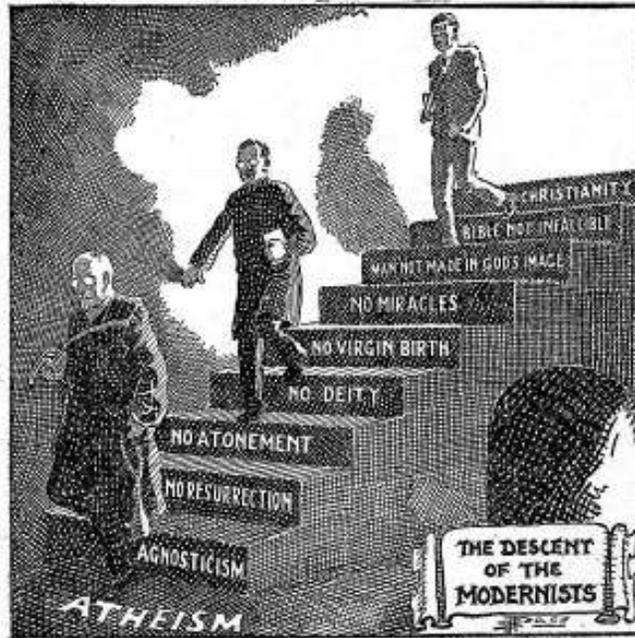


Reclaiming Genesis: Part I

By Greg Witherow

For more than two centuries Modernists¹ have assaulted the book of Genesis by questioning the historical merit of its contents. Seemingly supernatural events are relegated to myth, fable and the status of legend. Science demands it we are told. And the Mosaic authorship of Genesis is now out of vogue, having been usurped by a multi-author view. We are told these authors, separated by hundreds of years, allegedly made contradictory statements at times, allowing errors to slip into the sacred text. In the end we are left with fables and myths masquerading as history and mistake-prone authors unable to get their facts synchronized. Where the Holy Spirit is in all this we are not told. Such Modernists tales have seeped into nearly all of our Catholic institutions² and have reached the laity via the pulpit, catechesis, youth groups and commentaries. Is it any wonder that many Catholics grapple how to answer the question, “did the events in Genesis really happen?” or “did Adam and Eve really exist?” Science and theologians make us doubt. And if we doubt the miracles of Genesis, why should we trust the miracles of the Gospels? With our foundations eroded many sectors of the Church are eventually reduced to a Social Gospel of peace, justice and environmentalism. But the Church opposes such Modernist corruptions. The following is a review of the Magisterium’s³ teaching on Genesis, re-establishing its historical trustworthiness and infallible status.



¹ Modernism describes a broad body of theological views regarded as heretical by the Catholic Church, including the belief that the Church and Catholic dogma are merely human institutions that can change over time. Modernists do not believe in miracles or the infallibility of scripture, only natural explanations.

² There are probably fewer than 20 Catholic colleges in the U.S. faithful to the Magisterium. While there are faithful seminaries, many have proven to be cesspools of heresy. The post Vatican II priesthood did not prove to be a “bulwark of orthodoxy”. But with our younger priests the tide has begun to turn.

³ The Magisterium is the teaching authority of the Church. It is composed of the extraordinary (as opposed to ordinary) universal teachings of either the Pope (ex cathedra) or of the Bishops in union with the Pope.

Without Error And Real History

The book of Genesis, as is all scripture, is infallibly inspired and without error. Pope Benedict XV penned the encyclical *Spiritus Paraclitius* in 1920. In it he stated, “[The chair of Peter] also teaches that **Divine inspiration extends to every part of the Bible without the slightest exception**, and that no error can occur in the inspired text...those, too, who hold that the historical portions of scripture do not rest on the absolute truth of the facts but merely upon what they are pleased to term their relative truth, namely, what people commonly thought, are ... **out of harmony with the Church’s teaching**.”⁴

Additionally, the Church has decreed that the book of Genesis contains real historical events. It contains inspired accounts of history, not mere allegories. In 1909 a Pontifical Biblical Commission posed the following question and response:

“Question: Whether in particular **the literal and historical sense can be called into question**, where it is a matter of facts related in the same chapters (the early chapters of Genesis)...for example...the special creation of man; the formation of the first woman from the first man; the oneness of the human race...the transgression of the divine command through the devils persuasion under the guise of a serpent...?”

“Reply: **In the negative**”⁵

To reinforce the literal sense the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) states:

“According to an ancient tradition, one can distinguish between two *senses* of Scripture: **the literal and the spiritual**, the latter being subdivided into the allegorical, moral, and anagogical senses...the *literal* sense is the meaning conveyed by the words of Scripture and discovered by the exegesis, following the rules of sound interpretation: **‘All other senses of Sacred Scripture ARE BASED ON THE LITERAL**.”⁶

But literal interpretation of scripture means to understand the author’s intent. On this matter the CCC states, “In order to discover the sacred authors intention, the reader must take into account the conditions of their time and culture, **the literary genres** in use at the time, and the modes of feeling, speaking and narrating then current.”

To summarize, **every word** of scripture is inspired by the Holy Spirit and infallible. Genesis is not riddled with historical inaccuracies, nor did the sacred writers mistakenly (or deceptively) present myths or fables as historical events. The facts, properly understood are accurate and trustworthy. Additionally, the literal understanding of the text is foundational to our understanding of its message. Any spiritual sense is derived from the literal sense. The literal sense, properly understood, is the first sense.

⁴ *Spiritus Paraclitius* sections 21 and 22.

⁵ Denzinger *Sources of Catholic Dogma*; 2123. See also *Spiritus Paraclitius* section 22.

