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CHAPTER 1

What Is a "Theology of Genesis"?

The book of Genesis contains some of the most memorable and moving narratives within the Old Testament, which have engaged the hearts and minds of (quite literally) millions of people down the ages. Neither Jewish nor Christian faiths – nor, more distantly, Islam – can be understood without some appreciation of the enduring impact of the Book of Genesis. Likewise, much of the literature and art of Western civilization, at least until recent times, is deeply imbued with motifs and images from Genesis.

In Genesis, God creates a world, which is the object of his approval, indeed delight ("very good"). Yet Eve and Adam listen to the serpent in Eden and eat the forbidden fruit, hide from God, and are expelled from Eden. Cain resents God's preferential acceptance of Abel's sacrifice, ignores God's warning, murders Abel, and is condemned by God to be a marked and restless wanderer on the earth. Noah builds an ark in wordless obedience to God and enables a faithful remnant to live through the unmaking and remaking of the known world. The great building project at Babel – Babylon, an early center of human enterprise – is overturned by God so as to scatter people and make human language and culture complex.

Against this backdrop Abraham is called by God to leave his Mesopotamian home on the basis of God's promise to make him the ancestor of a great people, in a land of their own, blessed by

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God, and esteemed by other peoples. Abraham does many things, yet his life fundamentally involves waiting for a son by Sarah to begin to fulfil the promise; his son Ishmael by his servant-girl Hagar also gives rise to a people, but is nonetheless a false start. When finally the long-awaited son Isaac, the symbol of Abraham's future, is born and begins to grow, Abraham is told by God to reduce him to ashes and smoke in a sacrifice; Isaac's knife-edge survival anticipates that of his descendants.

Isaac himself does relatively little. The longest narrative in which he appears focuses on how his wife, Rebekah, conspires with his younger twin son, Jacob, to deceive him, so that he pronounces his blessing on Jacob rather than on his older, preferred, and intended twin son, Esau.

Jacob does not walk before God in the mode of Abraham. Rather, he appears to be relentlessly, and more often than not successfully, self-seeking, whether in deceiving his father Isaac or in trying to outsmart his uncle Laban to whom he flees to escape Esau's murderous anger. When God appears to fleeing Jacob at Bethel, Jacob thinks in terms of making a deal with God. Only years later, when Jacob, returning home, fears for his life and wrestles through the night with a mysterious figure does he appear genuinely to encounter God and thereafter builds an altar to God. However, Jacob remains a poor and querulous father of his twelve sons, the ancestors of the twelve tribes. Yet remarkably, he, and not Abraham, is the eponymous ancestor of the whole people of Israel.

Joseph, Jacob's favored son, pays for his youthful arrogance toward his brothers by being sold by them into slavery in Egypt, where he faces prolonged darkness, is traduced by Potiphar's wife, and is abandoned in prison. Yet eventually his interpreting of the Pharaoh's dreams gives him a meteoric rise to power. His brothers, seeking food in Egypt in time of famine, do not recognize Joseph,

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and Joseph appears to toy with them. Yet eventually Joseph's brothers and father are brought to food and safety in Egypt, and there is a family reconciliation (of sorts). When Joseph dies, the Genesis narrative comes to an end with Israel's ancestors established in Egypt, with the promise of settlement in Canaan left open for the future.

It is a rich and frequently surprising narrative. Though there are some comings and goings from and to the two great centers of early civilization, Mesopotamia and Egypt, the main action is in the seemingly insignificant land of Canaan. God makes promises and guides, and his blessing overarches the whole; yet for long stretches, God appears absent and inactive. Sinners at Sodom and Gomorrah perish; yet deceitful Jacob prospers and lives long. Younger sons are consistently favored over their older siblings, so that the "proper" order of things is regularly subverted. Significant space is given to Abraham's untypical military campaign, Jacob's breeding of sheep and goats, Joseph's management of the Egyptian economy. The more one looks at the material, the less it fits typical notions of what "God" and "religion" are all about.

TOWARD A "THEOLOGY OF GENESIS"

The Contested Nature of "Theology"

How then might one approach the task of articulating a "theology of Genesis"? This is tricky and controverted, for a variety of reasons. For example, people often point out that Genesis is not a work of theology in the sense that people usually understand that term – in the kind of way that, say, Origen's *On First Principles*, or Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*, or Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, or even von Rad's *Old Testament Theology* are recognized as works of theology. But this means that it is vital at the outset to define what is, and is not, meant by "theology."

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"Theology," like "history" and many of the other major categories that scholars use to interpret the biblical text, is not itself a biblical term; it originated in classical Greek and rose to prominence in the works of the church fathers. Of course, it need not be a problem to use postbiblical terms to designate and interpret the content of the Bible,[1] as long as the terms are used with appropriate nuance and sensitivity. But this already reminds us that biblical interpretation generally involves a dialectic between the content of the text itself and the categories and frame of reference within which one seeks to understand and perhaps also appropriate it. Notions such as the plain sense of the text have their place, but they can easily obscure the subtlety and complexity of what in fact goes on when people read any text from the past, never mind one that is held by Jews and Christians to be enduringly authoritative.

