Brenner, Athalya, Archie Chi Chung Lee, and Gale A. Yee, eds.

*Genesis*

Texts @ Contexts


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This book is the first published volume in the new Fortress Press Texts @ Contexts series, which arises out of the Society of Biblical Literature’s Contextual Biblical Interpretation section. The second volume, on Mark, was published in October 2010, with additional volumes currently planned on Exodus and Deuteronomy, Leviticus and Numbers, Joshua and Judges, Matthew, John, and 1 and 2 Corinthians.

Athalya Brenner and Nicole Wilkinson Duran describe the intentions for the series in the book’s preface. The Texts @ Contexts series seeks to foreground the multiple contexts—geographical, gender, faith, community membership, class, among others—that interpreters bring to a given text. It strives to broaden the horizons of what constitutes acceptable biblical interpretation, providing a potent challenge to the hegemony of North Atlantic and Western European, largely Protestant male, interpretations (xi). This is but one among many interpretive postures out of which biblical studies may emerge. The problem comes when one fails to recognize the highly contextual nature of even these results, holding that they are the “only ‘objective,’ plain truth of the text itself” (xii). As Brenner and Duran perceptively write, “no one is native to the biblical text, no one reads only in the interests of the text itself” (xii). Toward these ends, the Texts @ Contexts series intends to produce “volumes exemplifying a broad multivocality in themselves,” presenting within a single volume “multiple contextual readings of the same biblical
texts” (xiv). Two reciprocal trajectories are in evidence: (1) reading one’s contemporary context through the lens of a given biblical book as a means of underscoring problems or issues within that context; (2) reading a biblical book through the lens of a specific contemporary context.

The book is divided into three parts, each treating a particular theme or section of the Genesis narratives. Part 1 (“Beginnings: The Creation Revisited”) comprises nine essays, while parts 2 (“Redreaming with Joseph and Others”) and 3 (“Issues of Gender, Family, and Class”) contain four essays each. Rounding out the volume are author biographies that sketch out each one’s context in more detail than one will find in several of the essays, as well as a comprehensive bibliography and three indexes.

Opening part 1 is an essay by Amadi Ahiamadu entitled “A Critical Assessment of the Creation Mandate in Genesis 1:26–28 and Its Human Rights Implications for Nigeria.” Ahiamadu is trained as a political scientist yet currently serves as a minister of the Reformed Church in Nigeria and Lecturer in Old Testament and African Religion and Culture at the University of Port Harcourt in Nigeria. Ahiamadu rightly notes that the divine speech in Gen 1:26–28 is too often interpreted as signaling humanity as the apogee of creation, whereas in Nigeria and various other parts of Africa humanity is viewed as subservient to creation. What results from these differing perspectives is the blatant exploitation of African land by multinational oil companies, leading further to crop failure and the erosion of social values, as well as paterfamilias and gerontocracy. Compounding the problem, the federal government of postcolonial Nigeria mandated in 1978 that land ownership was a “civil,” not an “inalienable” or “natural,” right; land tenure and stewardship thus belong to state governors, who conspire with multinational oil companies to obtain large parcels of land. To address this gross misuse of the biblical text, Ahiamadu reads the first Genesis creation account in conjunction with other ancient Near Eastern accounts, specifically the Enuma elish and Atrahasis, arguing that an essential similarity among them is the expectation and requirement of human stewardship of creation. The contemporary African context, regarding humans as partners with creation rather than its apex, helps produce a more robust and inclusive definition of stewardship that sees land as partner rather than that which is to be subdued.

Ahiamadu’s appeal to a proper reading of Gen 1:26–28 is an important point that continues to be timely even outside a Nigerian context. The texts he adduces, however, in favor of that proper reading seemingly do very little to redress the problem of eroded human rights. Both the Enuma elish and Atrahasis can hardly advocate for human civil rights. In both myths, humanity is created not simply in service to the gods but as slaves to the gods (see, e.g., Enuma elish VI, 1–40). Their purpose is solely to submit themselves to the drudgery of the deities’ former work. Moreover, humanity is entirely expendable in
both of these texts, decimated by a deluge when they become too noisy for the gods’ liking. Some of the parallels are also not as strong as Ahiamadu suggests; for instance, he states that clay is the common substance of creation in both texts and Genesis, yet clay is not mentioned in Enuma elish. Instead, Marduk creates humanity out of the blood of Kingu, Tiamat’s co-conspirator. A stronger case may be made if Ahiamadu had stressed the differences between Genesis and these two texts, seeing therein an inherent value in humanity—male and female—in the Genesis account compared with the subjugation of humanity (as a part of creation) in the Enuma elish and Atrahasis.

