

Book Review

Brian Bull and Fritz Guy.

***God, Sky, and Land: Genesis 1 as the Ancient Hebrews Heard It.* Roseville: Adventist Forum, 2011. 190 pp.**

***God, Land, and the Great Flood: Hearing the Story with 21st-Century Christian Ears.* Roseville: Adventist Forum, 2017. 211 pp.**

***God, Genesis, and Good News: God, the Misreading of Genesis, and the Surprisingly Good News.* Roseville: Adventist Forum, 2019. 201 pp.**

These three volumes, published by the Adventist Forum over eight years, tackle one of the core issues in Adventism: creation, and beyond that, how the Genesis 1–11 origin narratives could, and should, be read in the context of our current “Gutenbergian” and post-Hubble worldview, now relying heavily on our literacy and understanding of science. That such books are needed is no news at all: many other evangelical and “Bible-believing” Christians – if not necessarily their denominations – have been addressing the science versus literal 6-day creation interface for decades, with names of international fame, such as the scientist-theologian John Polkinghorne, and Keith Ward, the former Regius Professor of Divinity in Oxford, entering the fray. The debate has come to the consciousness of the general, particularly English-speaking, public more forcefully of late, due to the very public face of the neo-atheism debate, spearheaded by Richard Dawkins *et al.* While a number of publications have recently come out in support of the official Seventh-day Adventist Fundamental Belief number 6 (“a recent 6-day creation...”) the arguments mooted have only skirted around, or dealt pre-emptive apologetical deathblows at, the questions raised in this “Genesis trilogy”. Consequently, what is so different, rare – and yes, also controversial – here is that the elephant in the room is now addressed full on. Thus, how can the Genesis accounts of creation, the world-wide flood, and other “origins” of our world be read within our today’s “scientific” understanding of the universe?

The authors Fritz Guy and Brian Bull represent some of the best and most learned minds in Adventism: the former as a leading Adventist scholar in various fields of theology and philosophy, the latter as an eminent Loma Linda scientist. And the beauty of this book is that it arises from a commitment to the Church and its responsibility to biblical truth and has nothing to do with the denouncing “memoirs of bitterness” genre occasioned by some who have decided to part company with the denomination. Central to the method they use in all three books is the recognition that while divinely inspired, the language, imagery, and worldview that the biblical authors employed, in this case mainly in the Genesis origin stories, and particularly the Creation and Flood accounts, were those of the narratives’ first, ancient Hebrew audience and thus need to be “retro-translated” for our 21st-century reader. This is crucial, the authors emphasise, as the Bible has abiding relevance and authority for all humanity in all ages and needs to remain accessible to all.

This concept, and the accompanying application, of the method of retro-translation is perhaps the most novel and valuable contribution of the trilogy. It aims to help today’s Bible reader to appreciate, as well as to bridge, the many conceptual and linguistic chasms that the intervening millennia and our removal from the ancient Near-Eastern context have generated between us and the biblical world and the first hearers (rather than readers) of these stories. According to Fritz Guy and Brian Bull many of these conceptual gaps arise not simply from our stances on the biblical language as either “literal” or “figurative”, but from the different explanatory concepts, which we, and humans in all times and cultures, have used to assign causality or agency to events around us. For this purpose, the authors have minted the term “explanaccept” (explanatory concepts). Accordingly, the ancient Hebrews had two such “explanaccepts”: Agency was always either human or divine. We, post the scientific revolution, have added two more, the first of which is “nature”. This includes everything where our scientific world view influences the way we explain things, be it in conformity with the laws of nature, or simply our understanding of human biology. Thus, for instance, while the ancient Hebrews (and many other people) understood pregnancy, or the absence of it, in terms of God either “opening” or “closing” the womb, we resort to our understanding of human fertility. Or where in the Bible natural disasters, such as earthquakes, are seen as direct acts of God who is “shaking the mountains”, we scrutinise seismographs. Secondly, we have added the “explanaccept” of

“chance” for the things we really cannot explain, at least not yet, such as the roll of the dice. This, again the ancient Hebrews, seeing God in charge of even what to us seem like the most random of events, were able to use to divine God’s will, as in casting of lots.