The term "theology" has a long and complex history from the Fathers to the present day, which makes it far from straightforward to use. Not least there has been a tendency from the early Enlightenment in the seventeenth century onward to use theology as a counterpart of religion, both of which are used in distinctively modern and contracted senses. "Religion" in the modern West is often used to denote a generic kind of thought, piety, and practices, quite distinct from those of politics, economics, and the natural sciences; it designates what happens primarily in an inward, subjective, and largely private realm, distinct from what happens in public – so that religious people who transgress these distinctions tend to encounter strong opposition. Theology is then sometimes conceived as an attempt to talk about religious experiences, which risks being a kind of psychobabble with religious jargon;

[1] Such terms even include the basic structuring categories Old Testament, Hebrew Bible, and New Testament.

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alternatively, theology may be a kind of metaphysical speculation about invisible and intangible entities – an activity that bears no relation to, and certainly makes no difference to, the realities of everyday life. One reason, therefore, why it can be difficult to articulate a theology of Genesis is that so much of the content of Genesis does not conform to modern theological preconceptions of what one should find there. Only if one can recover a more classic sense of theology, as an attempt to understand everything in the world in relation to God, will one be better placed to start to make sense of the theology of Genesis.

Historical Criticism and Socially Valued Knowledge

One common scholarly approach, which tries to deal with the problem of possibly distorting preconceptions, is to understand theology in relation to the Bible as a primarily philological and historical discipline, a descriptive and analytic account of religious thought and practice. In this sense, to give an account of the theology of Genesis is to characterize its content in the categories of religious history: to show what certain terms and ideas and practices mean in their originating context, in the tenth or sixth century BCE (or whenever), and to map them in relation to each other and to other aspects of ancient Israel's developing religious thought and practice, and possibly those of Israel's neighbors also. Such a theology of Genesis is not in principle different from giving an intelligent account of the content of any religious text, biblical or otherwise – one would not in principle handle Augustine's *Confessions*, the Qur'an, or the Bhagavad-Gita differently. The task requires good philological and historical understanding, so that one can appreciate the content of the text for what it is, without prematurely assimilating it to the perspectives of other texts, ideas, and practices from other periods of history and different cultural

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contexts. Theology thus becomes, in essence, a history of Israelite religion in some form or other.[2]

There is obvious value in such an enterprise. Not least, those who hold the Bible to be God's self-revelation, a gift and a truth that is given to Israel and the church for the benefit of the world, have an interest in wanting to discern as accurately as possible what the text really says, lest God's word be misunderstood, or lest it be confused with their own preferences and predilections. On any reckoning, the insights of good philology and history will only be downplayed or despised by those who have never come to appreciate what those insights are or who have failed to master the disciplines necessary to acquire them.

Nonetheless, it is the thesis of this book that a theology of Genesis needs to be more than, and somewhat different from, this, primarily because Genesis is not a freestanding ancient text, like the Epic of Gilgamesh, but is part of the authoritative scriptures of synagogue and church, wherein there has been an unbroken history through the centuries of living with the text in a variety of ways, not least its incorporation into regular worship, both through reading aloud and in liturgical texts. Among other things, this means that one does not, indeed almost cannot, come to the text "cold," but only in the context of an enduring Jewish and Christian, and consequent wider, cultural reception. This reception forms a kind of

[2] There have been many twentieth-century debates as to how, if at all, to distinguish between theology and the history of Israelite religion. Usually those advocating the distinction have presented their theology in thematic/systematic categories, more recently also in synchronic form, as distinct from providing diachronic, comparative, and developmental accounts (history of religion). Yet it is doubtful whether any of these, even Gerhard von Rad's influential concept of retelling (*Nacherzählung*), succeeds in doing more than, as it were, reshuffling the pack so as to provide a fresh hand to set on the table of accurate historical understanding of ancient religious data.

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plausibility structure, a context for bothering with the text and for taking it seriously, in a way that would not be the case otherwise. It means, among other things, that Genesis (or any other biblical book) is approached with expectations, or at least arguments, about its enduring significance and possible truth that are not the case when one approaches most other religious texts of antiquity.

Biblical scholars often take this plausibility structure for granted. Sometimes, however, they reflect on it, and one striking example is this excerpt from Brevard Childs:

> I do not come to the Old Testament to learn about someone else's God, but about the God we confess, who has made himself known to Israel, to Abraham, Isaac and to Jacob. I do not approach some ancient concept, some mythological construct akin to Zeus or Moloch, but our God, our Father. The Old Testament bears witness that God revealed himself to Abraham, and we confess that he has broken into our lives. I do not come to the Old Testament to be informed about some strange religious phenomenon, but in faith I strive for knowledge as I seek to understand ourselves in the light of God's self-disclosure. In the context of the church's scripture I seek to be pointed to our God who has made himself known, is making himself known, and will make himself known. . . . Thus, I cannot act as if I were living at the beginning of Israel's history, but as one who already knows the story, and who has entered into the middle of an activity of faith long in progress.[3]

Childs's formulation is rather distinctively Christian; Jews often express their own self-understanding in relation to the Bible quite differently. Yet for Christian and Jew alike, there is a common preconception. It is one thing to come to the biblical text without allowing church and synagogue to prejudge the outcome of one's

[3] Brevard S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (London: SCM, 1985), 28–29. Although the thought is basic to Childs's work, its expression is untypical, as Childs generally eschews such first-person "confessional" terminology.

