Hendel, Ronald, ed.

*Reading Genesis: Ten Methods*


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This collection of essays, edited by Ronald Hendel, is one of a growing number of endeavors to create a new order in biblical studies. Once dominated by the products of the *Einleitungswissenschaft*, the grand and comprehensive introductions to biblical studies, mostly (re)producing the basic theories, the center has given way to a plethora of approaches, each with its own aspirations and characteristics. In this situation Ronald Hendel proffers a shifting focus, in which ten different approaches, from the literary vista to modern theology, are to make for a multiple perspective of methodical pluralism. A second purpose is the return to a “premodern” “intelligent reading” of the biblical text in an effort to make sense of the text as such, without losing sight of the methods and insights gained by modern, critical methodologies. This volume is opened by three contributions that address the basic issues: literary study, which echoes in all ensuing essays; cultural memory, which adapts the historical view to new insights; and an essay on source and redaction criticism, in particular over against literary study.

In a sense, the tone for this volume is set by Robert Alter’s essay on “Literature,” which deftly introduces Herder’s program for a literary reading of the Bible, shortly reviews Auerbach’s *Mimesis* as the watershed, then turns to Frei’s *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* to indicate what biblical studies has lost by the overtly historical approach. Literary study in
Alter’s sense represent characters such as Saul or David as “history-like” or a realistic figure “realizing his destiny in the realm of political power … under the pressures and contradictions of the historical process,” much like the figures of a political roman. Alter demonstrates the working of the literary perspective in an attractive study of the Jacob tales that highlights the coherence introduced by recurrent motifs, the stone, the contender and bargainer, the depth of his feelings, and, last but not least, his wrestling for an existence. In the end, Alter addresses the question of diversity within this unity. In Alter’s view the presence of alternative sources, E and P, does not distract from the basic unity of the tale, since the redactor gave place of pride to J’s persuasive portrait of Jacob. What remains disturbing in this study is the narrow view of what “literature” means, which definitely remains behind the achievements of The Art of Biblical Narrative and its chapter on “Sacred History.” In biblical context the polity in which Saul, David, and Jacob act is the theopolity, and therefore the portent of the narrative by far transcends that of the novel, in the same way as Aechylus’s Oresteia or Sophocles’ Oedipus Blinded/Antigone/Oedipus in Colonus transcend that of a stage play. A broader perspective would have been possible had Alter given Martin Buber his due place, since it was Buber who opened up our discipline for the ideas of Oskar Walzel, whose Gehalt und Gestalt was one of the trail blazers of modern immanent literary study as New Criticism or Werkinterpretation. Admittedly, the notion of the “key word” is far from encompassing the comprehensive literary experience, but it was the tracing of the key words in the Jacob narratives that enabled Buber to present an intrinsic relationship between Jacob’s dealing with Esau and Laban.

Ronald Hendel presents “Cultural Memory” as the past remembered rather than as the aggregate of historical factualities and poetics as the narrative design that makes it possible to give memory form. The tale of Jacob’s dream at Bethel, which Gunkel classified as an etiological charter tale for the cult at Bethel, is viewed as a place of memory enabling the Israelite pilgrims to take part in the collective past, much like the landscape of the “Holy Land” for the latter-day Christian pilgrims. The Jacob narrative shows that the Haran/Ḥarrān region was part of the sacred topography of Genesis, likely preserving vague memories of Amorite tribal roots. The forgetting of ancient non-Yahwistic cultic practices forms an additional aspect of the poetics of memory.

A spirited defense of the Documentary Hypothesis and redaction criticism is offered by Robert Kawashima. Although Kawashima admits that ancient books differ from modern books and that they should not be read as the “integral work of a single author” (54), he maintains that a modern literary reading of Genesis always presupposes the activity of an author, whose existence is only warranted by source criticism, as, for example, in the story complex of Gen 1–3. Analysis of the Pentateuch in its final redacted form as a composite text is the task of redaction criticism, which is to deal with the work of the
“literary figure who assembled the received texts into a single work” (62, quoting R. Friedman). The status of the editor is contrasted with that of the author, in that his composite artistry is limited to a choice out of and the combination of different authored texts. Accordingly, Kawashima argues that an analysis of “editorial intention” should begin with the works that lay before the redactor, as in the story complex of the flood. Recognition of the different layers makes it possible to assess the contribution of the redaction. In Kawashima’s view, only this procedure fits the “direct historical relationship between philology and the modern academic study of literature,” which both embody the close attention to and ardent love for the text. What remains difficult in this argumentation is not only the contradiction between his recognition that ancient books simply are unlike modern books and his assumption that authorial intention is at the root of all literary study (an assumption not shared by most students of literature); a far graver problem, which he fails to even mention, is posed by the fact that the so-called criteria of source criticism, on whose validity such scholars as Westermann and Whybray cast doubt, are based on the aesthetic norms of the seventeenth–nineteenth century classical gymnasium rather than on systematic study of the norms of ancient Near Eastern single texts. Kawashima fails, for instance, to deal with the matter of repetition, ubiquitous in ancient Near Eastern texts, in Homer, and, in fact, in all literary texts, but until this very day a criterion for splitting up text units as “repetitious.” It should also be realized that in traditional narrative the “single author” oftentimes is no less bound to tradition than the redactor is. Since redactor and single author also are both literary figures, it is not always possible to set them apart.

