Jennings, William H.

Storms over Genesis: Biblical Battleground in America's Wars of Religion


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William H. Jennings, a distant ancestor of William Jennings Bryan and Emeritus Professor of Religion at Muhlenburg College, has written an engaging, if occasionally erratic, book that tries to make sense of the various arguments, debates, and controversies engendered by and connected to the first three chapters of the book of Genesis. He aptly terms these debates “storms.” His focus is largely on the Protestant context of the United States in the past and present century. His selection of this context is certainly justified because “that is where the debates are most intense and interesting” (xii). Jennings is careful, however, to include the perspectives of both the Roman Catholic and Jewish traditions. Additionally, Jennings largely limits his examination to interreligious debates. “Our focus will be upon how Christians and Jews who call for changes in the religion that they follow face off verbally against those who take a more defensive and traditional stand…. The views and debates considered are from within Christianity and Judaism” (xii). These delimitations permit Jennings to structure his study to speak directly to those who are most engaged in debates surrounding the proper interpretative strategies for making sense of Gen 1–3.
Jennings’s first chapter provides general background on Gen 1–3 and explains the nature of critical biblical scholarship. It can be divided into two major sections. In the first, he introduces readers to the standard scholarly consensus that Gen 1–3 contains two creation stories, composed at different points in the history of ancient Israel by different sources: the Yahwist and the Priestly sources. He continues by contrasting the two stories by means of the name used for the Israelite deity and the question of what existed prior to creation. He briefly highlights the lack of sexual language, in marked contrast to many other creation stories, to describe the Israelite deity’s creation of the world. Jennings also introduces the concept of anthropomorphic language and illustrates how both creation stories participate in anthropomorphic language concerning the god of Israel—a god who “speaks” the world into being and a god who “forms” the first human being from the ground. He finally points to the nature of male and female and their relationship to one another in the two accounts. (He focuses especially on the supposed connection between sex and sin in the account of the Yahwist.)

The second half of the first chapter is then devoted to a broad explanation of academic biblical scholarship, its methods and goals. Jennings concisely claims that “biblical criticism has attempted to focus on the Bible as a human book and to read without the influence of dogmas or traditional interpretations. It draws on human sciences—such as philology, archaeology, history—and has at times attempted to be scientific and objective in approaching the Bible” (16). Jennings highlights the potential implications of academic biblical scholarship for questions related to the nature and authority of Scripture before introducing the fundamentalist response—particularly the Presbyterian origins of The Fundamentals in the early twentieth century—to the adoption of academic biblical scholarship in many Christian seminaries. He concludes by highlighting modern, nonfundamentalist Christian denominations and their general acceptance of academic biblical scholarship as a method for interpreting the Bible. He states that “clergy and many laypeople today are familiar with methods of Bible study that emphasize historical development, and they commonly talk about J and E and P when reading the first books of the Bible” (21).

Each of the remaining three chapters focuses on a particular area of debate or concern raised by the creation narratives in Gen 1–3. Chapter 2 explores the “challenges of feminists.” Jennings focuses first on issues raised by the Yahwist source before turning to the Priestly account of creation. Jennings highlights the (dominant?) views of those scholars who claim that the Yahwist creation account has a negative view of women and their relationship to males. He does so with a catenation of truly horrendous things that Christian males have said about women on the basis of their reading of some passage or other in Gen 2 and 3. Special attention is given to the claim that “the male was created first” and “the woman was the first to sin.” He next turns to a brief overview of P. Trible
and H. Bloom, whom he claims as “defenders” of the Yahwist. He is sympathetic to Trible’s suggestion that we must divorce our reading of Gen 2 and 3 from the misogynistic interpretations it has received throughout Christian history. He is intrigued, but ultimately unconvinced, by H. Bloom’s notion that the Yahwist was, in fact, a female. In this evaluation he is, of course, not alone. His conclusion is that “most feminists continue to read the story as hopelessly biased against women” (38).

