



STATEMENT DG-235

NEWS WATCH

Moyers Hears Many Voices on Genesis

by Doug LeBlanc

Merely by introducing them to TV audiences, Bill Moyers boosted the celebrity status of Robert Bly, Huston Smith, and the late Joseph Campbell. Moyers may now do the same service for Adam, Eve, Noah, and Abraham while he transforms the Book of Genesis into a multimedia event. As a forum for religious truth, however, some Christian observers contend Moyers's series is about as helpful as the Tower of Babel.

Moyers's 10-part discussion series, *Genesis: A Living Conversation*, premiered on the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) in October 1996. This series had its own genesis when Moyers read about a monthly Genesis seminar conducted by Rabbi Burton Visotzky in *The New York Times*. Moyers visited the seminar, found a spirited discussion, and "came away resolved then and there to test whether the communal reading of these stories could happen on television."

"The Visotzky seminar was too large for the small screen to treat kindly, even if the participants had been willing to surrender the intimacy of that room to an unseen audience of millions," Moyers writes in the 361-page companion book to his PBS series. "For our PBS series, my colleagues and I settled on a circle of eight people for each program, including Rabbi Visotzky." The people chosen for each discussion varied somewhat from week to week.

Participants included not only believers in the monotheistic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, but also agnostics, a Buddhist, a Hindu, and some who admit to neglecting Genesis for many years, but reading it again for the discussion. Moyers invited only a few evangelicals — pastors Roberta Hestenes (former president of Eastern College) and Eugene Rivers, and Fuller Seminary professors Lewis Smedes and Marianne Meye Thompson.

Moyers and PBS encouraged his "audience of millions" to form their own Genesis discussion groups. Doubleday has published not only the companion book but also 100,000 copies of a study guide, which 50 "outreach partners" were to distribute as they helped organize local discussions modeled on the Moyers discussions.

Everybody's a Critic. Moyers and some members of his chosen circles offered disturbing remarks about Genesis. For example:

Former Roman Catholic nun Karen Armstrong on the worldwide flood — "In Hinduism, they say that evil is one of the masks of God. I'm sorry to say it, but I think that here you see God behaving in an evil way."

Gnostic scholar Elaine Pagels — "What strikes me is that God warns that on the very day you eat of this fruit, 'you shall surely die.' But the serpent speaks more accurately, saying, 'You will *not* die' — and, of course, they do not."

Feminist seminary professor Phyllis Trible and Moyers on God's "cruelty" — "The cruelty of God is something from which the Bible does not flinch," says Trible, "whether it's Genesis or Job or Jeremiah..." Moyers

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then interrupts Tribble, "or Jesus, where God actually put His son on the cross to bleed in agony for other people. This is a God Who would save us by doing that to a human being?"

While welcoming the opportunities created by the series for discussing the important themes of Genesis, Christian scholars are concerned with the postmodernist and relativist interpretations that dominate the series.

"The series is geared to focus more on audience response, not on what the text actually says," states Marvin Wilson, professor of biblical and theological studies at Gordon College. "What I sensed in some of the programs was that God was on trial, rather than human beings going on trial."

Douglas Groothuis, associate professor of the philosophy of religion and ethics at Denver Seminary, expresses similar concerns: "Given American subjectivism and relativism and anti-intellectualism, many will simply use Genesis as a way to express their own preconceived notions, thus making it a wax nose to be twisted any way they desire. This is the postmodernist tendency in dealing with any texts."

"The unstated assumption of the entire discussion is that Genesis is mere mythology, a collection of human stories that reflect and illuminate the life stories of the human beings who wrote them, and who hear and read them," says Rebecca Groot-huis, author of *Good News for Women*. "God is thus a rather humanlike character in the story, a figment of human imagination. At the end of the discussion on the creation account, Roberta Hestenes (the lone evangelical in that conversation) attempts to correct this fundamental flaw. She says, 'This is more than storytelling around the campfire. This is God's self-disclosing to the human race.' But no one gets her point; they seem unable even to think in such terms. The dubious premise of the entire conversation remains undisputed and undiscussed to the end."

