Introduction

Ronald Hendel

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 rabbinic 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,"[1] 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

[1] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Twilight of the Idols and the Anti-Christ* (New York: Penguin, 1990), 194, §59.

to multiple converging and diverging paths of study for the simple reason that, as Wittgenstein says, "[I]t is possible to be interested in a phenomenon in a variety of ways."[2] There is no single authoritative – or authoritarian – method of reading Genesis.

A word about what we mean by "method." The subtitle of this book, *Ten Methods*, should not be taken to mean that there are fixed techniques or recipes for reading Genesis as there might be, for example, for operating heavy machinery or making onion soup. A method in humanistic scholarship is – as both the medieval schoolmen and Wittgenstein defined it – a "way of proceeding" (*modus procendi*), a bundle of insights and habits that seem to work. John Barton helpfully elucidates this sense of "method" in biblical studies:

> [W]e should see each of our "methods" as a codification of intuitions about the text which may occur to intelligent readers. Such intuitions can well arrive at truth; but it will not be the kind of truth familiar in the natural sciences. Reading the Old Testament, with whatever aim in view, belongs to the humanities and cannot operate with an idea of watertight, correct method.[3]

In other words, we should not reify our methods or pretend that they are scientific procedures. It is enough that they be, as the Germans say, *Wissenschaftlich*, which means, roughly, "intellectually rigorous." That is all we can ask of our scholarly efforts – and that is enough.

AFTER GUNKEL: ROADS NOT TAKEN

The classic treatment of Genesis in modern scholarship is Hermann Gunkel's commentary on Genesis, whose centennial we commemorate in 2010 (the third and final edition was published in 1910). As Ernest Nicholson rightly observed, "The influence of the methods pioneered by Gunkel upon subsequent Old Testament study can scarcely be overestimated."[4] Gunkel combined mastery of the older disciplines of source and textual criticism with a new focus on the history of traditions, comparative religion,

[2] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (New York: Macmillan, 1958), 47.
[3] John Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study* (2nd ed.; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 5.
[4] Ernest W. Nicholson, "Foreword: Hermann Gunkel as a Pioneer of Modern Old Testament Study," in Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997; German original, 3rd ed., 1910), 9.

folklore, and literary style. In his "Foreword," he posed two programmatic questions:

> How long until Old Testament scholars finally understand what a mighty task literary-historical problems present them, even in the realm of the narratives, and when will the testament of the great Herder finally be executed?[5]

Gunkel proceeded to unfold the historical and literary dimensions of the Genesis narratives. He showed how they originated in the folklore of Israelite and pre-Israelite cultures, tracing their transformation into larger narrative collections and, ultimately, into the literary documents of Genesis. This is literary history, the diachronic dimension of the stories and texts in their intricate evolution through time.

His evocation of Herder's "testimony" is a call for a close literary reading of Genesis, which Herder pioneered in *The Oldest Document of the Human Race* (1774) and *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry* (1782).[6] Gunkel devoted a major section of his "Introduction" to "the artistic form of the legends of Genesis" (*Kunstform der Sagen der Genesis*), including issues such as prose style, genre, literary structure, character, description, speeches, motifs, keywords (*Stichwörter*), and other wordplay. Gunkel described this literary task in Herderian terms: "[O]ne who wants to do justice to such old accounts must have sufficient aesthetic sensibility to hear an account as it is and as it wants to be."[7] This requires empathy (what Herder called *Einfühlung*, literally, "feeling into") and sensibility to literary nuance. Gunkel embraced this literary task throughout his commentary, and he treated the variety of dimensions of Genesis – historical, folkloric, religious, and literary – with erudition and brilliance.

Gunkel's multilayered reading of Genesis displays a methodological pluralism that has largely been abandoned in recent biblical scholarship. After Gunkel, scholars have tended to be methodological monists: one is a historian, another is a source critic, a third is a redaction critic, and so forth. More recently, the degrees of specialization have proliferated: one is a feminist reader-response literary critic; another is a postcolonial Third World theologian. Each inhabits a single method (or a hybrid that functions as one method) and tends to regard other methods with hostility or suspicion.

[5] Gunkel, *Genesis*, v.

[6] See Christoph Bultmann, "Creation at the Beginning of History: Johann Gottfried Herder's Interpretation of Genesis 1," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 68 (1995), 23–32. See also the excerpt from *The Oldest Document of the Human Race*, in J. G. Herder, *Against Pure Reason: Writings on Religion, Language, and History*, ed. Marcia Bunge (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1992) 107–10; idem, *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry* (2 vols.; Burlington, VT: Edward Smith, 1833).

