

I Introduction: Genesis and the *status quaestionis*

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The book of Genesis never seems to go away. Whether we roam the corridors of human philosophies and theological speculations, or walk among the literary giants of past generations, we always seem to find Genesis. It is, in fact, inescapable, given a name like “Genesis” or “Beginnings.” Its position as the first book of the Bible, and the one that establishes so many of the themes to follow, gives Genesis a unique position in world literature and in the history of religions. Indeed, Genesis addresses the most profound questions of life. Who are we? Where are we? Why are we here? And it has answers. Whether we are believers or skeptics, Genesis answers questions about who God is, what God’s nature is like, and how God relates to humankind. Since the beginning of civilization, most societies have speculated about these or similar philosophical questions, but none has left such an impact on world history and thought as Genesis. Besides addressing the beginnings of the cosmos, of humanity, and of human civilization, the book is also about the origins of God’s chosen people, the Israelites, who produced the traditions that came to be preserved in the Hebrew Bible, traditionally known as the Old Testament. As such, the book of Genesis is one of the first steps one must take along the path to understanding the world religions we now know as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and the variety of theologies and philosophical principles related to them.

For the history of biblical studies more precisely, the role of the book of Genesis cannot be overstated. During the Enlightenment, when traditional understandings of the Bible were thoroughly reevaluated, long-held assumptions about the composition of the Pentateuch became a topic of intense interest. Indeed, the first eleven chapters of Genesis became the focal point of the first investigations of modernity’s historical-critical research of the Bible. Building upon the philosophical foundations of Spinoza, Hobbes, and Richard Simon, among others from a previous era, two notable researchers of the eighteenth century theorized that different names for God in the opening chapters of Genesis reflected original

sources behind the text. The first was a German pastor, Henning Bernhard Witter in 1711, who was followed independently by a French physician, Jean Astruc in 1753 (see Chapter 2 below for discussion of both). The pastor and the physician were largely forgotten at first until their work was disseminated more widely at the close of the eighteenth century in what became the beginnings of biblical historical criticism. Since those early days, engaging the book of Genesis has been one of the first steps one must take along the path to understanding the world of critical biblical scholarship.

Because of its importance in so many areas of research, the secondary literature on Genesis is immense, and continues to grow every year. Indeed, this is an interesting moment in the history of biblical studies, especially as it relates to the study of the book of Genesis. Several large-scale and important commentary projects are under way on the book just now, including volumes in *Hermeneia*, the *International Exegetical Commentary on the Old Testament*, the *International Critical Commentary*, the *New International Commentary on the Old Testament*, the *Old Testament Library*, the *Yale Anchor Bible Commentary*, and others. We can expect to see several interesting and innovative approaches to the book in coming decades. This volume attempts to provide an overview of a wide variety of approaches and interpretations of Genesis at this pivotal moment in the field, as well as to provide original insights and proposals that will be useful to all interpreters of the book for the foreseeable future.

Certain questions about the Bible have been front and center since the beginning of critical investigation, and without doubt, the composition of Genesis is one of those. Part I addresses the structure and message of Genesis, tracing the history of research through to the leading critical approaches, including the more recent investigation of its rhetorical features. In Chapter 2, Jean-Louis Ska traces the history of critical interpretation of Genesis back to debates between the rabbinical schools of Rabbi Ishmael (90–135 CE) and Rabbi Aqiba (40–137 CE), showing that the impulses at work in those early approaches remain at the foundation of the origins of critical biblical interpretation. The rabbinical school that admits and explores the human dimension of Scripture gave rise eventually, after a long and drawn-out process, to the Renaissance and Enlightenment. Ska's chapter reveals (1) the degree to which some things have remained the same, and (2) the way in which Genesis especially has been at the center of questions about biblical authority from the early rabbinic period all the way to the present critical investigation of the Bible.

