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Mark W. Hamilton
mark.hamilton@acu.edu

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Who Has Seen the Like?

A Reading Guide to the Book of Genesis

MARK W. HAMILTON

John Chrysostom once preached a series of Lenten sermons on Genesis, in which he invited his Antiochene congregation to experience the wonders of the God whom the book revealed. Commenting on the book's opening line, he says,

“Notice how the divine nature shines out of the very manner of creation, how he executes his creation in a way contrary to human procedures, first stretching out the heavens and then laying out the earth beneath, first the roof and then the foundations—who has ever seen the like?” (*Homily 2 on Genesis*)

Readers of Genesis have long shared the sense of awe that Chrysostom sought to cultivate in his hearers, even if we do not share his reading strategies, conclusions, or biases in every detail.

The wonder of the book arises in part from its theological focus on the superstructure of creation and the salvation of the people of Israel, a connection that lies deep in Israel's faith (see, e.g., Psalm 8 or 104, Isaiah 40-55). But this theology takes place within a literary masterpiece. Juxtaposing stories, poems, genealogies, and other lists, Genesis rises above the particular to cast a long view at the whole of human life by employing the understated style of biblical narrative, in which the motives of characters elude us or become clear only through their actions.

Chapters 1-11, the “primeval history,” interweave ancient stories of creation, fall, giants, the flood, and the organization of human cultures to set the stage for the core of the book (and foundation of the Pentateuch), in which a family grows into a nation. Chapters 12-50, the “patriarchal history,” explore the lives of this family, acknowledging their brushes with moral disaster but expressing confidence in the faithfulness of God to the chosen people.

Preachers joining Chrysostom in the task of exposing the marvels of the book should consult several types of works, all of which help explore the multiple contexts out of which Genesis arose and in which it continues to function. These books include commentaries, works on history and archaeology, studies of the history of interpretation, theology, and preaching.

COMMENTARIES

Given its centrality in the biblical canon, it is no surprise that Genesis has attracted a multitude of skilled commentators. Still the most literarily sensitive commentary on the book is that of Gerhard von Rad (*Genesis* [Old Testament Library; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1971]). Von Rad combines form critical insight into the small units of the book with an extraordinary eye for the telling detail. His sense of the subtlety of the book, its literary complexity, and its refined depictions of its lead characters remain unsurpassed. Written in a graceful style, the commentary will orient the preacher to the basic flow of the book and crucial problems arising from its construction out of disparate pieces into an integrated work (Von Rad accepts the results of older source criticism but examines how the small pieces contribute to the theological

architecture of the book as a whole). Although his theological concerns are those of mid-twentieth-century German Protestantism, the commentary has retained its value.

Von Rad's student Claus Westermann wrote the most comprehensive commentary of the book in recent decades (*Genesis* [3 vols.; Minneapolis: Augsburg/Fortress, 1984-86]). A thoroughgoing form critic, Westermann also examines ancient Near Eastern parallels when they shed light on the text. For each pericope, he traces the history of interpretation, identifies the genre (form), examines difficult passages and ideas, and explores the "purpose and thrust." This last item usefully provides theological insight into the ongoing significance of the text in Christian circles.

Another helpful part of Westermann's work is his attention to how small units contribute to larger units. For example, in considering the formation of the Abraham story in Genesis 12-25, he discerns an overall plan that constructs the character of the patriarch as a recipient of the enigmatic promises of God. The unfolding of the promise moves the story forward. Next to von Rad's older commentary, Westermann's massive work is perhaps the definitive Genesis commentary in print today.

Gordon J. Wenham, meanwhile, has written a more modest, but eminently readable and well researched *Genesis* in the Word Biblical Commentary (2 vols.; Waco and Dallas: Word, 1987, 1994). More cautious in his acceptance of multiple sources than either Westermann or von Rad, he nevertheless recognizes discrete layers in the book, which are, however, fashioned into an integrated whole.

Wenham notes that for the patriarchal stories, themes are repeated, showing careful integration of the stories, which "were written to shed mutual light on each other" (1:257). For each unit, Wenham follows the WBC format: bibliography, translation, textual notes, form/structure/setting, comment, and (theological) explanation. This clear arrangement has the merit of allowing readers to enter the commentary at different points based on their training and interests. Although Wenham occasionally grinds evangelical axes a little too much, his work will serve the industrious student well.

