

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-68538-2 - The Theology of the Book of Genesis

R. W. L. Moberly

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

THE THEOLOGY OF THE BOOK OF GENESIS

The book of Genesis contains foundational material for Jewish and Christian theology, both historic and contemporary, and is almost certainly the most consulted book in the Old Testament in contemporary culture. R. W. L. Moberly's *The Theology of the Book of Genesis* examines the actual use made of Genesis in current debates, not only in academic but also in popular contexts. Traditional issues such as creation and Fall stand alongside more recent issues such as religious violence and Christian Zionism. Moberly's concern – elucidated through a combination of close readings and discussions of hermeneutical principles – is to uncover what constitutes intelligent understanding and use of Genesis, through a consideration of its intrinsic meaning as an ancient text (in both Hebrew and Greek versions) in dialogue with its reception and appropriation both past and present. Moberly seeks to enable responsible theological awareness and use of the ancient text today, highlighting Genesis's enduring significance.

R. W. L. Moberly is Professor of Theology and Biblical Interpretation at Durham University. He is also the author of *Prophecy and Discernment* and *The Bible, Theology, and Faith*. His writings have appeared in scholarly journals such as *Vetus Testamentum*, *Journal of Theological Studies*, *Harvard Theological Review*, and *Journal of Theological Interpretation*.

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-68538-2 - The Theology of the Book of Genesis
 R. W. L. Moberly
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

GENERAL EDITORS

Brent A. Strawn,
*Associate Professor of Old Testament,
 Candler School of Theology, Emory University*

Patrick D. Miller,
*Charles T. Haley Professor of Old Testament Theology, Emeritus,
 Princeton Theological Seminary*

This series aims to remedy the deficiency of available published material on the theological concerns of the Old Testament books. Here, specialists explore the theological richness of a given book at greater length than is usually possible in the introductions to commentaries or as part of other Old Testament theologies. They are also able to investigate the theological themes and issues of their chosen books without being tied to a commentary format or to a thematic structure provided from elsewhere. When complete, the series will cover all the Old Testament writings and will thus provide an attractive, and timely, range of short texts around which courses can be developed.

PUBLISHED VOLUMES

The Theology of the Book of Jeremiah, Walter Brueggemann

FORTHCOMING VOLUMES

The Theology of the Book of Exodus, Dennis T. Olson
The Theology of the Book of Leviticus, Brent A. Strawn
The Theology of the Book of Judges, Joel S. Kaminsky
The Theology of the Book of Psalms, Patrick D. Miller
The Theology of the Book of Ecclesiastes, J. Gerald Janzen
The Theology of the Book of Daniel, Anthea Portier-Young
The Theology of the Book of Hosea, Christine Roy Yoder
The Theology of the Book of Amos, John Barton

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-68538-2 - The Theology of the Book of Genesis

R. W. L. Moberly

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

THE THEOLOGY OF THE BOOK OF GENESIS

R. W. L. MOBERLY

University of Durham



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-68538-2 - The Theology of the Book of Genesis
 R. W. L. Moberly
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
 Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi

Cambridge University Press
 32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA
www.cambridge.org
 Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521685382

© R. W. L. Moberly 2009

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2009

Printed in the United States of America

A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data

Moberly, R. W. L.
 The theology of the book of Genesis / R. W. L. Moberly.
 p. cm. – (Old Testament theology)
 Includes bibliographical references and index.
 ISBN 978-0-521-86631-6 (hardback) – ISBN 978-0-521-68538-2 (pbk.)
 1. Bible. O. T. Genesis – Theology. 2. Bible. O. T. Genesis – Criticism, interpretation, etc.
 I. Title.
 BS1235.52.M63 2009
 222'.1106–dc22 2008041848
 ISBN 978-0-521-86631-6 hardback
 ISBN 978-0-521-68538-2 paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party Internet Web sites referred to in this publication and does not guarantee that any content on such Web sites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate. Information regarding prices, travel timetables, and other factual information given in this work are correct at the time of first printing, but Cambridge University Press does not guarantee the accuracy of such information thereafter.

