on the Ancient Near-East (ANE) while ignoring the rest of the world.

4) Clarity

The commentary is written smoothly. Certainly jargon is unavoidable, but it is written in a way that allows the gist of the argument to be perceived. The summary section beginning each chapter helps those who might get lost in the technical discussions that follows to get the main points Sarfati is teaching.

Concerns/ Weaknesses

1) YEC and Scientific sources

Sarfati is ministering with Creation Ministries International (CMI), and it is understandable that for YEC arguments, he would reference their website and their journals. That said, there are a lot of citations from their website. If there is so much new material that they have written and posted on their website, perhaps they actually can compile those into books, which are better as reference sources.

This does not mean that Sarfati is operating in an echo chamber, for there are ample citations of articles from scientific journals like *Nature*, *Science* and *PNAS (Proceedings of the National Academy of Science)* just to name a few notable ones. But it would certainly look much better for YEC sources to come from books instead of websites, regardless of which PhD scientist lies behind the article on the webpages referenced.

2) Electronic sources

Alongside the previous criticism, generally electronic references are not ideal. Sarfati even references articles by J.P. Holdings at tektonics.org. Now, even if that was scholarly, the website is unknown to many. References to creation.com might be more tolerable only because it is known as CMI's website, still electronic sources are not generally regarded as good in appearance for scholarly discussions.

The main problem with electronic sources, which is why I generally don't like to use them as references, is that they are much more transient and easily changed without notice or indication. This usage of electronic sources therefore is a weakness for the book.

3) Weakness in OT scholarship

Sarfati knows Hebrew, even Modern Hebrew. Yet his interaction with modern OT scholarship is weak. For example, the Framework View concerning the creation days is discussed superficially, mostly interacting with Meredith Kline's article "Because it had not rained" [Meredith G. Kline, "Because it has not rained," *WTJ* **20** (1958):146-157] and the paper "Space and Time in the Genesis Cosmogony" [Meredith G. Kline, "Space and Time in the Genesis Cosmogony," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* **48** (1996): 2-15]. I know Sarfati is primarily a scientist, but surely dealing with a view that claims to be scholarly merits greater interaction with the sources. Perhaps some interaction with M.G. Kline's *Kingdom Prologue* should be the minimum required. I have faulted Framework

proponents with ignorance of the YEC view, and now it seems I have to fault YEC proponents with relative ignorance of the Framework view.

Another of such weaknesses can be seen in his treatment of the topic of meat-eating. Ronald Osbourne in his book *Death Before the Fall* [Ronald E. Osborn, *Death Before the Fall: Biblical Literalism and the Problem of Animal Suffering* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2014)] has a biblical theological apologetic for death before the Fall. I obviously reject Osbourne's position,¹ but that such books exist show that biblical theological scholarship is always evolving (no pun intended), and it would be helpful for Sarfati to interact with them.

Narrative theology and the postmodern turn towards non-literal literary expressions is one of the issues in modern biblical theological scholarship. Sarfati however does not deal with these issues, focusing primarily on older liberal scholarship. That is a weakness throughout the book, and thus we have to still await a YEC response to the latest trends in biblical theological scholarship.

3) Theological references

Along this, Sarfati's references could be better. For example, on page 603 footnote 22, Sarfati states that the book of Deuteronomy is "a typical ancient near eastern suzerain-vassal treaty." Meredith G. Kline wrote the book *Treaty of the Great King* which proves just that, thus a reference here to his work would be helpful. After all, Sarfati did not come up with that by himself, so even if he did not get that from Kline, why not cite where he had gotten the information?

I understand this is a big work, but surely more references would be helpful. If there is anything I have learned, the more **relevant** references there are to support your point, the better your work is (Key word: "relevant").

Areas of particular concerns/ Disagreements

1) Genealogies

Sarfati holds to and promotes an unbroken genealogy, and he argues for it based upon the way the genealogies are structured, which is basically of the form:

"When **A** had lived **x** years, he fathered **B**. **A** lived after he fathered **B** **y** years and had other sons and daughters. Thus all the days of A were (**x+y** years), then he died" (p. 447)

He further states that gaps in the genealogies would make little differences since genealogical gaps could be present yet there would still be no time gaps due to the time

¹ Daniel H. Chew, *A Review of Death Before the Fall: Biblical Literalism and the Problem of Animal Suffering*. Accessed at http://www.angelfire.com/falcon/ddd_chc82/articles/DeathBeforeFall_review.pdf (accessed May 14th, 2015)

gap x being provided. (p. 448). Thus, even if there were gaps in the genealogies, there cannot be any time gaps.