David Tuesday Adamo, Professor of Religion at Nigeria’s Kogi State University, authors the second essay, “The Genesis Creation Accounts: An African Background.” Adamo compares and contrasts biblical and African creation accounts, ultimately concluding that scholarship must attend to the possibility that the myths of ancient Israel and Mesopotamia in fact derive from Africa. After providing a cursory overview of several African creation myths, Adamo compiles a list of differences—which he attributes to the “nature of a floating oral tradition”—and similarities. Among the differences he isolates are that African myths do not speak of a primordial chaos or know the concept of the imago Dei, that the seventh day of rest is a day of evil in African myths, and that African myths personify the moon and trees and are polytheistic. The similarities, conversely, are more significant for Adamo: both African and biblical creation accounts view God as creator and controller of the cosmos who rests on the seventh day, the heavens and earth are the first things created, the original humans are gendered male and female and created from the dust, and humanity is the pinnacle of creation and experiences a fall. God’s greatness, transcendence and immanence, and omnipotence are emphasized in the myths of both cultures as well. As a result, Adamo challenges the consensus that the sources for the biblical accounts are Mesopotamian in origin, proffering three possible mechanisms whereby the Israelites would have gained exposure to the African myths: (1) during their 430 years in Egypt (see Exod 12:44); (2) Mesopotamians encountered and “localized” the African myths, and ancient Israel saw these myths as an affront to their faith in YHWH and reshaped them during the exile; (3) both Sumerians and Israelites encountered the myths in Africa, though they remained unproblematic for Israel until faced with the Sumerian version in the land of Canaan.

While Adamo’s comparative study opens up some interesting avenues to consider, in my view there remains much to be considered. Primary among my questions is whether the similarities Adamo articulates are adequate enough to show Israelite reliance upon or knowledge of African myths. What is one to make of other creation accounts that bear affinities to the Genesis texts but are likely not the product of contact? Is it more helpful to speak of a particular creation form or genre as the reason for these common elements? Additionally, more critical discussion is needed to substantiate Adamo’s case. Never does
Adamo provide a date for any of the African myths he surveys. One may also wonder how the geographical specificity as well as the diversity of African myth would have impacted the Israelites. Not all the elements in common with Genesis are present in every African myth Adamo discusses, an equivocation evident in the many qualifications (“almost all,” “might be … yet basically,” “some” [29–30]) that pepper his discussion of parallels; would ancient Israel have been acquainted with all these African myths, and, if so, what caused them to gravitate to and assimilate certain elements of one myth and reject others? Are biblical accounts of creation a hodge-podge of various African myths? Lastly, Adamo’s essay lacks critical engagement with more recent secondary sources and their questions. His engagement with secondary biblical scholarship does not go past 1984 (and that date is the copyright for the translation of Westermann’s commentary into English). Similarly, he fails to address contemporary critical questions such as the historicity of the exodus, the presence of creation ex nihilo in Gen 1, and humanity’s place in creation (Adamo’s statement that humanity is “given power over all the rest of creation” [30] strikes a resounding dissonance with the previous essay by Ahiamadu).

The next essay, “The Tree of Life as a Female Symbol?” belongs to Athalya Brenner, professor emerita at the University of Amsterdam and Professor of Biblical studies at Tel Aviv University. She writes from the contexts of feminism and secularism. Brenner uses a book on women’s embroidery that depicts female figures with and amidst tree branches as an entrance point to discussing the tree of life in Gen 2–3. Despite not seeing evidence of a goddess (Asherah) in the tree of life symbol, Brenner does see a female/feminine principle manifest in the Hebrew for Eve, הווה, “life.” Relying upon the binary nature of Gen 1–3, Brenner proposes that the tree of knowledge is a male/masculine symbol, withheld from the first couple because “a jealous Father may be withholding the Phallus from his son (and eventually daughter) out of anxiety” (41). Brenner attributes the withholding of the tree of life as indicative of “some male (authorial) anxiety” (42).