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-68538-2 - The Theology of the Book of Genesis
R. W. L. Moberly
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

*For Jenny,
celebrating ten years*



Contents

<i>General Editors' Preface</i>	<i>page xv</i>
<i>Preface</i>	xix
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	xxiii
1 WHAT IS A "THEOLOGY OF GENESIS"?	1
Toward a "Theology of Genesis"	3
The Contested Nature of "Theology"	3
Historical Criticism and Socially Valued Knowledge	5
Ideological Criticism of the Biblical Text	8
A Proposal for a "Theology of Genesis"	12
Biblical Text and Canonical Contexts	12
Text and Contexts: An Example	17
Conclusion	20
2 ON READING GENESIS 1–11	21
Building on the History of Interpretation	22
Noah and the Flood	28
The Perspective and Convention Embodied in the Use of Hebrew Language	34
Literary Conventions and Theological Interpretation	36

x	CONTENTS
3	GENESIS 1: PICTURING THE WORLD 42
	A First Reading of Genesis 1 43
	Genesis 1 in Relation to Its Possible Compositional Context 48
	Genesis 1 in Relation to Alternative Ancient Pictures 50
	Jon D. Levenson's Reading of Genesis 1 54
	Genesis 1 and Evolutionary Biology 57
	Genesis 1 and Alternative Pictures of the World: A Proposal 65
4	GENESIS 2–3: ADAM AND EVE AND “THE FALL” 70
	James Barr on Genesis 2–3 71
	A Reformulated Version of the “Traditional” Interpretation 75
	Is a Gnostic Precedent a Good Precedent? 76
	Identifying the Key Issue 78
	Rereading the Narrative 83
	Conclusion 87
5	GENESIS 4: CAIN AND ABEL 88
	Exposition of Regina M. Schwartz's Interpretation 89
	A Theological Reading of Cain and Abel 92
	Conclusion: Doing Well in Demanding Circumstances 98
6	GENESIS 6–9: CATAclySM AND GRACE 102
	Reflections on Some Characteristic Modern Approaches 103
	Pentateuchal Criticism and Reading Strategy 103
	The Flood in Genesis and the Epic of Gilgamesh 105

CONTENTS

xi

A Characteristic Postmodern Anxiety	106
Toward a Theological Interpretation of the Flood	
Narrative	110
The Collocation of Genesis 6:5 with 8:21	111
The Evil-Thought Clause in Genesis 8:21	112
Reading the Story without the Evil-Thought Clause	114
Reading the Story with the Evil-Thought Clause	115
Israel and the World, Sinai and the Flood	118
7 ON READING GENESIS 12–50	121
The Patriarchs as a Problem for Jewish Observance	
of Torah	121
Genesis as a Compositional and Religio-Historical	
Problem	126
A Third Way: A Canonical Approach	130
Genesis as “The Old Testament of the Old	
Testament”	131
On Interpreting the Revelation of the Divine Name	132
The Distinctive Patterns of Patriarchal Religion	135
Theological Issues in a Canonical Approach to the	
Patriarchal Narratives	137
8 GENESIS 12:1–3: A KEY TO INTERPRETING THE OLD	
TESTAMENT?	141
A Contemporary Christian Approach to Genesis	
12:1–3	142
An Alternative Reading of Genesis 12:1–3	148
The Idiomatic Meaning of “Blessing”	150
The Significance of the Proposed Reading	155
Theological Interpretation as a Continuing Task	156
Exegesis and Theology	156

	On Evaluating Gerhard von Rad's Interpretation	158
	A Jewish–Christian Dimension	159
9	GENESIS 12:3A: A BIBLICAL BASIS FOR CHRISTIAN ZIONISM?	162
	Why Christians Should Support Israel	163
	Some Factors in the Use of Scripture	167
	An Appeal to the “Plain Sense” of the Text	168
	Merely Human Words?	169
	Some Observations on Unconditional Divine Promises	170
	The Bearing of the New Testament on Christian Appropriation of the Old Testament	173
	Conditionality and Christian Attitudes toward Jews	173
	Who Are the Children of Abraham?	174
	Politics and Self-Interest	176
	Conclusion	178
10	GENESIS 22: ABRAHAM – MODEL OR MONSTER?	179
	Interpretive Clues within the Biblical Text	184
	Model or Monster? Some Factors for Making Progress	189
	De-instrumentalizing Isaac	193
	The Nightmare Scenario	196
	A Christian Epilogue	198
11	ABRAHAM AND THE “ABRAHAMIC FAITHS”	200
	Exposition of Karl-Josef Kuschel's Account of Abraham	202
	Preliminary Critique of Kuschel	208
	Jon D. Levenson's Critique of Kuschel	210