Later on in the chapter, Sarfati also deals with the alleged symmetry between the genealogies in Genesis 5 and Genesis 11, showing forth that the symmetry does not really exist (pp. 464-5).

So far it seems that, if one go according to the textual evidence, the genealogies look solid and thus could be used as a way to count backwards to the time of creation. In fact, Sarfati's personal view is that creation is at (4178 +/- 50 BC) (p. 127).

It seems that the internal argument for an unbroken genealogy seems rather sound. What I am concerned with however is with regards to the textual issues with the numbers. The Old Testament has 3 main textual families: the Masoretic Text (MT), the Septuagint (LXX) and the Samaritan Pentateuch (SP). By and large, the MT is more faithful to the original, at least since the beginning of the Mishnaic era after the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. The LXX, which is a Greek translation of the Old Testament, however contains variants at various places, and not all of them can be taken as interpretive license. With the discovery of the Dead Sea Scroll, the superiority of the MT can be seen, yet at other places the LXX reading seems more authentic.

In Old Testament textual criticism, the MT enjoys priority in place, yet sometimes we should pause and ask if the MT variant is the right one. This becomes especially problematic when we look at the variants in the genealogies.

Name	Age at Begetting Next in Line			Remaining Years of Life		
	LXX	Masoretic Text	Samaritan Pentateuch	LXX	Masoretic Text	Samaritan Pentateuch
Adam	230	130	130	700	800	800
Seth	205	105	105	707	807	807
Enosh	190	90	90	715	815	815
Cainan	170	70	70	740	840	840
Mahalaleel	165	65	65	730	830	830
Jared	162	162	62	800	800	785
Enoch	165	65	65	200	300	300
Methuselah	167	187	67	802	782	653
Lamech	188	182	53	565	595	600
Noah	500	500	500	450	450	450
Total Adam to Flood	2242	1656	1307			

Fig. 1: Genesis 5 genealogy (taken from p. 460)

In the Genesis 5 genealogy, we can see quite a lot of variants between the three manuscript types. We can grant alterations in the LXX version, since it seems rather clear that there is an almost consistent addition of 100 years to the age of begetting next in line. From the variants, the MT looks like its numbers are more or less correct.

Name	Age at Begetting Next in Line			Remaining Years of Life		
	LXX	Masoretic Text	Samaritan Pentateuch	LXX	Masoretic Text	Samaritan Pentateuch
Shem	100	100	100	500	500	500
Arphaxad	135	35	135	430	403	303
[Cainan]	[130]	-	-	[330]	-	-
Shelah	130	30	130	330	403	303
Eber	134	34	134	370	430	270
Peleg	130	30	130	209	209	109
Reu	132	32	132	207	207	107
Serug	130	30	130	200	200	100
Nahor	79	29	79	129	119	69
Terah [to Haran]	70	70	70	135	135	75
Total Flood to Terah's fatherhood	1070	290	940			

Fig. 2: Genesis 11 genealogy (taken from p. 677)

In the Genesis 11 genealogy however, we start to see a problem in that the age of first begetting the MT seems to have subtracted 100 years as compared to the LXX and the SP. Since both the LXX and the SP have the same numerical values, it is more likely that the MT subtracted 100 (or 50 for Nahor) from the actual numbers as opposed to the LXX and the SP adding 100 years.

The key point to be made here however concerns the uncertainty regarding the numbers. If we say that the LXX added 100 years to the original values in the Genesis 5 genealogy, while it seems that the MT subtracts about 100 years from the original values in the Genesis 11 genealogy, then it seems that the numbers have been massaged over time, probably with a view to reconciling various dating systems and perhaps with the distorted chronologies of other ANE cultures. The goal of such massaging of numbers is accuracy, and thus it is not the case that they were trying to deceive.

Therefore, there is a strong case to be made from the variants that the numbers are not in themselves exact. This means that dating to the Flood or to Creation is not exactly possible, but the numbers give us a range of dates when the events happen. This necessarily means a creation that is less than 10,000 years, since there is no way to massage the numbers in the genealogy to smuggle in tens of thousands or even millions of years.

