Reading Genesis

Ten Methods

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Introduction

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This book attempts to do something new and old in biblical interpretation. The new involves three moves: (1) charting methods of reading Genesis that have become vital in recent years, including literary criticism, cultural memory, the history of sexuality, and inner-biblical interpretation; (2) renewing the practice of several older methods that retain their vitality, including source criticism and theology; and (3) expanding the horizons of the study of Genesis to encompass the reception and transformation of Genesis in Western culture, including rabbinc and patristic interpretation, translation, and modern literature. The family of methods presented in this book focuses on ways of reading Genesis and on ways of reading influential past readings of Genesis. To put it differently, we are engaged in studying a text and its effects in Western culture. This combination of perspectives is relatively new in biblical studies and represents a proposal about how Genesis can be read (and reread) in the university and the modern world.

At the same time, this book is a throwback to an older era — let us call it a pre-postmodern era — when texts were believed to have meanings and when it was the task of the interpreter to discuss those meanings with intelligence and insight. Each contributor to this volume practices what Nietzsche called "the incomparable art of reading well," which involves a commitment to the notion that texts and their interpretations are worth grappling with in our work and lives. This theoretical empiricism, which can have many flavors and intensities, necessarily includes an appreciation of the interdependence of various approaches to the text — including the historical, literary, philosophical, anthropological, and theological. It involves a pragmatic openness.

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modern interpretive practices without our necessarily being aware of perpetuating them.

In Chapter 8, "Translation," Naomi Seidman addresses a method that rarely receives attention but has important consequences. As she observes, most readers over the millennia have only known the Bible through translation. There are many dimensions to translation: it entails loss of the original, but it is also transformative because it creates new meanings — and new converts. The distinction between original and translation is complicated because some "original" readings are only preserved in translation (e.g., in the Greek Septuagint) and the Hebrew text of Genesis is sometimes distorted by scribal error. Seidman shows that Christian and Jewish theories of translation — and modern versions by Kafka, Derrida, and others — are often based on Genesis stories, most memorably the Tower of Babel story, in which God translates the original language into mutually conflicting local languages. In Seidman's treatment, translation — which involves languages and cultures — illuminates deep features in the life and afterlife of Genesis.

Ilana Pardes explores what she aptly calls "literary exegesis" in Chapter 9, "Modern Literature." Novelists, poets, and writers of all kinds have interpreted the stories of Genesis by fashioning them through literary imagination. In her primary example, Melville's Moby-Dick, she shows how Melville — through his narrator, a whaler by the name of Ishmael — presents a new Bible and a reinvented Genesis for the new American world. A series of "wild Ishmaels" populates the story and negotiate the dangers of the watery wilderness, inverting the desert locale of Ishmael in Genesis 16 and 21. Melville imagined these Ishmaels as virtuous outcasts, whereas the "chosen one" is an Ahabs, not an Isaac. The clash of characters and fates favors the rough Ishmael, who alone survives when he is rescued by a whaling ship named Rachel, who cries for her lost children as she grants our narrator new life. Pardes traces the transformations of Ishmael — and Melville's biblical interpretations — as complex, politically charged, and attuned to the complicated subtexts of Genesis.

John J. Collins expertly treats the last of our family of methods, "Modern Theology," in Chapter 10. He explores what it means to read Genesis theologically in the modern world, exposing the possibilities and pitfalls of this method. Focused on the harrowing narrative of "The Binding of Isaac" in Genesis 22, he offers penetrating critiques of influential modern theological readings by Gerhard von Rad, Brevard Childs, Jon Levinson, and others. Collins observes that theological interpretations tend to adopt an apologetic stance toward the Bible and shirk the ethical problem at the heart of the story.

In his call for a critical biblical theology, he makes a compelling case for theological readings that offer reasoned ethical engagement with the text rather than a pious defense of it. Collins's lucid treatment — both a critique and a program for theological method — demonstrates the continuing vitality of theological inquiry into the ethical implications of Genesis.

My hope is that these chapters find receptive readers. They offer a panoramic model of biblical studies as a truly interdisciplinary field, in which each method complements and complicates the others. As I have noted, the idea that methodological pluralism is desirable — or even possible — is contested in contemporary biblical scholarship. At a conference on Genesis a few years ago, an eminent biblical scholar cautioned me against such pluralism. "When you open one door," he warned, "you close another." This book is testimony to the possibility of opening multiple doors, with the aim of a multilayered understanding of Genesis and its legacy. Each door in this book opens a new vista that enables one to open the other doors with new perspectives and opened eyes.

A note on transliteration. We have adopted a simplified system, in which each Hebrew letter is represented by a single symbol (') or English letter (including h, s, z, and l). Vowel length is not indicated. The exception to the latter rule is vocal ש, which is indicated by a raised ə. Hebraists do not need a more elaborate system and non-specialists need not be burdened by supererogatory notations (which are, in any case, linguistically questionable because they mix the phonology of different periods of Biblical Hebrew and its reading traditions).

A note on the cover art. The iconic Lucas Cranach painting of the Garden of Eden was chosen by the marketing department for the cover art, perhaps with the hope that the famous naked couple would catch the eye. I now see that the image, in a subtle way, expresses several themes of this volume. The forbidden fruit, which Eve nonchalantly gives to the puzzled Adam, is an apple. However, in Genesis the fruit is more esoteric — it is "knowledge of good and evil" fruit, which only grows on one tree in the middle of the Garden of Eden. This fruit cannot be found in any grocery store or fruit stand. But artists need an image to paint, and readers need a fruit to imagine, so a species was inferred from a close reading of the story — in the Latin translation (which was originally a translation of the Greek translation of the Hebrew). In Latin, "knowing good and evil" is "scientes bonum et malum." Malum, "evil,"