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-68538-2 - The Theology of the Book of Genesis
 R. W. L. Moberly
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

CONTENTS

xiii

Should We Continue to Speak of “Abrahamic Faiths/Religions”?	216
Conclusion	220
12 GENESIS 37–50: IS JOSEPH WISE?	225
The Joseph Narrative in Gerhard von Rad’s Analysis	226
Analysis of von Rad’s Account	229
Reenvisioning Key Elements in the “Solomonic Enlightenment” Hypothesis	230
Reenvisioning the Joseph Narrative in Relation to Proverbs	231
Joseph’s Treatment of His Brothers	237
Divine Sovereignty and Human Activity	241
Conclusion	244
<i>Further Reading</i>	247
<i>Author Index</i>	253
<i>Scripture Index</i>	256
<i>Subject Index</i>	263

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-68538-2 - The Theology of the Book of Genesis
R. W. L. Moberly
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

General Editors' Preface

Some years ago, Cambridge University Press, under the editorship of James D. G. Dunn, initiated a series entitled *New Testament Theology*. The first volumes appeared in 1991 and the series was brought to completion in 2003. For whatever reason, a companion series that would focus on the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible was never planned or executed. The present series, *Old Testament Theology*, is intended to rectify this need.

The reasons for publishing *Old Testament Theology* are not, however, confined solely to a desire to match *New Testament Theology*. Instead, the reasons delineated by Dunn that justified the publication of *New Testament Theology* continue to hold true for *Old Testament Theology*. These include, among other things, the facts that, (1) given faculty and curricular structures in many schools, the theological study of individual Old Testament writings is often spotty at best; (2) most exegetical approaches (and commentaries) proceed verse by verse such that theological interests are in competition with, if not completely eclipsed by, other important issues, whether historical, grammatical, or literary; and (3) commentaries often confine their discussion of a book's theology to just a few pages in the introduction. The dearth of materials focused exclusively on a particular book's theology may be seen as a result of factors like these; or, perhaps, it is the cause of such factors. Regardless,

as Dunn concluded, without adequate theological resources, there is little incentive for teachers or students to engage the theology of specific books; they must be content with what are mostly general overviews. Perhaps the most serious problem resulting from all this is that students are at a disadvantage, even incapacitated, when it comes to the matter of integrating their study of the Bible with other courses in religion and theology. There is, therefore, an urgent need for a series to bridge the gap between the too-slim theological précis and the too-full commentary where theological concerns are lost among many others.

All of these factors commend the publication of *Old Testament Theology* now, just as they did for *New Testament Theology* more than a decade ago. Like its sister series, *Old Testament Theology* is a place where Old Testament scholars can write at greater length on the theology of individual biblical books and may do so without being tied to the linear, verse-by-verse format of the commentary genre or a thematic structure of some sort imposed on the text from outside. Each volume in the series seeks to describe the biblical book's theology as well as to engage the book theologically – that is, each volume intends to *do* theology through and with the biblical book under discussion, as well as delineate the theology contained within it. Among other things, theological engagement with the composition includes paying attention to its contribution to the canon and appraising its influence on and reception by later communities of faith. In these ways, *Old Testament Theology* seeks to emulate its New Testament counterpart.