But if we were to admit inexactness concerning the genealogies, does this not compromise our view of Scripture? No, because from the variants we can see that inexactness is built into the numbers. Furthermore, the goal of the genealogies was never for us to calculate the date of the Flood or Creation, but its main purpose is covenantal. It is covenantal, because its purpose was to link Adam with Noah, and then Noah with Abraham. The numbers given was to give an approximate time frame, which functions to

contrast the antediluvian generation (including Noah and Shem) with the postdiluvian generation. The massive reduction in lifespan was real and it was to illustrate the destructive power of sin. Formerly, the antediluvians lived great long lives, yet in the end they still die. After the Flood, man becomes even more insignificant, and he continues to die. Vanity of vanities, life is but a vapor.

Sarfati's confidence concerning the genealogies is in my opinion not well-founded. I certainly appreciate wrestling with the genealogies, and certainly it is hard to imagine how gaps can be found with such a dating formula. Yet it seems to me that textual reasons will mess up the chronology, so that it is not possible for exact dating of the Flood or Creation, but rather that it gives us an approximation, a range of dates, of when they might have been.

2) Meat-eating before the Flood

Sarfati is rather adamant about meat-eating only being allowed after the Flood, at least for the godly (p. 598). Now I admit the parallel between God's liberality in giving the plants for food at Creation, and the liberality of God giving the animals for food after the Flood. But it seems to me to be a stretch to say that meat was forbidden between the Fall and the Flood; it is an argument from silence. After all, the main reason why meat eating is forbidden is because it comes from the death of a *nephesh chayyah* ("living creature"), not that meat in itself is sinful since God evidently blesses His people with meat.

At the Fall, God slew animals for their skins to clothe Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:21). Their son Abel took care of sheep (Gen. 4:2), but are we to think that they are raised only for "milk, wool and sacrifices" (p. 598)? God did not forbid the eating of meat before the Flood, so there is no reason to suppose that meat was not eaten before the Flood. Genesis 9:3 could be read as the formal giving of meat for food, whereas previously the legitimacy of meat-eating might be unclear.

3) *Toledot* as sources

It does not seem clear to me that *toledot* refers to a source. That they are structural features to order the book of Genesis is certain. That they are family documents is certainly a plausible interpretation of *toledot*, but it could also be Moses' editorial hand in organizing the material. Ultimately, I do not think the word *toledot* can bear that much meaning by itself, and thus what we are able to say is less to do with sources but rather its literary structure.

4) Hebrew as the original language

Noticing how the names of the people pre-Babel are laced with meaning only in Hebrew, Sarfati suggests that Hebrew was the original language (p. 449). This however I think is not at all certain, since the names with their meanings could be translated into Hebrew, just like one could call a girl the English name "Grace" instead of the Greek "Charis" (χαρις) with no change in meaning. At Babel, the various people groups did not suddenly speak in a tongue they thought foreign. Rather, the transformation was so thorough that each of

them thought they were speaking the exact same language they were speaking before God confused the languages. Therefore, if the transformation was so sudden, those who ended up speaking proto-Hebrew would have these meaning-laced names translated instantaneously in their minds such that they always thought the names sounded as they are recorded in the Bible. Conversely, Sarfati's example of non-Hebrew names in Genesis 14 shows only that the knowledge of the names of these kings came after Babel so they sound foreign and are therefore recorded as foreign non-Hebrew names.

While there is nothing to suggest Hebrew is not the first language, yet there is nothing to suggest it is the first language either. The first human language remains a mystery, which God may reveal to us in glory but unlikely to do so this side of heaven.

Conclusion

Sarfati's commentary is a monumental work. It stands near the pinnacle of YEC scholarship, and presents the 6-24, YEC position in a robust manner both exegetically and scientifically. Sarfati tries to deal with the text fairly and the controversies exegetically, while showing forth his brilliance in both Scripture and the sciences. Bar the concerns I have listed above, this work is certainly a must for anyone seeking to understand the 6-24, YEC position, and it would benefit all who reads it.

Ultimately, what is most important about this debate is the cosmology of the Scriptures. Only when the Scriptures are shown to be true to real history from the beginning can we claim that biblical revealed religion is true in a real objective this-worldly sense, instead of the liberal idea of subjective "spirituality." It is my conviction that only the 6-24 YEC position can function to adequately ground the cosmology of Scripture and do justice to the words of Scripture. Sarfati's commentary is thus a great work in this regard, and will take pride of place for the promotion of the YEC position.