Philip Venter, a Dutch Reformed pastor in Johannesburg and research associate at the University of Pretoria, discusses the issue of gender and ideology in Gen 1 in “History or His Story? Ideology of the Body in the First Creation Narrative.” Venter places Gen 1 in the context of the Babylonian exile. He suggests that the real threat posed by this cataclysmic event was a threat not to the people or the earth but to God, specifically, “the God construct as regulatory body that gave solidarity to the social practices of a nation” (44). Genesis 1 comprises its own distinct entity. Masculinity typifies the hierarchical universe of Gen 1, supported by the concepts of wholeness and completeness, which in an ancient context were masculine traits, coupled with the active (and thus male) הבש in opposition to the chaotic (female) waters. Other indicators of the masculine Venter points out are creation by speech, the transformative power of this speech, the metaphor of light/heat, the orderliness of the creation narrative itself, the pronouncement
(“good”), blessing, the phallocentric symbolism of trees, divine rest, and the *imago Dei* concept. As a result, Venter concludes that this uneven portrait of God as exclusively male serves the rhetorical function of empowering the collective body of ancient Israel so that they may resist foreign god constructs. The resoundingly male Elohim becomes “the perfect role model, a role model that, in its maleness, is virtually a perfect image of the male, intelligent, and virile priest” (53).

Venter’s reading will no doubt be troubling for many, yet this essay is a fine example demonstrating the governing importance of context. That aside, this reviewer remains unconvinced (perhaps as a result of my context?) at the one-sided, masculine presentation of Elohim in Gen 1. Venter discerns a hierarchical arrangement in Gen 1:27 with the female subordinate to the male. A stronger case could be made had Venter here followed Trible and understood God as encompassing masculine *and* feminine attributes—a point certainly not lost on contemporary biblical scholars—an observation that could just as well be an attempt to censure the masculine Marduk’s destruction of the female Tiamat. To rule out the feminine in Gen 1 replaces one monstrous deity with another; proper appreciation for the feminine, it seems to me, would have the dual benefit of having the characteristics of strength and power while still communicating the inherent value in all humanity within a context that does not value that same ideal (despite the obvious patriarchal culture of ancient Israel).

The next essay, by Edwin Zulu, an Old Testament scholar from Nambia, continues the discussion of gender. In “Sin, Gender, and Responsibility: A Contextual Interpretation of Genesis 3,” Zulu reads the Genesis text against the backdrop of the Ngoni tribe in Zambia. For the Ngoni, gender defines the role one plays in society; women occupy a central place in this context. Women are to make certain the family is adequately cared for and fed, yet the man is the head of the household. As a result, from the Ngoni perspective it is the man who is at fault in Gen 3 for failing to exercise his authority by declining the serpent’s offer; the man should accept responsibility for his household. Adam’s blaming Eve in Gen 3:12 thus highlights “a failed household, a failed head of household, and a failed family leader who shifts the blame onto a woman” (62). While both male and female are ultimately at fault, the Ngoni would not denigrate the female as has the history of Western interpretation, for she is the giver of life. Another fascinating feature of the text arising from the Ngoni context is that the serpent transgressed by not first obtaining the man’s permission to speak with his wife, a basic tenet of Ngoni society. Similarly, in the Ngoni context Eve would have deferred the decision to eat the fruit to her husband and not made the choice herself to eat. Zulu draws three conclusions: (1) man and woman together bring evil into the world; (2) sins are not gender-based; (3) women are the “givers of life” and thus warrant the highest respect.
In the following chapter, “Re-reading Genesis 1–3 in the Light of Ancient Chinese Creation Myths,” Yan Lin of Shenzhen University employs a cross-textual reading method of Hebrew and Chinese accounts so as to illuminate both. Cross-textual reading (developed by one of this volume’s editors, Archie Lee) “juxtaposes two different texts … so that text A is read in the light of text B, and vice versa” (69). One can then understand text A better, leading to a rereading of text B with greater insight. Lin focuses upon four issues: cosmology (focusing upon the Hebrew words הָוָא and מָנוּ, cosmogony (looking at the verbs אָרְאֵה, יַעֲשֶׂה, and בָּרֵא), human origins (noticing the lack of a “divine dimension” in Chinese myths), and the divine-human relationship (discussing themes of creation and redemption). Lin concludes by drawing a comparison between Chinese appeal to their creation myths in the first half of the twentieth century—a time of colonial exploitation of China—as a means of reinvigorating the Chinese spirit and the authors of Gen 1 during the period of exile.