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philological, historical, and other inquiries. It is quite another to recognize that one might well not bother with studying this text in the first place were it not for the general assumptions and expectations with regard to its enduring significance and truth – assumptions that depend on the continuing health of synagogue and church, and their wider cultural recognition. As Jon D. Levenson crisply puts it, in the context of discussing the role of historical criticism in biblical study,

> [t]he very value-neutrality of this [that is, historical-critical] method of study puts its practitioners at a loss to defend the *value* of the enterprise itself. In a culture saturated with religious belief involving the Bible, this weakness was less apparent, for the defense was less called for. Now, however, after secularism has impugned the worth of the Bible, and multiculturalism has begun to critique the cultural traditions at the base of which it stands, biblical scholars, including, I must stress, even the most antireligious among them, must face this paradoxical reality: the vitality of their rather untraditional discipline has historically depended upon the vitality of traditional religious communities, Jewish and Christian. . . . Indeed, in the humanities today, every "canon," cultural as well as scriptural, is under intense suspicion, and every selection of subject matter is increasingly and correctly understood to involve a normative claim and not merely a description of value-neutral fact. In all cases, what scholars study and teach is partly a function of which practices and beliefs they wish to perpetuate.[4]

Ideological Criticism of the Biblical Text

What, then, of one of the fashionable trends in contemporary biblical scholarship, ideological criticism of various kinds? Ideological

[4] Jon D. Levenson, "Historical Criticism and the Fate of the Enlightenment Project," in Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), 106–26 (109–10).

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criticism generally encourages readers to read "against the grain" of the biblical text, critique it in the light of the best cultural values of the present time, and bring to critical consciousness, with a view to repudiation, issues of, say, gender or power that are simply taken for granted within the biblical text.

Interestingly, proposals to read against the biblical grain tend to get their critical and rhetorical purchase from an apparent unwillingness on the part of mainstream scholarship to put hard questions to the biblical text or to take sufficiently seriously what the text might "do to you" – thereby apparently encouraging rather unthinking biblicism. So, for example, David Clines criticizes typical historical approaches to the Bible and insists that a reader can only maintain ethical integrity by reading the Bible against the grain:

> The practitioners of the historical-critical method, like the inventors of the atomic bomb, were ethically irresponsible. Their commitment was to the "truth," whatever that might be and wherever it might lead. And that is unquestionably a whole sight better than a commitment to falsity. But it systematically ignored the question of effects on readers, and it is about time we regarded such study as part of our scholarly discipline and task. . . .
>
> I am rather insistent on a programme of judging interpretations by standards other than their own; for if we do not judge them by our own standards of reference, we cannot be ethical. If we judge the references in our texts to slavery or to the oppression of women by the standards that operated in the ancient world, we might well find ourselves approving those practices, or at least being less antithetical to them. We do not owe any such debt to the past, however, and it is a more truly human activity to make serious and well-informed judgments than merely to acquire knowledge or "understanding. . . . "
>
> What it boils down to is this: To be truly academic, and worthy of its place in the academy, biblical studies has to be truly critical, critical not just about lower-order questions like the authorship of

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> the biblical books or the historicity of the biblical narratives, but critical about the Bible's contents, its theology, its ideology. And that is what biblical studies has notoriously not been critical about at all. To be critical, you have to take up a standard of reference outside the material you are critiquing; but, traditionally, biblical scholars have been believers, ecclesiastics or, at the least, fellow-travellers and sympathizers with the ideology of the Bible. When the academy begins to view the Bible as a cultural artifact, and is not seduced or pressured by religious commitments, the hallmark of criticism will be that it steps outside the ideology of the text.[5]

The issues at stake here are complex, and part of the force of Clines's rhetoric depends on some oversimplifications. For example, it is hardly the case that mainstream biblical scholarship has eschewed critiquing the biblical text in all sorts of ways. Clines's stance is reminiscent of the kind of critique offered by deists in the eighteenth century, which was the period in which historical-critical approaches started to dominate the field. Strong ethical critiques characterized this scholarship, and there are still historical-critical scholars today who see themselves as continuing within such a mold.[6] Moreover, one response to the pronouncement of the Bible's inadequacies from a modern (and often irreligious) European perspective has been precisely to promote a more rigorous and thoroughgoing historical awareness.[7] In other words,

[5] David J. A. Clines, "Why Is There a Song of Songs and What Does It Do to You If You Read It?" in Clines, *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible*, JSOTSup 205 (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 94–121 (107–10).

[6] See, e.g., Heikki Räisänen, "Biblical Critics in the Global Village," in *Reading the Bible in the Global Village: Helsinki*, ed. Heikki Räisänen et al. (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), 9–28; and John J. Collins, *The Bible after Babel: Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005).

[7] It is notable that the German Enlightenment, which quickly came to lead the field in the study of ancient history and the Bible, remained more religiously

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