The book of Genesis has, of course, played a central role in the early history of biblical scholarship. Jan Christian Gertz shows in Chapter 3 how critical research on the Pentateuch began with Genesis and considers the implications of its ongoing significance in such research. Some questions will simply never cease to fascinate us, compelling us to revisit the answers offered in the past. The nature of the underlying sources and of the redactional processes that led to the composition of the book of Genesis is certainly one of those questions. Gertz surveys developments as they occurred especially related to Genesis, and concludes with a summary of his own reconstruction of the composition of the book. In Chapter 4, Christoph Levin takes up the contributions of form and tradition criticism since their emergence at the beginning of the twentieth century. After a critique of those early contributions, Levin offers a helpful refinement of the circumstances of the earliest literary traditions from ancient Israel, placing special attention on their royal focus, even as they were developed further by the administrative and cult aristocracy after the collapse of the monarchy. Michaela Bauks in Chapter 5 provides an overview of the literary mechanisms that drive Genesis forward as a unified whole. As a representative of more recent approaches to the book, Bauks demonstrates how earlier critical methods evolved by giving special attention to its most relevant rhetorical features, first its formal elements, such as reports, etiologies, genealogies, travel reports, cult notices, etymological notices, etc., and then its motifs and semantic structuring elements (keywords, wordplays, etc.).

Having considered the world *in* the text, Part II turns to consider the world *behind* the text. In Chapters 6 and 7, Alice Mandell and John H. Walton place the book of Genesis squarely in its ancient Near Eastern context by exploring both its literary analogues from the surrounding cultures and its conceptual worldview as compared to Israel's neighbors in the ancient world. The history of comparative work is itself a lesson in caution, as Mandell has helpfully shown in a history of the scholarship. Her chapter returns to the relevant comparanda in order to contextualize Genesis in the first millennium BCE. The result of her work is an understanding of the book as unifying the disparate peoples of Israel and Judah into a cohesive family unit in the context of Mesopotamian imperial oppression. John H. Walton explores intercultural commonalities between Genesis and the ancient Near Eastern world, giving focused attention to creation and humanity, perceptions of the divine, and the uses of ancestral narratives. His study helpfully shows how a fixation or preoccupation among scholars to compare individual passages of the Hebrew Bible to individual texts from the ancient world needs to be

balanced by comparative analysis that takes into full account the cognitive environment shared by the cultures producing those texts. His work is especially helpful when we consider that the distance between our contemporary setting and the world of the Hebrew Bible is much greater than that between the Bible itself and its environment in the ancient world (culturally, socially, linguistically, etc.).

In Chapter 8, Naomi A. Steinberg offers a fresh analysis of the Israelite conceptions of kinship units in order better to understand the Israelite family as something more than blood relationship. Steinberg shows how errant Western assumptions from a contemporary perspective can be avoided by focusing on such kinship studies in order to understand traditional roles of family, clan, and tribe. Her study illuminates institutions such as marriage, adoption, bartering, children, and the roles of women in society. On this last point, few other books in the Hebrew Bible have as many women characters as Genesis, making it a fruitful object of study for feminist analysis. Thus in Chapter 9, Sarah Sheckman shows how feminism is not itself a distinct method but a perspective on the text that chooses to focus on women, which therefore also engages all the traditional methodological approaches and serves a complementary role to those methods. In the process, Sheckman illustrates how feminist analysis enhances our understanding both of the text itself and of related issues of power, status, and autonomy.

Of the many notable themes of the book of Genesis, Part III offers representative discussions of a few of the most important. In Chapter 10, Brent A. Strawn courageously turns to the question of the “image of God” (*imago Dei*), which is famously an important statement of the book’s anthropology (Gen 1:26, 27; 5:1–3; 9:6). Strawn considers the theological, historical, and comparative approaches to the question, but then asserts that the book contains not a singular image of God but many images. Whatever else we make of the significance of this phrase, its use must be analyzed in the canonical book as a whole rather than only these few occurrences. By giving attention to the book’s holistic message, Strawn emphasizes the functional (as opposed to essential) category of the divine image, suggesting that humans *become* the image of God only as they *actually image* God (reflecting thus an action more than a state of being).

This is followed by another complex issue arising from the book of Genesis. Indeed, the most frequently asked question among lay readers of the book is the relationship of Genesis to science, which is all too often assumed to be adversarial. In Chapter 11, Jitse M. van der Meer offers

a compelling investigation of the material realities in the experimental and historical natural sciences that intersect with our reading of Genesis. His chapter is a helpful survey of developments in recent decades as a guide for the non-specialist in both cosmic and human evolution showing the reliability of science and suggesting methodological principles in its interaction with Genesis. He argues that the supposed conflict between Genesis and science is an occasion for reevaluation of both, accepting the presuppositions and limitations of science while also reassessing independently the hermeneutical principles at work in the interpretation of Genesis.