Nahum Sarna's *Genesis* (JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989) offers a Hebrew text and a fresh translation as well as notes on linguistic problems and other features of the text. Detailed introductions to each unit of the text are suggestive, as are the 30 excurses concluding the volume and covering historical, ethnographic, linguistic, archaeological, and history of religions issues such as circumcision, difficult names, and the ancient Near Eastern connections to the life of the patriarchs, among others. Writing from a learned Jewish perspective, Sarna offers Christian readers a glimpse at the rich interpretive life of that community with which we share a common Bible.

The most recent commentary available in English is from David W. Cotter, O.S.B., *Genesis* (Berit Olam; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2003). A Benedictine monk and biblical scholar, Cotter pays close attention to the structure of each of the biblical stories and the larger units growing out of them. Historical and critical issues receive minimal attention, with Cotter preferring to think of the book as the work of a single author (rather than an editor) who freely used earlier sources. However, the preacher using the volume will gain a sense of the literary shape and flow of Genesis and a detailed knowledge of intertextual links in the book. Cotter's faith in the theological relevance of the book will encourage the preacher's own reflection.

Preachers joining [John] Chrysostom in the task of exposing the marvels of the book should consult several types of works, all of which help explore the multiple contexts out of which Genesis arose and in which it continues to function.

The most important commentary from Churches of Christ is John T. Willis, *Genesis* (Austin: Sweet, 1979). Less technical than some of the others in this list, Willis's volume nevertheless offers a very clear and wide-ranging introduction to the major historical issues and a helpful commentary on each pericope. His well-known religious commitments shine through on every page, as well. Many readers will find his moderate conservatism a helpful bridge to more critical biblical scholarship.

HISTORICAL WORKS

Although some biblical scholars and preachers seek to do literary work absent historical concerns, it is unlikely that such an approach will ultimately prove satisfactory. Helpful historical works to consult include Alfred Hoerth, Gerald L. Mattingly, and Edwin Yamauchi, eds., *Peoples of the Old Testament World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994). Competent historical surveys by experts on each topic (most of whom are also evangelicals) examine the Sumerians, Babylonians, Assyrians, Persians, Hittites, Canaanites and Amorites, Phoenicians, Arameans, Philistines, Egyptians, Ammonites, Moabites, and Edomites. Well-chosen photographs, a map, and time lines enhance the book. Since Genesis sets the Israelite story in a regional context and contains ethnographic data sometimes central to the meaning of the text (such as oath-making practices, or the nature of Egyptian politics), the preacher will benefit from the articles in this book.

Philip J. King and Lawrence Stager have written *Life in Biblical Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), a volume that moves from the small (family) to the large (government), and from the mundane (food production) to the sublime (art and religion). Chapter 1 argues for the importance of the history of the ordinary. Chapter 2 describes family life in ancient Israel, moving from architecture to what we know about family structure, childhood, marriage, old age, crime and punishment within families, and even health care.

Chapter 3 explores "The Means of Existence," that is, agricultural practices, water supplies, arts and crafts, and travel and trade. Chapter 4 offers a Weberian model for understanding Israel as a patrimonial kingdom (in which the king is paterfamilias and power and status follow kinship lines), discussing along the way geopolitics and warfare.

Chapter 5 explores what the authors call "the expressive life," namely dress and adornments, music, song, and dance, and writing and education. Chapter 6, finally, examines the artifacts of religious life such as altars and cult stands, as well as such practices as the *marzeah* and the cult of the dead. At total of 228 illustrations, many in color, enrich the book. While King and Stager focus on Israel under the monarchy, much of their material also sheds light on Genesis and the so-called age of the patriarchs, because basic life patterns change more slowly than political structures.

Because texts that evoke social worlds are not truly self-contained, the student of Genesis will want to learn more about the life ways and beliefs of the ancient Israelites who passed along the stories of their ancestors. These works will help such a study.

HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION

But, of course, history is not enough. Because modern Christians stand in a long tradition of interpreters of Scripture, it is instructive to ask how previous generations read these same texts. James Kugel, in *The Bible as It Was* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), traces the early Jewish and Christian retellings of the stories of Genesis (and the rest of the Pentateuch). Ancient interpreters, thinking of Scripture as God's flawless book designed to form readers spiritually, held up the biblical figures as moral exemplars (the patriarchs became prophets for example), even when such a reading stretched the plain meaning of the text to a breaking point. Yet their readings are often brilliantly insightful and remain influential.

