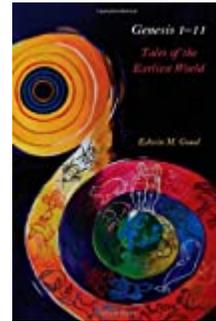




**Edwin M. Good.** *Genesis 1-11: Tales of the Earliest World.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011. x + 125 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-7496-3; \$15.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8047-7497-0.



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## A Literary Analysis of Israel's Primeval History

Edwin M. Good begins *Genesis 1-11* with one of the most honest—and humorous—introductory sentences one could expect to find in an academic monograph. He writes, “I have written on these chapters before, both in my first book (which I leave unnamed, preferring that people not look up what I now consider a youthful production, from whose positions I have mostly departed) and in my second, *Irony in the Old Testament* (1965; second edition, 1981)” (p. 1). It is with this same wit and charm that Good presents his material throughout.

Good has written this volume for the layperson who “does not regularly enter the Bible in any of its guises” (p. 6). Thus, his stated objective is not to argue a sophisticated thesis or nuanced rendering of the primeval history, but to challenge readers of his volume to engage the biblical text as attentively as he has. One way he attempts to draw readers into the Hebrew narrative is by making the familiar unfamiliar. He transliterates all names, whether they are common or not. The familiar Lord, God, Cain, Abel, and Noah are rendered Yahweh, *Elohām*, Qayin, Hebel, and Noach, respectively. Like-

wise, Good prefers to provide fresh translations to traditional words and phrases so the modern reader must pause to consider the original meaning of those phrases. Thus, for example, he translates *tohá» wa-bohá»* (formless and void) and *raqā»a* (expanse) in Gen 1 as “shapeless and empty,” and “bowlshape” (p. 8).

*Genesis 1-11* follows a straightforward structure. Each chapter begins with Good’s own translation of the biblical text, followed by a commentary on that text. The book consists of twelve chapters. Chapter 1 covers Gen 1-2:4a. Chapters 2-3 encompass the events of Gen 2:4b-3:24. Chapter 4 pertains to the story of Cain and Abel (Gen 4:1-16), while chapters 5 (Gen 4:17-26) and 6 (Gen 5:1-32) address two separate genealogical records. Good divides the Noah narrative of Gen 6-9 into three chapters: 7 (Gen 6:1-4), 8 (Gen 6:5-9:17), and 9 (Gen 9:18-29). Chapter 10 corresponds to the same chapter in Genesis. Finally, chapter 11 deals with the Tower of Babel (Gen 11:1-9), leaving the genealogy of Gen 11:10-32 for chapter 12.

As promised, this volume provides an original look at these captivating chapters of Genesis. Good's careful attention to details brings fresh insight to the uninitiated and elicits probing questions from the text. While scholars have long noted multiple sources in the flood narrative, Good not only shows the internal inconsistencies within the text, but also demonstrates how they work together. For his readers for whom this comes as a surprise, he observes, "It's almost as if members of a family were sitting around recalling the same event somewhat differently, and interrupting each other with 'No, it wasn't like that, it was like this.' Yet the two stories work together remarkably well" (p. 68). Although the book is replete with examples of Good's attention to detail, it must suffice to note just a few additional instances. First, he reminds his audience that snake in Gen 3 is not called the devil or Satan anywhere in text. Second, he notes the irony of that same snake "walking on his belly" (p. 40). Third, Good notes the internal textual conflicts with Qayin (Cain) fearing other humans and finding a wife when, presumably, no other humans had yet been born. Good's response to such issues of consistency is commendable. He does not attempt to arrive at a rational solution. Instead, he lets the text speak on its own terms.

Despite these and many more positive qualities, there are three primary areas in which some critique is necessary. First, although Good claims that one of his goals "is to assist people to read with care and to make up their own minds more clearly," it appears that he is operating under another subtext (p. x). That is, God is not quite sure how to handle his creation, so he keeps going back to the drawing board, hoping something just might work. "We keep coming across ways in which the creation was not working out the way the creator intended, necessitating new responses and requirements and setting more rigorous boundaries" (p. 68; see also pp. 76, 92, 113, and 116). Certainly, this is a conclusion one could draw from the text, but it seems unlikely that this would have been the conclusion for the ancient faith community

whose members tended to view their God as one of orderliness and control (see, for example, Job 38; Psalms 8, 74, 104; Proverbs 8; Isaiah 40:12, 42:5-9; Nehemiah 9:6). Second, there are several cases in which some engagement with modern biblical and ancient Near Eastern scholarship would have greatly enhanced—or even altered—his argument. For example, on his discussion of *toḥā» wabohā»*, he might have consulted David T. Tsumura's *Creation and Destruction* (2005); and on the function of the genealogies in Genesis, he could have considered John H. Walton's article "The Antediluvian Section of the Sumerian King List and Genesis 5." [1] The third critique concerns Good's use of the Hebrew. On the whole, his translations are not only satisfactory but also accurate and creative. However, there is the occasional instance in which his translations betray the original text. One such instance is his translation of the waw-consecutive (or narrative preterite), for which Good has opted for the "literal" translation of "and" (p. 5). Of course, the function of the waw-consecutive is not monolithic, in which a single English conjunction can adequately encompass all its intended meanings. It is perplexing why he chose to be literal in this case, but opted for a dynamic equivalent translation elsewhere.

*Genesis 1-11* is a delightful read. The author engages the biblical text closely and carefully, inviting others to do the same. Its brevity makes it all the more enticing to lurkers of the Hebrew Bible. Aside from the issues outlined above, this volume comes highly recommended as an entry not only to Gen 1-11, but also for other undergraduate level Bible courses. While one may not agree with all of his conclusions, what more could be hoped than for students to read every word of the text as if it were the most important word in the book? This book will challenge them to do just that.

#### Note

[1]. John H. Walton, "The Antediluvian Section of the Sumerian King List and Genesis 5," *Biblical Archaeologist* 44 (1981): 207-208.

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