Jennings sees the relationship between male and female in Gen 1 as more complicated. He points out that many feminists read the claim that “God created humankind in his image; male and female God created them” (Gen 1:28) as biblical mandate for gender equality. Many other scholars, however, point to the pervasive patriarchy that remains in the use of the masculine pronoun for the god of Israel and the hierarchical nature of the creation account of Gen 1. After introducing these two terms, patriarchy and hierarchy, Jennings turns to “female images” of god in the Hebrew Bible and the work of theologians S. McFague and R. Ruether, who are known, in part, for their focus on the metaphorical nature of all language concerning the divine. He argues that more feminine models for God are a necessary corrective to many of the deeply embedded patriarchal assumptions codified in Gen 1.

Jennings concludes chapter 2 with a brief introduction to evangelical reactions to the questions raised by feminists who believe the creation stories of Gen 1–3 are inimical to the well-being of women and in need of major correction, if not outright rejection. Jennings introduces two groups. Christians for Biblical Equality maintains that “the problem is not with the Bible…. the problem is that the Bible has been misinterpreted in ways that do harm to women” (46; see http://www.cbeinternational.org/). They are in favor of full equality between males and females. Another evangelical group, the Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, argue for distinctive and hierarchically divided roles for males and females (see http://www.cbmw.org/).

Jennings discusses the ecological consequences of Gen 1–3 in chapter 3. The first half of the chapter explores the rise of ecological challenges to traditional readings of the creation stories. The second half explores what Jennings terms the “greening” of Jewish and Christian thought. In the first section, he opens with a reference to a well-known article by the medieval historian Lynn White Jr. In this article (“The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” Science 115.3767 [March 1967]), White attributes the (already) unfolding ecological crisis to the “biblical” idea that all of creation is separate and other from humanity and that nature was made for the benefit of human beings. “Man shares, in great measure, God’s transcendence of nature. Christianity not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God’s will that man exploit nature for his proper ends” (52). Genesis 1–3 is the foundational document for anthropocen-
trism, according to White and many of the biblical scholars who have followed. Jennings, as in his section on feminist readings, divides the responses into those who “blame” Genesis for negative ecological views and those who “defend” Genesis against such charges and claim the texts have only been misinterpreted. Under the first category, Jennings highlights the standard interpretation of the biblical mandate for humanity to “have dominion” and “subdue” the created world. He demonstrates how pervasive an anthropocentric reading of such a passage is in the modern world. (One must chuckle here to see John Paul II and an anonymous letter to “Dear Abby” quoted in the same paragraph to make this point.) Jennings also explores how the narrative of Adam “naming” the animals has been utilized to highlight the superiority of humanity over creation. With regard to the “defenders” of Genesis, Jennings points to a number of suggestions made by recent and ecologically sensitive readers of Genesis. The “creation stories reflect a covenant involving God, nature, and humans” that views human beings as part of the created order itself. Jennings points to the Yahwist’s vision of the first human being formed from the ‘adama to highlight humanity’s physical connection to the natural world. He also highlights the many limitations of human use of nature throughout the Hebrew Bible (prediluvian vegetarianism, Sabbath restrictions for humans, animals, and land, and the Jewish notion of Bal Tashcit [Do not destroy], derived from Deut 20:19).

In the second section of chapter 3 Jennings explores contemporary theological thinking that draws from the ecological concerns listed above. Jennings moves away from direct discussion of biblical texts in this section to introduce panentheism. Jennings maintains that the ecological problems associated with Gen 1–3 are not simply exegetical but are a result of classical Western theism itself. Jennings holds that, “as a substitute for classical theism, panentheism is proposed. The term comes from the Greek: pan (all) en (in) theos (God). All is in God, but God is more than all.” He is quick to point out, however, that “Panentheism is not to be confused with pantheism” (64). In this connection, Jennings also highlights the ecofeminist connection between ecological concerns and those issues noted by feminists in the previous chapter. Hierarchy of male over female is connected to the idea of a hierarchy of humanity over nature.