The next essay, by Archie Chi Chung Lee (Professor of Religious Studies at the Chinese University, Hong Kong), “When the Flood Narrative of Genesis Meets Its Counterpart in China: Reception and Challenge in Cross-Textual Reading,” also compares Genesis with Chinese myths using the cross-textual method. Lee focuses upon the biblical flood narratives in comparison with the Naxi (a Chinese ethnic minority) flood myth. A number of affinities exist: in both accounts the flood comes from God, a hero is provided a method of escape, and a thanksgiving sacrifice marks the end of the flood. Lee cites Claus Westermann, who ascribes blame for the flood to the events of Gen 6:1–4; humanity is punished for attempting to become like God. Conversely, in Chinese culture striving to become divine is strongly encouraged, and in the Naxi flood story the postflood generation promotes intermarriage between “the son of humankind” and “the daughter of the God.” Given this insight, Lee proposes that the relationships forged in Gen 6:1–4 are not to blame for the flood. Naxi readers of Gen 6:1–4 in the context of Gen 1–11 would see it is a vital part of postdiluvian humanity repopulating the world. Therefore, Lee advances the possibility of placing Gen 6:1–4 at the end of the flood account in 9:28–29. This transposition would sync nicely, says Lee, with subsequent events in Gen 9–11, such as the differentiation of language, scattering of humanity, and the advent of agrarian society, all of which follow upon divine-human intermarriage in the Naxi myth.

Mark Rathbone, a minister of the Dutch Reformed Church, addresses the inadequacies of neocolonial and anticolonial readings of Gen 11:1–9 in “Unity and Scattering: Toward a Holistic Reading of Genesis 11:1–9 in the South African Context.” Rathbone notes how neocolonial readings have been used by the Dutch Reformed Church to justify apartheid by emphasizing the divine mandate to scatter those at Shinar. Such readings lead to “unjust forms of ethnocentricism” (102). Similarly, Desmond Tutu offers an anticolonial
reading through the lens of Gen 1:26, holding that the basic tenet of creation is shalom, wholeness, unity. For Tutu, scattering stems from sin, but the Holy Spirit restores that original unity. This type of reading, argues Rathbone, runs the risk of cultural relativism. Rather than attempting to resolve the unity/scattering dichotomy, Rathbone avers that it is best to let the tension remain. Using the art of Azaria Mhatha as a hermeneutical lens, he proposes that the peoples’ sin with the tower “is the result of the disconnection between people, land, and God due to the loss of cultural identity” (105).

The final chapter in part 1 is by Yael Shemesh, a lecturer at Bar-Ilan University, entitled “Vegetarian Ideology in Talmudic Literature and Traditional Biblical Exegesis.” Shemesh writes as a vegetarian and an observant Jew with the purpose of raising voices from talmudic literature and traditional Jewish commentators that support a vegetarian way of life. Shemesh mines Jewish literature on the topic, revealing that the sages held that the ten antediluvian generations spanning Adam to Noah were vegetarians. Only after the flood was humanity allowed to eat meat. A number of possible reasons for this shift are present in the Talmud, among them the view that, because humanity was the vehicle for the animals’ survival of the deluge, humanity could do with the animals as it saw fit, that after the flood meat was one of the only surviving foods, or because only after the flood did humanity attain the level of a rational being worthy of eating meat. This carnivorous identity was not to last long: God’s provision of manna in the wilderness (see Exod 16:4) is seen as a divine initiative to reinstitute vegetarianism. Concerning present matters, Shemesh adduces several texts that advocate moderation or limiting one’s meat intake, though she notes the impetus behind this appears to be an economic rather than ethical concern. In other texts, abstinence from meat is regarded as a method of mourning the temple’s destruction. Regarding the future, Shemesh cites Isaac Abravanel’s commentary on Isa 11:6–7 as evidence for the idea that the messianic age will see a return to the harmony of the original created order and thus, by extension, a return to vegetarianism.