This method of retro-reading and the accompanying tool of “explanacepts” is abundantly illustrated through all the three volumes, as the reader is provided with an insightful and illuminating journey to tease out the meaning of key words and concepts in aid of showing how the original audience would have heard the narratives in question (as the orality of the origin of the compositions is affirmed) and what they would translate to today. This exploration brings many and surprising insights into things we have probably always taken for granted. Particularly innovative here is the suggestion that the concept of “miracle” could only exist once the “explanacept” of “nature” had been conceived: Thus the ancient Hebrew knew no miracles – just divine agency!

More specifically, the first volume in the series, *God, Land, and the Great Flood*, scrutinises key Hebrew words, such as *’eretz*, argued to mean “land” rather than “earth”, *raqia’*, translated as “vault”, and *shamayim*, “sky”, rather than “heaven(s)”. In support, the “globe-less” ancient view of the world is imagined at some depth and the wording of many English translations explained in terms of how they reflect the expanding view of the universe post the scientific revolution, when the translations were made and the concept of “planet earth” had come to be. And no topic is out of bounds, be it billions of years versus only 6,000.

The second volume *God, Land, and the Great Flood*, further elucidates this “globe-less” view of the world, but also addresses the apparent inconsistencies and duplications in the Flood narrative of Genesis 6–9, such as the numbers of animals admitted to the ark and the number of the days of rain, as well as the use of the two names for God, YHWH and Elohim. This volume also expands to include material from other ancient Near-Eastern flood narratives for comparison. The intriguing and much debated “sons of God” and Nephilim of Genesis 6:1–4 also get a look-in.

While the two first volumes consistently ask what these narratives meant for their first audience, an important part of the exercise of retro-translation is also asking what they could “not possibly have meant” to them, as this tends

to make the best point of comparison for our, as opposed to their, understanding of the events. Thus, the third and final volume, *God, Genesis, and Good News*, dwells longer on exemplifying the close reading of Genesis 1–11, and on the scientific side the development of our heliocentric cosmology. Besides, issues such as the growth of the biblical tradition from its first tellings to the written canons we now have in the Old and the New Testaments is also outlined.

One of the main strengths of this trilogy is its immense readability, meant to be accessible – and enjoyable – to a general Bible-espousing readership, but particularly to our own Adventist membership, well-versed and deeply invested in the Genesis 1–11 origin stories and their momentous theological significance. Hence much discussion is also dedicated to the theological and spiritual implications of this new kind of reading of the narratives: That they were originally composed for others does not mean that they were not meant for us or that they do not speak to us! Quite the opposite, and one of the salient lessons of these volumes is the fact that we should look beyond the controversies over the lengths of days or depths of water to the God in charge of not only these events but of our salvation.

While the trilogy is not intended for specialists in biblical studies or sciences, it is clear that the volumes are well researched, both from biblical and scientific points of view. Neither do Fritz Guy and Brian Bull have an overly optimistic, naïve view of what science can provide, but its limits also come under scrutiny. They also include some, but not excessive, footnoting and bibliography, as well as indices, for those wanting to pursue the matters further. From a purely biblical scholarship's point of view there are of course some inevitable generalizations, perhaps most obviously in the discussion of the duplications and inconsistencies of the Flood narratives and the outline of the canonization of the Bible in *God, Land, and the Great Flood*. But this is an acceptable, and inevitable, norm in the fairly recent genre of "popular science", here pursued with an emphasis on biblical scholarship. Some cosmetic blemishes also occur, mainly with the transliteration of Hebrew, where two systems are used (e.g., with the vocal Shewa) and the Tetragrammaton, i.e., YHWH, God's "personal" name. But none of these undermine the value of the books.

Many significant theological questions inevitably arise from this innovative reading of texts we thought we knew so well. First and foremost of these questions is inspiration. This is thoughtfully and extensively addressed by the authors in harmony with the quintessentially Adventist concept of thought inspiration, eminently articulated by Ellen White herself. Although inevitably most readers of this trilogy will have their interpretational comfort zone impinged in one way or another, Fritz Guy and Brian Bull approach their subject matter reverently, fully aware of the significance of the issues raised. Neither do they attempt to be the “final word” on any subject or provide off-the-shelf easy answers to matters that have vexed scholars for centuries. Rather, the reader is invited on a journey of discovery into the riches of the Bible, for which this is only the start. While the three volumes are self-standing, for the best reading experience they should all be read, and in order. And this, I feel, I can recommend.

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