[7] Gunkel, *Genesis*, xi.

Other scholars' methods are – in various measure – heretical, hegemonic, or narcissistic. There is a crisis of confidence in the field today – a fractured sectarianism – in which the terms of discourse are in constant contention. As Barton describes the current tension: "A great rift has opened . . . [with] each party on the whole regarding the other as largely worthless."[8]

Usually, the lines of fracture are drawn up as "history versus literature" or "diachronic versus synchronic"; sometimes the counterclaim is "objective versus subjective" or "empirical versus politically engaged." Each opposition, however, is overdrawn and based largely on portraying the other as a straw man or caricature. It is salutary to note that every intellectually responsible literary reading of Genesis relies on knowledge of an ancient language (i.e., biblical Hebrew, with a smattering of Aramaic, and – it is hoped – some Greek) and an awareness of ancient literary and cultural conventions. This is historical knowledge. And any historical reconstruction – of sources, redaction, or texts – that does not attend to the nuances of the literary text is merely incompetent. Reading the Bible is a multifarious task such that there are – to use Frank Kermode's term – many "forms of attention" appropriate for reading it.[9]

There are partisans on both sides of the battle lines of history versus literature and the related binary oppositions in the study of Genesis. Rather than posing simplistic oppositions, we should imagine and practice an interweaving dialectic. We should acknowledge that the task of richly reading Genesis involves both sides of each of these contrasts: history and literature, synchrony and diachrony, empirical data and ideology. The notion that one can read an ancient text *without* attention to its historicity or that one can reconstruct history *without* attention to the literary constituency of the text are equally symptomatic of sectarian illusions. As Wittgenstein says in another context, such "problems arise when language *goes on holiday*."[10] We readily grant that Genesis is an ancient book – a discourse from the past – which necessarily entails the intertwining of history and literature.

An intelligent reading of any ancient literary text involves multiple skills and sensibilities. If we resist the seduction of sectarian rhetoric, it is easy to see that methodological pluralism – as exemplified by Gunkel's classic commentary – has virtues that offer a model for the present. This book resumes "the road not taken" by pursuing the path of multiple and complementary methods, which diverge and converge in illuminating ways.

[8] John Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 187.
[9] Frank Kermode, *Forms of Attention* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).
[10] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 19.

This is not a lazy eclecticism but rather a methodological pluralism that befits the complex phenomenon that is the focus of our investigation: the task of reading Genesis in – and for – the modern age.

THE FATE OF TEXTS: LIFE AND AFTERLIFE

One of several new areas of biblical scholarship that we include in this book is the study of classic readings of Genesis in Western culture, from inner-biblical interpretation to postbiblical Jewish, Christian, and secular exegesis. The fate of Genesis in its reading publics has, in recent years, become a part of biblical scholarship. In some ways, this interest displays a new maturity in the field, which arose in part as a reaction to traditional interpretations of the Bible. Modern biblical scholarship is shaped by its formative era in Renaissance humanism with the admonition, *ad fontes* ("to the sources"), which the Reformation adapted to the Bible with the call for *sola scriptura* ("scripture alone"). The Protestant Reformers castigated traditional interpretation as the devil's (or the pope's) work, which had long ensured the "Babylonian captivity" of the church. Modern biblical scholarship defines itself in opposition to traditional church- and synagogue-based forms of interpretation; hence, it is both ironic and salutary that the study of "precritical" forms of reading has recently become part of the horizon of critical scholarship. The expansion of the guild of biblical scholarship to include Jews and Catholics has stimulated this new interest in the chain of interpretation, which complicates the focus on "scripture alone."[11]

In some respects, the attention to the fate of Genesis in postbiblical culture is entirely consonant with the long-standing epistemology of modern biblical criticism. Baruch Spinoza defined the "true method" of biblical interpretation as consisting of three interlocking steps: (1) mastery of biblical Hebrew, (2) careful discernment of the meanings of biblical texts, and (3) awareness of the history and transmission of the biblical books. The third step – what Spinoza called "the fate of each book"[12] – logically entails its reception and use in the chain of textual transmission, although Spinoza referred primarily to its editorial and scribal history. But the fate of Genesis is not limited to its material dissemination; it logically includes its cultural uses and effects – that is, its life in Western culture.

[11] See James L. Kugel, "The Bible in the University," in *The Hebrew Bible and Its Interpreters*, eds. W. H. Propp, B. Halpern, and D. N. Freedman (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 143–65.

[12] Baruch Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, ed. Jonathan Israel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007; Latin original, 1670), 101.