These three studies are followed by a number of essays on various aspects of Genesis. An essay on gender and sexuality, by Ronald Hendel, Chana Kronfeld, and Ilana Pardes, offers a succinct review of gender studies since de Beauvoir and Phyllis Trible until Foucault, Daniel Boyarin, and Susan Ackerman, then analyzes the tale of Sodom as a primal scene that casts “a shadow on issues of gender, sexuality and procreation in the Bible.” An essay by Yair Zakovitch on “Inner-Biblical Interpretation” approaches the same features as Alter’s study of the Jacob narratives but explains them as a matter of innerbiblical exegesis rather than as plot development. This essay lays an easy bridge to premodern interpretation, which could be viewed as the continuation of innerbiblical exegesis in a new framework.

Premodern interpretation is introduced by an essay by Dina Stein on “Rabbinic Interpretation,” which opens with the predecessors of midrash exegesis in the books of Jubilees, Enoch, and the Genesis Apocryphon discovered at Qumran, then continues to discuss Philo and modern philological validations of rabbinic midrash literature by Isaac and Joseph Heinemann and by Daniel Boyarin. Stein mentions particularistic interpretations of the creation tale and analyzes the midrashic view of Abraham, with its
literary and intertextual features. The present reviewer regrets that this discussion of “rabbinc interpretation” does not extend over the field of medieval Jewish exegesis, which, after all, was no less rabbinc than the midrash and is revealing for the power of premodern exegesis. Richard A. Layton’s parallel essay on “Interpretation in the Early Church” uses the literary notions of reception criticism and textual indeterminacy in the sense of Wolfgang Iser. These notions enable Layton to discuss Abraham’s call and migration from the predecessors (Jubilees and Philo) to Origen, who viewed Abraham’s migration as a renunciation of the temporal benefits of this world, and to martyrological interpretation.

The section on modern interpretation opens with Naomi Seidman’s study of “Translation,” as integral part of the “afterlife” of the biblical text. Seidman discusses the intricacies of the phrase ruah ’elohim, since the meaning potential of this expression includes breath, wind (mostly in Jewish translations), and spirit (mostly in Christian readings, as part of the trinity), while the term ’elohim has also been taken as a superlative (“a mighty wind”). This is only one of the passages by which Seidman illustrates the perplexities of translation, from the divergent views of Buber and Rosenzweig to Derrida and the midrash on Japheth in the tents of Shem. Translation is shown to be both problematic and a sine qua non, a loss of rhetoric to be overcome (Buber) and a gain of dialogue to be enjoyed by every reader (Rosenzweig). A different dialogue is introduced by Ilana Pardes under the heading “Modern Literature.” Pardes deems the exegetical reflections of modern writers and poets “no less earnest or pertinent” than recognized premodern/modern exegesis and shows some of the aspects of the exegetical concerns in Melville’s Moby Dick, which after all opens with the narrator’s self-introduction as Ishmael. The dialectic of exegesis and creation centers on the frontier and the position of the outcast in the oceanic wilderness and presents Moby Dick as a counter-pilgrimage, representing the misdirection of the Pequod and its final perishing as an image for the misdirected American ship of state.

This volume is rounded off by John J. Collins’s essay on “Modern Theology,” which presents the modern exegetical endeavor in face of the perplexities inherent in the tale of Isaac’s sacrifice and concludes with a demand for honesty and courage. In a sense, this chapter returns the reader to the point of departure, for in the end, the meaning of the narrative of Gen 22 is enunciated, rather than by a theological statement or an ideological assertion, in a particular narrative construction with its macro- and micro-structure and its specific ways of shaping and highlighting problems (as shown in Gen. Rab. 55:7; see the discussion of Dina Stein on 129 of this volume) and suggesting rather than averring positions.
These considerations lead me to my general evaluation. In my view, a literary prism could have enabled the editor and the authors under his aegis to present a more consistent perspective than mere pluralism. After all, innerbiblical exegesis is a literary phenomenon, even if the instruments used are different from those of New Criticism. So is cultural memory, based as it is on narrative. Both innerbiblical and midrash exegesis are based on reader reaction, which also supplies the foundations for reception criticism, which is no more than the analysis of specific reader reactions in the past. Fortunately, the essays on “Translation” and “Modern Literature” have done justice to this side of the coin. All in all, then, this essay volume is extremely valuable for the perspective it affords, even more so as it provides the point of departure for a new vista in which the literary point of view will take center stage.