Part 2 of the book treats dreams and the Joseph narrative. The first essay, “Here Comes This Dreamer: Reading Joseph the Slave in Multicultural and Interfaith Contexts,” is by Carole Fontaine, Professor of Biblical Theology and History at Andover Newton Theological School. Fontaine writes from the perspective of a biblical scholar using biblical texts to address human rights issues, a context, she says, that has resulted in her being named an enemy of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Fontaine is also responsible for my favorite line in the entire book, because of its evocative power in making one appreciate the intrinsic import and unsettledness of the biblical text; her words attest to the gravity of a very important task. She writes: “Aside from the discord of being part of a trophy ‘minority’—religious scholars who will speak up—my sense of discontinuity is not simply at the discovery that being a biblical theologian is enough to get you many death threats, if you do it properly” (133, emphasis added). Turning to the biblical text, Fontaine
regards Joseph as a figure who successfully endures human trafficking and ultimately becomes a successful state-food-aid distributor (135). It is striking, notes Fontaine, that the system devised by Joseph the former slave is that same system that will enslave his family within a few generations (144). She muses over whether the trauma of Joseph’s experience in human trafficking may be one avenue to explain “his later descent into administrative slaveholding” (144).

Meira Polliack, Professor of Bible at Tel Aviv University, reads the Joseph story in tandem with modern theories of trauma, recovery, and memory in “Joseph’s Journey: From Trauma to Resolution.” The key verse for Polliack is Gen 42:9, “And Joseph remembered the dreams he dreamt for them.” Precisely what Joseph remembers is left ambiguous in the text. Polliack suggests that Joseph’s brothers bowing before him (42:6) triggers the memory of his experience at their hands. Joseph’s subsequent accusations and harsh treatment of his brothers becomes a “symptom” of his earlier ordeal, reenacting the trauma at their expense as a means of catharsis (159). Polliack isolates two additional key texts that demonstrate Joseph’s recuperation. First, in Gen 42:21–24 Joseph overhears his brothers recounting the trauma among themselves, which continues the arduously slow healing process and begins to provide Joseph with a grammar to make sense of his experience. Second, Judah’s speech in Gen 44:18–34 reestablishes the emotional and familial bond between Joseph and his brothers. This process of reenacting his own trauma through memory eventually gives way to recovery when Joseph reveals himself to his brothers and recounts their selling him; it is significant that Joseph never narrates the experience of the pit, says Polliack, as that pain is too deep. Joseph’s avowal in Gen 45:5 that God has been behind it all is part of a “new story” that recasts Joseph’s hurt and suffering as “dignity and virtue” (168). He ascribes meaning and significance to his traumatic experiences. Closing out Joseph’s recovery is his urgent insistence that the brothers “hurry” to bring Jacob to Egypt.