In the intervening years since *New Testament Theology* was first conceived, however, developments have taken place in the field that provide still further reasons for the existence of *Old Testament Theology*; these have impact on how the series is envisioned and implemented and also serve to distinguish it, however slightly,

from its companion series. Three developments in particular are noteworthy:

1. *The present hermeneutical climate*, often identified (rightly or wrongly) as “postmodern,” is rife with possibility and potential for new ways of theologizing about scripture and its constituent parts. Theologizing in this new climate will of necessity look (and be) different from how it has ever looked (or been) before.
2. *The ethos change in the study of religion, broadly, and in biblical studies in particular*. No longer are the leading scholars in the field only Christian clergy, whether Catholic priests or mainline Protestant ministers. Jewish scholars and scholars of other Christian traditions are every bit as prominent, as are scholars of non- or even anti-confessional stripe. In short, now is a time when “Old Testament Theology” must be conducted without the benefits of many of the old consensuses and certainties, even the most basic ones relating to epistemological framework and agreed-upon interpretative communities along with their respective traditions.
3. Finally, recent years have witnessed *a long-overdue rapprochement among biblical scholars, ethicists, and systematic theologians*. Interdisciplinary studies between these groups are now regularly published, thus furthering and facilitating the need for books that make the theology of scripture widely available for diverse publics.

In brief, the time is ripe for a series of books that will engage the theology of specific books of the Old Testament in a new climate for a new day. The result will not be programmatic, settled, or altogether certain. Despite that – or, in some ways, *because* of that – it is hoped that *Old Testament Theology* will contain highly useful

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-68538-2 - The Theology of the Book of Genesis
R. W. L. Moberly
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

xviii

GENERAL EDITORS' PREFACE

volumes that are ideally poised to make significant contributions on a number of fronts including (a) the ongoing discussion of biblical theology in confessional and nonconfessional mode as well as in postmodern and canonical contexts, (b) the theological exchange between Old Testament scholars and those working in cognate and disparate disciplines, and (c) the always-pressing task of introducing students to the theology of the discrete canonical unit: the biblical books themselves.

Brent A. Strawn

Candler School of Theology, Emory University

Patrick D. Miller

Princeton Theological Seminary, Emeritus

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-68538-2 - The Theology of the Book of Genesis

R. W. L. Moberly

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

When I began seriously to think about the writing of this book, two things struck me. Neither was new, but each struck me with fresh force, in the kind of way that changed my thinking and so also my writing.

First, of all the books in the Old Testament, Genesis is probably the most appealed-to and most used in contemporary discussion. To cite a few examples, the biblical portrayal of creation, and the contemporary phenomenon of creationism, feature regularly in “science and religion” debates, such that the question of what to make of the first few chapters of Genesis remains a live issue. Global warming is directing enormous attention to our understanding of, and appropriate interaction with, the environment; in such a context, the implications of the divine mandate to humanity to “have dominion” over the earth, and what kind of stewardship is envisioned, becomes important in a way that it was not a hundred years ago. Greater population mobility raises issues about the interrelationship of different religious traditions, such that inter-faith dialogue is increasingly on the agenda of those to whom faith is important; and dialogue among Jews, Christians, and Muslims regularly appeals to Abraham as some kind of “ecumenical” figure, who may represent common ground among the dialogue partners. Millions of Americans believe that the United States of America

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-68538-2 - The Theology of the Book of Genesis

R. W. L. Moberly

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

should support the state of Israel because of God's promise in Genesis to bless those who bless Abraham and his descendants.

Second, a strongly negative stance toward the Old Testament tends to be an integral element within the currently fashionable atheist critique of religious faith in general and Christianity in particular. To be sure, not all express themselves quite as eloquently and forcefully as Richard Dawkins: "The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully."¹ Nonetheless, anxiety, suspicion, and hostility, not least toward famous stories within Genesis, are on the increase. Is not the story of Cain and Abel an archetypal example of the murderous violence that the biblical conception of God can generate?² If one can but stand back from familiar interpretations, should one not see that the God of the story of Adam and Eve, or the Abraham who is willing to reduce his son to smoke and ashes, is each alike a "monster"?³ If these stories were merely museum pieces, their doubtful values perhaps would not matter so much. But it is because these are part of the sacred scripture of more than a billion people today that what these stories say, envisage, and possibly mandate *matters*.

¹ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam, 2006), 31. See further the discussion in Chapter 3.

² See Regina M. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997) and the discussion in Chapter 5.

³ So, respectively, David Penchansky, *What Rough Beast? Images of God in the Hebrew Bible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 5–20; and Richard Holloway's review of *After These Things*, by Jenny Diski, *The Guardian*, April 24, 2004, 26.

