

Book Review: *Origins: The Ancient Impact and Modern Implications of Genesis 1–11* by Paul Copan and Douglas Jacoby

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Copan, Paul, and Douglas Jacoby. 2019. *Origins: The Ancient Impact and Modern Implications of Genesis 1–11*. Nashville: Morgan James. xvi + 248 pp. ISBN: 978–1–68350–950–9. Kindle: Approx. R135 (\$9.19); Paperback: Approx. R194 (\$13.89).

The controversies surrounding the book of Genesis have lasted for millennia and show no signs of abating anytime soon. Incontrovertibly, few exegetical matters require as much circumspection and pastoral sensitivity as dealing with those things that concern science, creation, and the Bible (history, literature, and theology), particularly concerning the first eleven chapters of Genesis. Given the challenging and often sensitive nature of these topics and the wide diversity of opinions that exist in the Church at large, how does *Origins: The Ancient Impact and Modern Implications of Genesis 1–11*, by Paul Copan and Douglas Jacoby, help to contribute positively to this all-important subject?

Prior to offering a full-scale review, a brief overview of the volume, as a whole, is in order. *Origins* consists of fifteen chapters and is divided into four main parts of roughly equal length: (1) Orientation, (2) Creation: Chaos to Cosmos, (3) Cycles: Eden to Deluge, and (4) Cleansings: Deluge to Babel. Aside from the “orientation” section (which is four chapters in length and mostly deals with the structure of Genesis, ancient sources, and the gods and goddess of the ancient Near East), each of the other main units seeks to expose the meaning of the first eleven chapters of Genesis in its original (ancient Near East) context. Many chapters end with a brief “recap” section. With respect to this point, the authors state, “here the principal *biblical truths* of the text will be listed, followed by *points of contact with pagan culture and mythology, connections with the NT*, and then *application*” (64, italics original). Four appendices (ancient cosmology, the geocentric universe, Genesis genealogies, and God’s two books), a postscript (a caution to teachers), and a six-page bibliography round out the volume. Unfortunately, there are no indices.

From a pedagogical perspective, *Origins* is easy to read with ample white space, copious headings, wide margins, and an attractive writing style that is pitched “just right” for the non-initiated. For example, in discussing the contrasts/comparisons of Noah’s Flood with other ancient Near East epics (such as Gilgamesh and Atrahasis) the authors re-tell the story of “Goldilocks and the Four Bears” where the protagonist sits in the bears’ chairs, eats their spaghetti, and is later rescued by a park ranger who puts the bears into a zoo. The point is clear. As Copan and Jacoby assert: “Any changes to a familiar story tend to be highly noticeable” and, likewise, “the truth (biblical theology) is most visible at the points where the story has been recast” (pp. 15–16).

Origins is also visually pleasing to the eye with a plethora of charts, tables, graphs, and the like. Most surprisingly (but also, most welcome), there are even a few high-quality, high-resolution illustrations/reproductions of certain ancient artefacts, such as Hadad, an ancient god of the storm, an Assyrian Lamassu (i.e., a cherub) the *Imago Mundi* (image of the world map), and an artistic rendition of both ancient cosmology and a geocentric universe. One wonders, though, why the same map, “The World of Genesis 1–11,” is reproduced no less than three times (!) in the same volume (pp. 13, 85, 193).

The purpose of *Origins* is made explicit by Copan and Jacoby who hope that:

[Y]ou experience this book as a helpful running commentary on Genesis 1–11. Yet there is another reason for the book. *Origins* is also a work of Christian apologetics, and we aim to convince you that Genesis is seriously interacting with the ancient world, critiquing its polytheistic worldview while providing a credible alternative. If we can learn to engage with our culture as Genesis did in the ancient world, our own proclamation of the biblical message will be greatly enhanced.... Further, by suggesting how these eleven chapters *should* be read, we hope to undo some of the damage wrought by those who have created unnecessary obstacles to faith, for outsiders and insiders alike, as well as for children of Christian families. (xii, emphasis original)

Though the authors rarely cite the names of specific people or list various organizations and institutions, it seems evident that Copan and Jacoby seem to be referring to various “concordistic” views of Scripture, i.e.,

Young Earth Creationism (YEC) and/or Old Earth Creationism (OEC) and, perhaps, even certain aspects of the Intelligent Design (ID) movement. That this is the case seems to be made most clear through the authors’ repeated assertions that the words of Scripture ought to be understood “literarily,” that is, in keeping with the genre of the literature of the biblical text itself, and not “literally” since the problems with the latter in interpreting the first eleven chapters of the book of Genesis are “legion” (68). Elsewhere, they state, “It bears repeating that reading the Bible (a) to answer modern questions it was never intended to answer or (b) to confirm previously held beliefs is a flawed approach to Scripture” (27).

Given this assertion, Copan and Jacoby are to be commended in the restraint that they often demonstrate in delineating their arguments against so-called “woodenly literal” approaches to interpretation (see p. 50). To be clear, the authors exemplify academic professionalism and common courtesy, taking a firm, yet gracious, tone that is usually free of *ad hominem*, ‘straw man,’ and other fallacious and personal attacks when arguing controversial points. For instance, concerning Noah’s Flood (Gen 6–9), they maintain:

Before we discuss the flood narrative, let it be said that whatever one’s conclusions about the nature of the deluge (literal or not, global or regional), this is not a matter of salvation. Informed men and women hold differing views on this matter—and that doesn’t mean they are hardhearted or theologically careless. Since a lot has been written on the topic and from many different angles, we should strive to maintain a respectful attitude towards those with whom we disagree. (159)

This statement, however, is also something of a “double-edged sword,” for though the authors claim that they provide “abundant chapter endnotes” (see p. xiii), even a cursory overview will reveal that they are actually far from copious. This is, perhaps, most evident in the authors’ engagement with contrary viewpoints. To put the matter differently, though the authors do provide sufficient rationale throughout *Origins* for what they believe and why (and though, as mentioned above, they are often quite circumspect and judicious in their comments while doing so), it is rare to see evidence of their opponents’ actual argumentation *vis-à-vis* direct quotes and citations in the book itself. Would it not have been advisable for the authors to make more direct reference(s) to these “different angles?”

This shortcoming was especially prominent in the brief “appearance of age” section wherein the authors state:

Scientific evidence cannot be claimed for both a young earth *and* an appearance of age, which is precisely what the young earth advocates are doing. There should be no shred of evidence for a “young earth” if the Omphalos Theory is correct. Moreover, this approach makes God a party to deceit, since through the physical world he is misleading us. And yet the Scriptures affirm over and over that God *reveals* truth through the creation (Ps 19:1; Rom

1:20). You just cannot have it both ways. (237, all emphases original)

Regrettably, however, this is an unfortunate caricature of many in the YEC camp who, by and large, effectively distinguish between the patently false “appearance of age” argument in favor of a “mature” creation.¹

Although some may quibble about Copan and Jacoby’s decision to intentionally avoid the debate(s) about science and Genesis, one may, nonetheless, stand in agreement with the following assessment: “If you are disappointed that this book sets too many modern concerns (the age of the earth, the origin of species, the location of the ark ...) on the side, don’t despair. The appendices and the many endnotes will prove helpful. Further, the bibliography (in the final section) could keep you busy for a long time” (27).

Some other (relatively minor) criticisms, however, must be addressed. To begin, although Copan and Jacoby blandly assert that the cosmic serpent may be identified as Behemoth (see p. 98), this should be noted as being a *minority* viewpoint among most scholars, who tend to only identify the Leviathan as being snake-like (cf. Job 40 and 41).

In addition, despite Copan and Jacoby’s repeated assertions that the seven days of creation are meant to convey “*theological* truths—not *chronological* truths” (62, italics original) and that the “the six days in Genesis 1 appear to be topical, not sequential” (69), this assessment tends to break down upon further analysis. That is to say, the chronological, sequential order of events seems to be internally quite crucial to the “problem, preparation, and population” schema that Copan and Jacoby advocate (see p. 74). To be clear, do not the waters of “Day One” need to exist prior to them being able to be separated on “Day Two” and for the events of “Day Three” to occur? Likewise, is it not logical to assume that in order for humanity to rule

¹ Ken Ham, for example, writes, “Now it is true that when God created the earth the first day of Creation Week, it wasn’t fully functional. God deliberately prepared the earth and created the various kinds of living things over six days. However, at every stage of creation, everything God did was “good,” and all was functional for His created purposes. The creation was then finished—mature, but not with so-called “apparent age.” When Adam and his first descendants looked at the earth, they did not assume apparent age because they knew, based on God’s word, that creation had taken place recently.” <https://answersingenesis.org/astronomy/age-of-the-universe/mature-for-her-age/>

over the beasts of the field and the birds of the air and the fish of the sea (Gen 1:28), at least some of these things would need to have been created earlier? In addition, although one may, perhaps, argue that not everything in the Creation week is necessarily sequential since “light” is created before the traditionally accepted sources of the light (i.e., the heavenly bodies; cf. Gen 1:3–6 and Gen 1:14–19), it nonetheless remains evident that at least some kind of ordered, chronological sequence is still assumed by Scripture itself (cf. Exod 20:11). In brief, it would seem evident that most attempts to rearrange the days of the creation week tend to force impossibilities or reduce them into absurdities.

Alongside this, though the authors maintain that there are “ten generations from Adam to Noah, ten from Noah to Abram” (see p. 8), the genealogies of Genesis 5 and 11 are not actually symmetrical. That is, the *toledoth* of Adam (Gen 5:1–32) contains ten names (Adam to Noah) with the tenth, Noah, having three sons (Shem, Ham, and Japheth). The *toledoth* of Shem (Gen 11:10–26) only records nine names (Shem to Terah) with the ninth, Terah, fathering three sons (Abraham, Nahor, and Haran). Moreover, to say that Abraham counts as the tenth generation in Genesis 11 does not help because consistency would demand that Shem too be counted (cf. Gen 11:26 with Gen 5:32).

Lastly, questions of Mosaic authorship and literary (or oral) sources are largely left unexplored with little to no indication of their not-insignificant role in the greater world of higher learning/academia. They do, however, state (see p. 13) that the “final version of Genesis was evidently written no earlier than 1000 BC, since the monarchy, to which the text refers, was established in the late eleventh century (cf. Gen 36:21).”

Minor irritants include a non-comprehensive bibliography. One will search in vain, for instance, to find Richard Averbeck, Rhonda Byrne, D. A. Carson, Daniel Dennett, Skye Jethani, Gordon Johnston, Philip Ryken,

David Rudolph, or Jeff Robinson listed in the bibliography though each author does appear within the volume itself. As noted above, this problem is only exacerbated by the thorough lack of indices. Other infelicities also include missing bibliographic information and/or incorrect citations of said bibliographic information (e.g., see p. 67 fn. 87, p. 69 fn. 102, and p. 186 fn. 243; cf. p. 182). Minor typographical errors also do occur (pp. 23, 39, 145).

Such matters notwithstanding, *Origins: The Ancient Impact and Modern Implications of Genesis 1–11* by Paul Copan and Douglas Jacoby is a fine addition to the ever-increasing library of books concerning Genesis (history, literature, and theology). Its primary readers will likely be the invested laypersons, pastors, Christian leaders, and/or Bible College/Christian university students. One also hopes that this volume might be leveraged as an apologetics tool to help those looking for theistic viewpoints on Creation.

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