Polliack’s essay shows the contribution that a textual-based psychoanalytic reading of a biblical character can offer. Some aspects of her essay, however, were initially difficult to follow for someone who is not well-versed in trauma theory. For this reason, the “Postscript,” where Polliack defines “trauma” and the nexus of trauma, dreams, recovery, and memory, would fit much better at the outset of the essay as an orientation to the key concepts and assumptions operative in her study. In reading this piece, I also cannot help but be fascinated in thinking how such an investigation would inform the narratives about Isaac, the most passive of patriarchs. Whereas Joseph is able to face his trauma and achieve some level of recovery, the trauma of Gen 22 seems to debilitate Isaac for the remainder of his life. He is almost always from that point onward an object acted upon. How might the deep (and repressed?) wounds of the Akedah scene inform texts about Isaac?
The next essay (“Leadership and Land: A Very Contextual Interpretation of Genesis 37–50 in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa), by Gerald West and Thulani Ndlazi, the former a professor and the latter a Ph.D. candidate at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, is less a contextual interpretation itself and more a “how to” on contextual interpretation and its successes in dealing with the issue of land control in South Africa. Against the backdrop of postapartheid governments failing to return the majority of commercial agricultural land to indigenous South Africans, the Church Land Programme was launched. The purpose of the Church Land Programme Bible study series is to supply for churches biblical values regarding land issues through Bible study materials related to land issues, to educate churches on the Bible’s perspective on land issues, and to provide a context within churches for members to discuss land issues. West and Ndlazi then sketch out the contours and specifics of their contextual Bible study on the Joseph story. They report that this study, among others, has been “a nonthreatening but effective and empowering tool in drawing participants into a space of critical dialogue” (187).

The final chapter of part 2 is entitled “Same Bed, Different Dreams: An Engendered Reading of Families in Migration in Genesis and Hong Kong,” by Wai Ching Wong, associate professor at Chinese University, Hong Kong. Wong treats dream stories in the ancestral narratives (sans Joseph), reading these texts in conjunction with the depiction of dreams in films and literature relating the experiences of migrant (new immigrant) women in Hong Kong. Using well-known Hong Kong and Taiwan author Xixi’s novel The Flying Carpet as an entrance point, Wong isolates three important facets of a cross-textual reading of dreams of the patriarchs: (1) dreams are an act of resistance; (2) male and female dreams differ; (3) dreams are tied to migration. Turning to the ancestral narratives, Wong states that dreams “are narrative moments when God’s assurance is sought during the fathers’ migration between their native land and a foreign land” (199). In her analysis, Wong relies upon—both implicitly and explicitly—and follows much of Diana Lipton’s seminal study on dreams in Genesis (Revisions of the Night: Politics and Promises in the Patriarchal Dreams of Genesis [JSOTS 288; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999]). Upon noting the absolute dearth of narrated women’s dreams in the biblical text, Wong poses the fascinating question of what the matriarchs would have dreamt. She proposes to fill this lacuna with stories of Chinese immigrant women in Hong Kong, relating two brief stories of long work days, discrimination, lazy or absent husbands, and families for which to care. Wong concludes by suggesting that the matriarchs would have dreamt “to succeed in their roles and better their lives on their own terms … bear[ing] hopes for the future despite difficulties in their migrating life, adjusting to living between cities” (210). Wong hints that she plans to continue this project in the future, which will provide a welcome addition to the necessity and value of studies on the women in Genesis.
Wong overstates her case when she asserts that the biblical texts are silent about what the women truly feel “because their feelings are not important” (203–4) or “women’s aspirations and desires have never been valued” (210). Rebekah serves as a fine counter-example. Despite not taking place in the context of a dream, Rebekah’s impassioned and indefinite cry in Gen 25:22 offers the reader a glimpse into her emotional state. Moreover, she is the only woman in the biblical text to “seek” (ﺸﺪ) and find God (see Gen 25:22). The divine oracle she receives contains the kernel of the promise that will work toward fulfillment in her son Jacob, for whom she is a burst of activity in preparing the deception of Isaac (Gen 27). One may argue that the reader here gets a far greater appreciation for Rebekah’s motives and aims than those of Jacob or especially Isaac. Similarly, the reader gains detailed insight into Leah and Rachel’s thoughts in their contest over Jacob’s affections (see Gen 29:31–30:24). In short, Wong’s question regarding what matriarchal dreams may have looked like is a wonderfully insightful one that warrants further study; that no dreams are recorded for the women, however, does not mean the narrative provides no insight into their feelings and emotions.