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-68538-2 - The Theology of the Book of Genesis
R. W. L. Moberly
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

I have therefore decided against one time-honored scholarly way of writing on the theology of Genesis – namely, to focus primarily on a depiction of the religious thought and practice within Genesis as a constituent element within the wider history of the religion of ancient Israel. At the present time, this would mean distinguishing between Priestly and non-Priestly strands within the text; focusing on the nature of the Priestly perspective; discussing whether it is appropriate still to think in terms of a Yahwist and, if so, what particular emphases characterize the Yahwist; examining how the various Genesis traditions may reflect and relate to various contexts within ancient Israel and Judah; and so on. These are all valid issues. The difficulty is that they are increasingly issues of interest only to professional biblical scholars. The wider public interest that attended pentateuchal criticism in the nineteenth century has long since ceased. Even among scholars, interest in the wider issues about the nature and development of Israel's religion and its possible enduring significance, an interest that clearly motivated the nineteenth-century debate that climaxed with Wellhausen's famous synthesis,⁴ is hardly to the fore of the many technical debates that continue. Yet it is not just the nonscholarly public that tends to put different questions to the biblical text, for scholars themselves are recognizing that many different questions may validly be put to the biblical text, depending on the purposes that motivate one's inquiry. And so, we are back at the first point.

Thus my approach to the theology of Genesis is via various contemporary debates about, and appeals to, the biblical text. My concern is still to discover and engage with the intrinsic theological

⁴ Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*, trans. J. Sutherland Black and Allan Menzies, repr. ed. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994 [German orig., 1878]).

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-68538-2 - The Theology of the Book of Genesis
R. W. L. Moberly
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

xxii

PREFACE

meaning of the Book of Genesis, only to do so in the context of its reception and use. The debates I interact with are mostly scholarly debates, but scholarly debates that are more obviously engaging with the questions that many readers of Genesis are actually asking; even so, there is space for only some of those questions. I am also painfully aware that much of Genesis and its theological meaning remains undiscussed in the pages that follow, but I hope that the studies that follow are at least representative of Genesis and its theology as a whole.

I am grateful to my wife, Jenny, and my colleague Richard Briggs, for their reading and commenting on draft chapters and suggesting helpful changes, which I have generally (but not always) followed. I am also grateful to Brent A. Strawn and Patrick D. Miller, the series editors, for the honor of being invited to contribute this volume, for their putting up with my delays and idiosyncrasies, and for their constructive editorial improvement of my text. As a result of all this wise and friendly help, my text, whatever its continuing deficiencies, is much better than it would have been otherwise. My thanks also to Douglas Earl for compiling the indexes, which we hope will be user-friendly.

Biblical citations are taken from the NRSV.

Abbreviations

ACCS:OT	Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament
ANET	James B. Pritchard, ed., <i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament</i> , 3rd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969)
ASTI	<i>Annual of the Swedish Theological Institute</i>
ATM	Altes Testament und Moderne
<i>BibInt</i>	<i>Biblical Interpretation</i>
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
BZHT	Beiträge zur historischen Theologie
BZRT	Beiträge zur Religionstheologie
CC	Continental Commentaries
CD	Karl Barth, <i>Church Dogmatics</i> , ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. T. Thomson et al., 5 vols. in 14. (Edinburgh, UK: T. & T. Clark, 1936–1977)
CSCD	Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine
ESV	English Standard Version
<i>ExpT</i>	<i>Expository Times</i>
<i>HBT</i>	<i>Horizons in Biblical Theology</i>
<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
Interp	Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching

<i>Int</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
JB	Jerusalem Bible
JSJSup	Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
LHBOTS	Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies
LXX	Septuagint
MT	Masoretic Text
NEB	New English Bible
NIV	New International Version
NJPSV	New Jewish Publication Society Version
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
OBT	Overtures to Biblical Theology
OTL	Old Testament Library
OTM	Oxford Theological Monographs
REB	Revised English Bible
SABH	Studies in American Biblical Hermeneutics
SBLSCS	Society of Biblical Literature Septuagint and Cognate Studies
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries
<i>VT</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary