

How To Read Genesis, by Tremper Longman III  
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Evangelical Christians lack no zeal in their love for Scripture, but they often lack a strategy for reading it with understanding. Believers frequently ignore the broad outlines of narrative and plot, focusing instead on “what this text means *to me*.” Interpretation is a suspect, and liberalizing, tendency that silences the Bible’s “literal” meaning. Tremper Longman’s *How to Read Genesis* — along with his similar volumes on Psalms and Proverbs — is a welcome and helpful corrective to these errors.

Longman begins with a robust argument for the necessity of having a comprehensive reading strategy. If we really care to understand Scripture, we must give thought to the literary, historical, and theological context of the Bible. Part Two addresses the basic literary questions: Who wrote this book? Why did they write it? Longman does a good job of addressing critical arguments about author and date in an accessible way. The next section puts Genesis in the literary context of other ancient creation and flood texts, illustrating its distinctive theology. In Part Four Longman brings all these elements together to give an overview of the book. This mini-commentary provides a helpful framework for understanding how the episodes we know so well fit into a broader story. Longman concludes by showing how New Testament readers rightly saw God’s promise of Christ in Genesis, even if Moses or his audience may not have fully grasped this divine intent.

Longman deserves praise giving laymen the tools to more thoughtfully engagement the Bible. Genesis is first and foremost as “God’s story,” and we must understand it on its own terms before seeking a personalized meaning.

If Longman succeeds in correcting common evangelical errors of interpretive method, it isn’t clear that he does so well in improving upon evangelical theology. In Genesis, “God pursues human beings with his grace,” and the patriarchs respond by embarking on a “rocky journey of faith.” In Longman’s Genesis, there is much Gospel and little Law. Even God’s judgment is portrayed as gracious, as at Babel. The line between the godly and ungodly line of men is a blurry one, as when we are told of Esau’s offspring that “God cares for these people even though they aren’t directly related to his redemptive strategy begun with Abraham.” Sin

gets short shrift. It's more of a bad day in our faith journey than an incalculable offense against the holiness and glory of God.

This weakness could have been corrected had Longman been truer to his own principles when it came to reading Genesis in its biblical context. Israel in the wilderness is after all the original audience. The redemptive story of Exodus and [failed] Conquest necessarily puts a finer point on the particularity of God's grace, and this particularity is not very flattering. Yes, those not directly related to God's Abrahamic redemptive strategy are invited to join, but in the ordinary course of events they are directly opposed to it and pay the price. The wilderness experience is not so much a journey of fidelity as infidelity. Israel's sin is, if possible, worse than that of the Egyptians. Genesis reminds them that they sold themselves into bondage in the first place, the bondage to which they yearn to return. It is this degree of depravity that God overcomes, dealing with sin by pouring out his wrath, first on Egypt, then on Israel herself, finally on a sacrificial substitute.

The message of Genesis is not that God will always be there — waiting for us, smiling — if we persevere on our faith journey. It is that God has saved us from our sin, despite our sin.