⁶ CCC 115 and 116.

The Literary Genre

But how does one take into account the literary genres?⁷ Let's look at an example. Suppose an author penned the following, "Mennonites are big hearted people." A future historian, taking into account the literary genre of the text, would conclude the following

1. The term "Mennonite people" is not allegorical nor are these people assigned to mythology or legend; these are actual people.
2. Furthermore, the Mennonites had a distinctive characteristic, having "big hearts", that distinguished them from others.

But what exactly is this characteristic? At this point our future exegete would need to carefully examine the phrase "big hearted people". Is this a scientific or poetic term? Finding the answer involves studying the context of the sentence, reviewing the work of past exegetes and understanding the literary genres of the time. A good exegete would conclude a historical people called the Mennonites were generous.

The Catholic Church stumbled over literary genre in its dispute with Galileo⁸. Much of the ancient Greek world held to a geocentric view of the universe, the theory that the earth was the center of the universe and that the Sun rotated around it. This theory seemed to dovetail with several passages from scripture. Psalm 93:1, Psalm 96:10 and 1 Chronicles 16:30 state, "the world is firmly established, it cannot be moved." Psalm 104:5 says, "[the LORD] set the earth on its foundations; it can never be moved." Ecclesiastes 1:5 states that "the sun rises and the sun sets, and hurries back to where it rises." But the poetic language in these passages was forced to say too much and the Church learned a hard lesson in a very public way. The exegete must be careful not to make the text say too much or too little. What the text says, its context, the literary genre employed and the Magisterium are all necessary to garner a proper understanding.

Out Of Step With The Magisterium

The Catholic Church struggles today to live up to her own dogmas in understanding the book of Genesis. Many of her theologians do not embrace Genesis as literal history. Instead legends, myths and fables are assumed to be the underpinnings of events found within Genesis, especially in the first eleven chapters. Such theories permeate many of the notes found in the New American Bible (NAB). The following is one such example.

Genesis chapter 6:4 records the following: "At that time the Nephilim appeared on earth (as well as later), after the **sons of heaven** had intercourse with the daughters of man, who bore them sons. They were the heroes of old, the men of renown." There is nothing wrong with the NAB translation of this passage. However, the footnote for this verse in the NAB reads,

⁷ Literary genres are classified into many types and sub-types, but for literature one usually starts with a division of prose and poetry. Other types of genres include epic, tragedy, comedy, novel and short stories.

⁸ The Church stumbled by not carefully living up to her own teaching, not by creating new false dogmas.

“This is apparently a fragment of an **old legend** that had **borrowed much from ancient mythology.**” The NAB footnotes go on to explain the “sons of heaven” are “**the celestial beings of mythology.**”

But the exegesis of this passage is in direct violation of the Pontifical Commission Report of 1909, the Catechism of the Catholic Church and other papal pronouncements on the literal sense of Genesis. How can mythology and legends be squared with “the literal and historical sense” the Magisterium has given Genesis? Secondly, the NAB footnotes referenced here display one-sided scholarship. Most Bible commentators believe the “sons of heaven” are the godly decedents of Seth, not celestial beings (believers being “sons of heaven”). But the Catholic reader is not given the option to choose an orthodox explanation. There are many other examples where notes in the NAB (as footnoted here⁹) undermine scripture. Unfortunately, the Modernist view permeates much of the NAB.

Reclaiming Genesis

Genesis is real history about real people. In Luke chapter 3 we are given a lineage of Christ. Starting with Jesus as the son of Joseph (“as it was supposed”) the lineage moves back in time. Eventually it moves deep into Genesis ending with, “the son of Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God”. Now Christ’s lineage is recorded for a number of reasons. One reason is to prove that Christ was a historical figure and truly a man. But if Adam and Eve are mythical characters representing mankind in the creation story, how useful is a mythical lineage in proving any historical point?¹⁰ If Hansel and Gretel, allegorical characters in a moral story, were listed as ancestors of Christ, would we not laugh? And would not such a reference destroy any point a lineage is trying to prove?

How do we avoid such errors? Today the answer is to stay close to the Magisterium and to be wary of the theologians. **It is the theologians who are gutting our Catholic institutions.** This fact is indisputable. But we need to drain the swamp and stop compromising our Faith. Imprimatur can be (and have been) revoked and therefore by definition are fallible¹¹. **Only the Magisterium is infallible.** In the 1960’s nearly every Catholic institution opposed Humane Vitae¹². But by ignoring the historical teaching of the Church and the Magisterium, namely the Pope, they were wrong. A lesson should be learned. Tradition, the Magisterium and scripture itself embraces the historical validity of Genesis, properly interpreted. And so should we.

⁹ The NAB notes devoid the historical merits of the Tower of Babel found in chapter 11. In explaining the dispersing of peoples by confusing the languages the NAB footnote states, “the secondary motive in the story is to present **an imaginative origin** of the diversity of the languages among the various peoples inhabiting the earth, as well as **an artificial explanation** of the name ‘Babylon’.” In another example, the NAB informs us the miracle of Moses parting the Red Sea didn’t actually happen. Instead the Israelites crossed over the **Sea of Reeds** that was “probably a body of shallow water somewhat to the north of the present deep Red Sea.” How did Pharaoh’s army drown in these shallow waters? The NAB is silent.

¹⁰ Darwinian evolution has no room for Adam and Eve. Therefore Modernist theologians have tried to relegate Adam and Eve to the status of allegory, fictional characters representing the first Men.

¹¹ An imprimatur can be revoked, if upon further examination, any doctrinal or moral error is found.

¹² Re-read my paper on Humane Vitae to see how nearly the entire Catholic hierarchy got it wrong.