The final chapter explores the historic origins of creationism as a movement within the Protestant Christian tradition in the United States. Jennings begins with a very brief overview of the iconic evolution court case (the “monkey trial”) that took place in Dayton, Tennessee, in 1925. Creationism is still deeply rooted in nearby Bryan College and its Center for Origins Research (http://www.bryan.edu/core.html). Jennings notes that arguments for a literalist reading of Gen 1–3 are still pervasive in large parts of American Protestant thought. He helpfully connects such widespread interpretive preferences to the broad usage of the Scofield Reference Bible (named for Rev. Cyrus...
Scofield) by many Protestants during the twentieth century. The Scofield Bible appeared in 1909 and relied on traditional (precritical) methods for arriving at the date of creation and the age of the earth. Following Archbishop James Usher (1581–1656), Scofield placed 4004 B.C.E. as the probable date of creation in the margins of the text beside Gen 1. Jennings suggests, however, that Scofield actually held to something termed the “gap theory.” Scofield, reading in the Authorized Version, read radical discontinuity between the phrases “God created the heavens and the earth” and the phrase “the earth was formless and void.” Scofield claimed the first line spoke to the creative power of the deity and may have hidden eons of geological time under its prosaic phrasing. The second phrase, with its reference to “formlessness,” spoke of a second creation following a cosmic upheaval—connected by Scofield with the fall of Satan. Such a midrashic reading of Gen 1:1 and 1:2 allowed Scofield to hold a literalist interpretation of Gen 1 in spite of the increasing geological evidence of the creation of the world.¹

Jennings provides a helpful overview of modern creation science. Of special interest is his discussion of the Creation Museum, located in northern Kentucky, which is committed to young-earth creationism (http://creationmuseum.org/). Young-earth creationists hold that the world and everything in it was created just as the biblical texts claim and that the goal of the accounts in Gen 1–3 is to provide Christians with “scientific” knowledge regarding the origins of life. Young-earth creationism can be contrasted with old-earth creationism. While most old-earth Creationists would consider themselves literalists or fundamentalists, they argue that the Hebrew term “day” could sometimes refer to a period longer than 24 hours.

Jennings contrasts the views of both young-earth and old-earth creationists with the view of mainline Protestant denominations and the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. These Christian traditions are much less comfortable with creationism and have, at times, even argued against the introduction of the teaching of creationism in public schools. He concludes with a discussion of intelligent design and the question of whether it is simply another form of creationism or substantively different in its arguments. The book closes with an appendix dealing with translational matters and the New Revised Standard

¹ Such a reading works only with regard to the English translation found in the King James Version, however. The JPS translation reads “when God began to create the heavens and earth—the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water—God said....” Scofield’s reading only “works” in connection, therefore, with a translation that many modern biblical scholars see as incorrect. For a recent discussion of issues related to the translation of Gen 1:1–3, see Mark S. Smith, The Priestly Vision of Genesis 1 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 43–49.
Version of Gen 1–3 and an appendix outlining recent U.S. court cases in which the book of Genesis has played a central role.

Jennings has done an admirable job of outlining the various ways in which Gen 1–3 has intersected with many of the important concerns and controversies of the past century. Along the way, he demonstrates how traditional readings of the creation narratives have conflicted with new scientific knowledge and changing cultural values. The work does have a number of deficiencies, however.

The intended audience of the book is an issue. I can imagine using the text in either an undergraduate course in biblical studies or in a religiously affiliated, adult education setting. I would, however, have some reservations with using the book in such a context due to the way in which Jennings often covers too much ground with too little detail. Scholarly theories such as the Documentary Hypothesis or modern debates surrounding intelligent design are often covered in just over a page. Such cursory treatment would require substantial explication by an instructor, if the work were to be utilized in one of the above contexts. There are also a number of places where Jennings’s treatment of particular issues feels a little dated. The work of P. Trible, for example, is absolutely essential for understanding feminist reading strategies with regard to Gen 1–3, but a tremendous amount of very good work has taken place over the past few decades. It would have been helpful for Jennings also to share more recent feminist approaches to the creation stories. It is also unfortunate that no one at Fortress Press caught Jennings’s mistaken claim that bara’ is Hebrew for “kind” (84). Finally, I found it interesting that there was virtually no discussion of the role of Genesis in modern debates about homosexuality. Given the state of the debate surrounding same-sex marriage and other matters related to the equality of homosexual people, both within the larger culture and especially within mainline Christianity, the silence of this particular storm was somewhat deafening.