Eckart Otto has made significant contributions to the study of the Hebrew Bible as it relates to the field of ethics, both regarding the Bible's internal system of moral versus immoral behaviors, and regarding the contribution of the Hebrew Bible to contemporary ethics. In Chapter 12, he gives special attention to Genesis by distinguishing between two basic types of narratives in the book. On the one hand, "didactic-sapiential narratives" are accounts in which authors of the text invite the readers to imitate the story's moral "heroes" as representatives of an implicit moral behavior. An example of a didactic-sapiential narrative is the Joseph Novel (Gen 37; 39–50). On the other hand, however, much more common in the book of Genesis are narrative tractates, or treatises, on "meta-ethics." In these accounts, human behaviors were valued negatively or positively based on criteria and implicit values arising from "an inner-biblical meta-ethics." Readers of texts such as Gen 2–3, Gen 22, and Gen 38 are invited to evaluate the behavior of the characters based on implicit values taught across a metanarrative, and thus to receive ethical guidance for their own lives. Otto's adroit use of this distinction is helpful in showing the reader how to avoid simplistic, moralistic readings of the multidimensional narratives of Genesis.

In Chapter 13, Paul M. Gould takes up explorations of the origin, nature, and explanation of evil among analytic philosophers, who often have not given enough attention to individual narratives of Genesis in the larger framework of the biblical metanarrative. He offers a fresh investigation based on more than Genesis 1–3, which is as far as many similar investigations go, while Gould considers the narrative arc of the book as a whole.

The final collection of essays, Part IV of the volume, pulls together many of the themes and reading strategies in the history of interpretation to explore the role of Genesis in diverse venues. In Chapter 14, Frederick D. Aquino explores the reception of Genesis among philosophers by considering the relationship between divine commands, what those

commands imply about the concept of divine nature, and ultimately the principle of ethical evaluation. After surveying recent philosophical engagements with Genesis, Aquino turns to the account of the Aqedah (also known as the binding of Isaac; Gen 22:1–19), where many philosophical issues converge, as an investigation of contemporary philosophical readings of the story.

Joel S. Kaminsky in Chapter 15 observes that classical Jewish interpreters sought to explain why the Torah, the majority of which contains divinely issued laws, does not begin with the Passover legislation of Exodus 12 containing the first instructions God gives to all Israel, or with the giving of the Ten Commandments, but rather with an extended prologue – the book of Genesis. He acknowledges a productive tension between the wider universalistic scope of Genesis 1–11 and much of the rest of the Hebrew Bible that is generally more particularistic and focused on Israel. Yet Kaminsky adroitly shows that the more universalistic Primeval History found in Genesis 1–11 contains substantial elements of particularism, while on the other hand, the particularizing ancestral narratives of Genesis 12–50 are more universalistic than often noted. Thus, Genesis anticipates the inseparability of the Bible's particularism (God's election and love of Israel) from the universal ideals it also projects (God's relationship to and concern with non-Israelite peoples and the larger natural world). Such universal ideals grow out of and make sense only in relation to the specificity of the Bible's theological claims. The Bible's universalistic and particularistic impulses are not trapped in a zero-sum game where one must wane if the other waxes. Rather, as Israel's understanding of its unique identity before God deepens so does their awareness of God's relationship to the rest of humanity and of Israel's role in God's larger universal vision for the world.

Finally, in Chapter 16, Iain Provan considers the diverse ways in which Christians have read Genesis from the beginning of the Christian movement. Some early Christians promoted a reading that sought the meaning of the original author, as a literal or historical interpretation, such as Augustine and others. Provan traces the influences of this approach through history to the Renaissance preparing the way for the Protestant Reformation. At times, however, because the early Christians embraced Scripture as a unified and self-consistent text, they also moved beyond the literal sense to other levels of meaning, as Augustine himself even allowed wherever he believed it was warranted. Many others in the post-apostolic Church explored figural and allegorical readings, Origen being the best example. Thus these interpretive strategies could and often did exist side by side until the middle of the seventeenth century,

when modernism's emphasis on the historical sense predominated. Provan's chapter helpfully illustrates the ways in which Christians have read each canonical portion of the book of Genesis.

In sum, the authors of this volume approach Genesis from diverse methods and reading strategies, and they address questions that have in some cases been explored for centuries. In other cases, they raise questions that we have only begun to ask in recent decades. By bringing together leading voices on each of these topics, the cumulative effect is, we hope, a dependable guide to understanding the book of Genesis both now and in the future. Whether the reader is taking the first step on the path or continuing a journey with many miles behind them, this volume will illuminate the role of Genesis in the history of world religions and critical biblical scholarship.