Part 3 of the book opens with an essay by Yairah Amit, Professor of Biblical Studies at Tel Aviv University, entitled “The Case of Judah and Tamar in the Contemporary Israeli Context: A Relevant Interpolation.” She divides her contribution into two parts, first addressing Gen 38 as an interpolation intruding upon the Joseph story, then looking at the story’s relevance to the contemporary Israeli context. Genesis 38 as interpolation, argues Amit, raises two related issues for modern-day Israeli society: marriage with non-Jewish women and levirate marriage. Pertaining to the former, Amit sees the biblical text as offering two possible responses to the question of who is an Israelite: an exclusive stance in Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School, and a more inclusive stance evident in the editing of the Holiness school. Genesis 38 advances a positive view on intermarriage, given that Tamar is never disparaged because of her Canaanite identity. Pertaining to the latter, Amit notes that the many wars and terrorist attacks in Israel have left a great many childless widows, and despite seeming archaic, the law of levirate marriage is still practiced. One avenue Amit proposes is to address the issue in a prenuptial agreement.

Cheryl Kirk-Duggan, professor at Shaw University Divinity School and an elder in the Methodist Episcopal Church, authors “Characterizations, Comedy, and Catastrophe: Divine/Human Relations, Emotions, and Rules of Law.” Kirk-Duggan reads Gen 1–9, specifically the stories of Adam and Eve and Noah and Mrs. Noah, from an interdisciplinary womanist context, paying specific attention to instances of comedy and tragedy in the text, as well as divine sensibilities. One example of comedy is the realization—given the serpent’s use of the plural form of “you” when speaking with Eve—that Adam has never left Eve’s side but still has no reservations about blaming her. He
remains a comedic bystander who ironically stands silent rather than admonishing his wife not to eat. Regarding divine sensibilities in the Noah story, Kirk-Duggan asks how contemporary readers may hear this text, noting that a child may see little more than a divine temper tantrum, while those engaged in domestic violence may find justification for their actions. She concludes, “God does not always act positively in a given moment on behalf of the poor and disenfranchised” (245). Kirk-Duggan also poses a number of insightful questions to the biblical text, such as whether the presence of women’s voices in Gen 6–9 would produce a startling different story, how Noah afforded the materials for the ark (prompting a brief summary of the Steve Carell movie *Evan Almighty*), and, once on the ark, “what did they do with all the poop?” (242).

The next essay, by Kari Latvus (lecturer at the University of Helsinki), “Reading Hagar in Contexts: From Exegesis to Inter-contextual Analysis,” employs intercontextual analysis (or, a *four-context model*) to connect ancient text and contemporary life in the Hagar narratives in Gen 16 and 21. The four contexts he addresses are views behind the biblical text, views of the biblical writers, his own views, and views of today’s poor. For Latvus, Hagar the Egyptian becomes “a forerunner of and companion to all immigrant women who live and work in forced reality” (247). After a thorough survey of the historical and diachronic landscape of the Hagar texts—in which he concludes that Gen 16 belongs to a preexilic J layer and that Gen 21 is a postexilic midrash to elucidate Hagar’s place in the family of Abraham—Latvus deftly demonstrates how historical/exegetical considerations can illuminate contemporary reality without emphasizing one at the expense of the other. In conclusion, Latvus extends the important reminder that Hagar’s story continues in the lives of contemporary impoverished immigrant females relegated to the margins, whose urgent cries “for refuge and protection” need to be heard and addressed (274).

Closing out this section, and the book, is “The African Wife of Abraham: An African Reading of Genesis 16:1–16 and 21:8–21,” by David Tuesday Adamo and Erivwierho Francis Eghwubare, both of whom are at Kogi State University in Nigeria. Adamo and Eghwubare indict Euro-American Old Testament scholars for “de-Africaniz[ing]” the Bible (275). This view fails to account for the countless commendations Africa receives in the Bible, serving as the location for Moses’ birth, the land of Israel’s nascence, Jeremiah’s final days, and Jesus’ childhood. To this roster one should also add Hagar. Upon presenting the various possibilities for the etymology of Hagar’s name to demonstrate “the Africanness” of ancient Egypt (Hagar included), Adamo and Eghwubare argue that Hagar occupies an inimitable role in comparison with other biblical women. She receives from God a promise of a child who will become a nation, sees and names God, is sustained by God in the wilderness, and is comforted by God amidst her subjugation. Taken together, Hagar serves as a symbol for God’s deliverance of all humanity, not only Israelites. It is not inconsequential that Hagar is the matriarch for Islam, which traces its
lineage through her and her son Ishmael. Adamo and Eghwubare then discuss Hagar against the backdrop of Urhobo (a Nigerian tribe) marriage law, which is strikingly similar to the story of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar. The Urhobo are a polygamous tribe, although the first wife has the distinction of being head wife, with all others ranked according to marriage date. Status of children according to the Urhobo, however, is not based upon the mother’s ranking but on the individual child’s date of birth; a son can elevate his mother’s position in the family. Hagar, argues Adamo and Eghwubare, stands as an emblem of liberation not only for African women but also for the poor, ethnic minorities and women. She is a vital link in the chain of salvation history.

This first volume in the Texts @ Contexts series presents a formidable orientation to the liberating, transformative, and eye-opening power of contextual interpretation. It offers a refreshing take on the Genesis text (or parts thereof) unlike anything one will encounter in extant critical commentaries. The series will present a welcome challenge to any semblance of scholarly complacency or those in Ph.D. programs who in desperation affirm that there is nothing new to argue in regards to these ancient texts! Cheryl Kirk-Duggan describes the point nicely: “Depending upon the issues of the day and my context, my sense of it all swings like a pendulum, sometimes landing on a particular point ... sometimes embracing an amalgam” (239). The import of this volume lies in the diversity of its voices. This book also stands as a helpful corrective, advocating an important reminder to all biblical interpreters to be honest in admitting that context plays an inescapable role in interpretation. No exegesis is or can be entirely disinterested.

Despite its many strengths, I should like to point out two weaknesses that may be addressed in future volumes. First, at times individual authors fail to articulate the particulars of their context clearly (or at all), which may make some essays cumbersome and difficult to follow for readers unaccustomed to the cultural essentials of a given context. Cheryl Kirk-Duggan, however, is one (among several) who successfully outlines her multiple contexts in a way that is not only manageable but also unpacks the terminology (in her case, womanist) so a reader knows precisely how Kirk-Duggan understands the term. Many of the words used to describe the various contexts (feminist, postcolonial, etc.) are polyvalent, so greater precision in defining the context and what is meant by that context would prove helpful. To be fair, of course, one can never articulate fully every contextual factor that may influence interpretation. My concern is simply that the contexts are outlined as clearly as possible at the outset of the essays in a way that is concise and clear.

Second, and perhaps more important, more balance is needed in terms of texts treated and contexts addressed for this and future volumes to meet its express goal of offering “multiple contextual readings of the same biblical texts” (xiv). This volume is not entirely
successful in achieving this goal. In part 1 the reader is exposed to a number of different readings of creation (eight in total, nearly half the volume), though there is only one essay in the entire book (by Mark Rathbone) that deals with the tower of Babel story in Gen 11:1–9. Similarly, Archie Lee’s essay on the biblical flood narratives is the only one to discuss these texts, save for part of Cheryl Kirk-Duggan’s essay on the comic and tragic. Wai Ching Wong’s essay is the only one that treats the Jacob narratives at all, and Yairah Amit is alone in dealing with Gen 38. While I appreciate the range of texts handled, failure to have even at least one counterpart for some texts results in a somewhat uneven volume. The matter of context is also a bit lopsided, with eight contributors writing from an African perspective, three from Hong Kong/China, two from the United States, four from Israel, and one from Finland. While these geographic locales are but one part of a multivalent context for each author, they are no doubt operative whether the author intends them to be or not. I am less concerned about balancing the contributors than I am the texts treated, but it may be something about which the series editors would like to be mindful in helping to meet the central goal of the series.

These criticisms notwithstanding, the chief strength of this volume and, I anticipate, the series as a whole is that it shows the efficacy of Scripture in its ability to address—and redress—contemporary issues of grave importance. Contextual interpretation breathes new life into these sometimes tired texts, imbuing them with a renewed value and vigor that speaks not merely of the history of the text, as though it were a calcified relic, but of the text as a vibrant and living organism with as much to say to situations of contemporary life as there are contexts to exhaust.