"It is certainly fair for people outside of the Judeo-Christian traditions/faiths to participate in a discussion of the meaning of Genesis. But it does not seem fair for them to manipulate the text in a way to change its meaning to conform with their belief system," says Stephen Moshier, associate professor of geology at Wheaton College.

"Modern pagans seem to relate to the symbolism in the Genesis text but do not realize that it is there to refute pagan ideas."

"Writing a New Story." Moyers repeatedly describes his series as an effort to have a "committed but civil" discussion about religion: "At this moment between two centuries, as one millennium gives way to another, we Americans need a new story about what it means to be a nation, about our identity as a people. How are we to write this new story for ourselves unless we learn to talk about our deepest religious beliefs with people not like us?"

Only time will tell whether Moyers can achieve such broad cultural goals, or whether Genesis will simply enjoy its "15 minutes of fame" alongside such heroes of syncretism as Joseph Campbell and Huston Smith.

Douglas Groothuis, for one, has low expectations for Moyers's project. "American culture is developing an uncanny ability to trivialize the paramount and turn matters of eternal verity into trends. The Genesis craze will probably follow that pattern overall," he says. Nevertheless, "some people may begin to read the text with the intent of discerning its objective meaning. If so, they may hear the voice of God speak."

"The discussion of Genesis has been a long-lasting phenomenon, as evidenced by, for better or for worse, the impact of the creation science movement in our culture," Moshier states. "Perhaps the positive impact of the Moyers programs will be an awareness within and beyond the church that Genesis is about more important things than how old the earth is and how Noah might have fit dinosaurs on the ark. It is a substantial document that reflects divine wisdom about God, humanity, and nature."

Michael J. Behe, associate professor of biochemistry at Lehigh University and author of the recent book, *Darwin's Black Box*, believes the text of Genesis withstands easy distortion. "Certainly there is the danger that people could be misled, by those who call themselves Christians, as well as by non-Christians," Behe says. "Still, the orthodox understanding of the Bible has had to contend with heterodoxy for thousands of years, and it has always survived and prospered. Given a chance to explain itself, the orthodox Christian understanding of Genesis will continue to attract large numbers of people to itself."

"Genesis goes to the core of who we are, how we got here, and what the purpose of the world is," continues Behe. "Especially when it is regarded poetically, as I think it should be, it provides abundant nourishment to the moral and

religious senses of humanity. Without that nourishment our human nature starves. I am encouraged whenever public discussion turns to eternal things, especially in a Judeo-Christian context. Simply focusing people's attention on God's word is a step in the right direction."

"The public seems to have lost faith in political solutions, and is turning to spiritual issues," says Phillip Johnson, a law professor who wrote *Darwin on Trial*. "Moyers will always put these issues in a relativistic or syncretistic framework, because that's what the contemporary intellectual culture wants. The interest in Genesis and other religious topics is genuine, and not just a fad, but it won't go anywhere as long as it is approached strictly in humanistic terms. People have to want God in reality, not just some spiritual experience. God does divide people, because they have to choose between God's ways and their own."

Hestenes adds about the discussions in Moyers's programs: "The conversation was a classical postmodern approach, with a sense of we morally superior beings sitting in judgment of the text, and even sitting in judgment of God. I believe we must be prepared for the text to judge us."

Still, Hestenes is pleased that she joined the conversations. "I have always believed that the Holy Spirit is present when people study Scripture together. I do believe the Isaiah passage about Scripture not returning void, and about God knowing the heart," she said. "I have such confidence in God's own work that a conversation allowing other voices does not diminish my own faith. We complain about being marginalized, but sometimes we do that to ourselves, if we won't be a witness in the middle of our culture."