Mark Sheridan's volume on *Genesis 12-50* (Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture 2; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2002), like other volumes in its series, offers an anthology of paragraph-length quotations from ancient church leaders' sermons, commentaries, letters and other forms written between the third and seventh centuries. Such an anthology can never substitute for sustained reading of the

ancient fathers' texts, and the emphasis on these authors' piety leads to an obscuring of their real flaws and biases—and indeed, the irrelevance of some of their ideas to contemporary church life. However, on the whole, the recovery of the theological and spiritual insights of these ancient readers of Genesis can enlighten and inform (post-)modern readers.

The commentary concludes with brief biographical sketches of the authors excerpted, a geographically arranged timeline of their lives, and a copious bibliography. Occasionally, preachers will find here quotations or ideas directly transferable to their sermons, but more often the influence will be subtler and more a matter of reorientation to a spiritual reading of the text.

A fascinating and enjoyable work is Gary Anderson, *Genesis of Perfection: Adam and Eve in Jewish and Christian Imagination* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), which traces the history of the interpretation of Genesis 2-3 through early Jewish and Christian texts and art. As a possible antidote to an exaggerated notion of the importance of the so-called fall, which is not truly a biblical concept, this text shows how complex were the theological recastings of the Adam and Eve story. Anderson focuses especially on the multiple portrayals of Eve, liberating the text from both modern political agendas and the misogyny to which they are reacting. Many colored prints of Christian and Jewish art grace the book.

Learning more about alternative (especially premodern) approaches to biblical interpretation, often deeply rooted in the life of faith, raises the possibility for preachers that a range of methods and concerns may legitimately be employed. While naïve appropriation of the ancients will fail to satisfy thinking Christians, a critical engagement with their work can stimulate new thoughts.

THEOLOGY

And if the provoking of new thought is the aim of study, two books by Jon Levenson will fit the bill. *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988) investigates biblical stories of creation, including those in Genesis, with particular attention to how these texts recognize the constant threat of chaos and thus the abiding need for divine activity. Those seeking to read Genesis on its own terms instead of those set by the religion-science debates of the nineteenth century will learn much from this book.

Meanwhile, Levenson's *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993) takes its cue from Genesis 22, the story of the binding of Isaac, and explores how this story has stimulated theological reflection in Jewish and Christian (where it became tied to the Passion narrative) traditions. Levenson's skill as a historian and Jewish theologian who is sympathetic to traditional Christianity and its concerns shines through here. Although it is difficult to choose just a few books on the theology of Genesis, these two will prove stimulating.

In a world of theological ferment, two further works deserve attention. Phyllis Trible's classic *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) examines four Old Testament stories of violated women, two in Genesis (Hagar and Tamar) and shows how such stories compel us to confront our own misogyny. *The Feminist Companion to the Bible* includes a volume on Genesis edited by Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998) that explores the depiction of gender both in Genesis itself and in its later reinterpretations. Although the book moves readers out of their comfort zones, it raises important questions we should ask.

PREACHING

Moving from biblical theology to preaching always challenges us, especially as we try to understand the texts as witnesses to the work of the Triune God. Although Genesis stands on its own theologically and need not be read mechanically through a New Testament lens (as argued for in an otherwise helpful book by Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Preaching from the Old Testament* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1989]),

the temptation to psychologizing readings can only be avoided by hewing resolutely to a theological-line preaching.

Sidney Greidanus's work *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) offers several options for doing just this. Other options will be found in the sermons in Fredrick C. Holmgren and Herman Schaalman, eds., *Preaching Biblical Texts: Expositions by Jewish and Christian Scholars* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995). While homiletics is a discipline in its infancy, much promising work along these lines is emerging.

CONCLUSION

The serious student of Genesis will learn to read the text at multiple levels, eventually allowing the alternative world it creates (as all biblical texts do) to reshape him or her into a new person. Commentaries, histories of the world behind the text and the worlds through which the text operated, and theological treatises—to say nothing of books on preaching—will help the preacher or serious reader of the book gain valuable perspective on the theological virtuosity of the book of Genesis.

As a kind of anchor to the biblical canon, Genesis explores the place between individuality and culture where we encounter God. Who has seen the like?

MARK W. HAMILTON

Dr. Hamilton teaches Old Testament at Abilene Christian University, Abilene, Texas.