Some pertinent remarks by Walter Benjamin illuminate this issue. He observed that the study of literature

> should struggle above all with the works. Their entire life and their effects should have the right to stand alongside the history of their composition. In other words, their fate, their reception by their contemporaries, their translations, their fame.[13]

Benjamin makes a valuable distinction between the "life" and the "effects" (*Wirkung*) or "afterlife" (*Überleben*; literally, "survival") of a literary work: "[I]n its afterlife – which could not be called that if it were not a transformation and a renewal of something living – the original undergoes a change."[14] Through its transformation – or, more precisely, its incessant variety of transformations – the text becomes a historical agent, a palimpsest of significant interpretations and uses through time. Hence, the plural task of reading Genesis should naturally include its life and afterlife, its meanings and effects.[15]

TEN METHODS

The family of methods treated in this book is not comprehensive. Our goal is to explore and expand illuminating ways of reading Genesis that are being actively pursued in contemporary scholarship. Other important methods are not included because they are not, strictly speaking, methods of reading – for example, textual criticism (although textual criticism has obvious implications for the concept of the text and for the parameters of any reading) and historical criticism (which, like textual criticism, is a necessary prolegomenon to an informed reading).[16] Other methods are not included because

[13] Walter Benjamin, "Literary History and the Study of Literature," in idem, *Selected Writings, Volume 2: 1927–1934* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 464.

[14] Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in idem, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 73; quoted in Naomi Seidman, *Faithful Renderings: Jewish-Christian Difference and the Politics of Translation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 10. See also Chapter 8 in this volume.

[15] H.-G. Gadamer, among others, argued that these distinctions can hardly be made (*Truth and Method* [2nd ed.; New York: Continuum, 1984], 352–7); however, if one grants that sentences have semantic implicatures (a conversational sense based on grammar and culture), it is difficult to avoid such distinctions. See H. P. Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989). See further the distinction between *peshat* and *midrash* in Chapter 5 in this volume.

[16] See Ronald Hendel, *The Text of Genesis 1–11: Textual Studies and Critical Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 3–5; "Plural Texts and Literary Criticism: For Instance, 1 Samuel 17," *Textus* 23 (2007), 97–114; idem, "Historical Context," in *The Book of Genesis: Composition, Reception, and Interpretation*, eds. C. A. Evans, J. N. Lohr, and D. L. Petersen (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, forthcoming).

they are not yet "ripe" in the study of Genesis – for example, postcolonial criticism, which is still in a nascent phase (although I have made an attempt for Genesis).[17]

Also conspicuously absent are what Barton calls "advocacy" readings, which advance political agendas via robust personal or prescriptive readings. For example, many feminist readings are avowedly advocacy readings – even "prophetic" readings – following Phyllis Trible's programmatic call:

> As a critique of culture and faith in the light of misogyny, feminism is a prophetic movement, examining the status quo, pronouncing judgment, and calling for repentance.[18]

Laudable as such social criticism may be, there are problems and internal contradictions in scholarship with these aims. As Saba Mahmood observes, there is "a deeper tension within feminism attributable to its dual character as both an *analytical* and a *politically prescriptive* project."[19] The politically prescriptive part often tends to drive the analytical, which "impose[s] a teleology of progressive politics"[20] onto materials for which such categories are wholly foreign. This may be described as a form of "Orientalism," in which ancient Israelite texts and practices are accorded praise or blame depending on their relationship to modern progressive politics. Because of these issues, we have not included methods of advocacy scholarship. Chapter 4, "Gender and Sexuality," is analytical – not prescriptive – in its study of the representation of sex and gender in Genesis. But we agree that the expansion of scholarship to include this topic has real (and timely) ethical implications.

A partially overlapping category is postmodern readings, for which all texts – and any linguistic utterance – lack stable or determinative meanings. This position seems to be another instance when the critic's language "goes on holiday" – as if the act of reading were a solipsistic dance over the void. A key contradiction within this method is that a reading that views the text as meaningless must somehow exempt itself from this condition, or else it must embrace its own meaninglessness. As Bruno Latour argues, postmodernism is an "incomplete skepticism" rather than a coherent

[17] Ronald Hendel, "Genesis 1–11 and Its Mesopotamian Problem," *Cultural Borrowings and Ethnic Appropriations in Antiquity*, ed. Erich Gruen (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2005), 23–36.

[18] Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984), 3.

[19] Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 10.

[20] Ibid., 9.

position.[21] In postmodernism, "[n]othing has value; everything is a reflection, a simulacrum, a floating sign. . . . The empty world in which the postmoderns evolve is one they themselves, and they alone, have emptied."[22] When this book's contributors avail themselves of postmodern theory, we do so gingerly, without emptying our text – Genesis – of its life and meanings.

The first of our ten methods is "Literature." Robert Alter, the most consequential modern practitioner of this method, traces its history and transformations from Late Antiquity to modern times and provides a penetrating reading of the life of Jacob, who becomes a fully realized individual in the course of the narrative. Alter addresses how the Jacob story works as a realistic narrative and compellingly draws out the richness of his changing character. Alter's discussion elegantly demonstrates the rationale and interpretive gains of an informed literary reading of Genesis.

Chapter 2, "Cultural Memory," is my topic. This is a relatively recent method that blends insights from anthropology, history, and cultural studies. To approach Genesis in this way involves attention to a cluster of features: how collective memory serves as an agent of cultural identity, how the landscape and sacred sites revitalize ancestral memories, how social frameworks filter the collective past, and how narrative strategies make the past memorable. The stories of Jacob at Bethel and his journey to Mesopotamia are discussed as examples of biblical memory. This approach is arguably more illuminating than conventional historical inquiry and aptly supplements the literary perspective in Chapter 1.

Robert S. Kawashima provides a philosophically incisive treatment of the literary history of Genesis in Chapter 3, "Sources and Redaction." He shows how a discerning attention to the compositional history of Genesis entails a richer understanding of its literary and theological meanings. Through close readings of the features of the J and P sources in Genesis 1–11, the sources' large-scale literary structures, and their editorial combination, Kawashima constructs a compelling synthesis of the historical poetics of Genesis.

Chapter 4, "Gender and Sexuality," is a collaborative effort by Ilana Pardes, Chana Kronfeld, and myself. Here, we weave together the fruits of feminist biblical scholarship with recent perspectives from the history of sexuality. We focus on the culturally constructed character of sexual norms, particularly as shaped by the changing dynamics of public knowledge, legal power, and personal agency. Our narrative focus is the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, which involves conflicts of authority, honor, gender, and sexual

[21] Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 9.
[22] Ibid., 131.

behavior – including male and female sexual agents. Because the biblical system of knowledge, power, and agency is configured differently than our own, modern categories do not easily apply. How to understand the nuances of sexuality and gender in the Genesis narratives without anachronism is an important goal of this method.

Yair Zakovitch addresses the chain of interpretations *within* the Bible in Chapter 5, "Inner-Biblical Interpretation." He discusses how the senses of the text are affected by concentric circles of interpretation – within the story cycle, among different sources, and in later biblical writings. His narrative focus is Genesis 27, in which Jacob deceives his father Isaac and receives the blessing of the firstborn son. Various interpretations arise from this story, particularly as they depict the ethics of Jacob's character. Political, moral, historical, and hermeneutical aims color these interpretations. Zakovitch shows how the methods of inner-biblical interpretation serve to make Genesis a perennially relevant and multivalent text.

Dina Stein explores the life of Genesis in the postbiblical interpretive culture of Judaism in Chapter 6, "Rabbinic Interpretation." With the rise of the Bible as Holy Scripture, reading Genesis becomes an intricate art. The major method of rabbinic interpretation – Midrash – is, as Stein shows, rooted in the self-conscious citation of Scriptural authority. It is a self-reflexive method, conscious of its own meaning-producing activity. Midrash correspondingly portrays its biblical heroes – in this case, Abraham – as self-reflective individuals. By means of its chain of Scriptural citations, Midrash shows how God contemplated Abraham when He created the universe – thereby unifying the national and cosmic dimensions of Genesis – and depicts Abraham as a proto-rabbinic sage, citing Scripture himself. The rabbinic method of interpreting Scripture, in its own self-representation, is a mirror of God's creative acts of interpretation, as each contemplates the perfect and divine words of Genesis.

Richard A. Layton explores the formative period of Christian interpretive culture in Chapter 7, "Interpretation in the Early Church." To comprehend these reading practices as more than antiquarian curiosities, he develops a nuanced model of reception theory, melding together different strands of recent scholarship on this topic. With these interpretive tools in hand, he discusses the different ways that the "Call and Migration of Abraham" (Genesis 12) was understood and refashioned by postbiblical and early Christian interpreters: how they filled gaps, created communities of readers, and accommodated the story to their cultural and religious horizons, whether particularistic/national, universal/philosophical, or points in between. Layton persuasively shows how ancient interpretive practices – formulated by Paul, Philo, Augustine, Origen, and other luminaries – continue to inform

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 refashioning 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 Ahab, not an Isaac. The clash of characters and fates favors the rough Ishmael, who alone survives when he is rescued by a wandering 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 Levenson, 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.