Within biblical studies, there has been a vibrant, exciting, and much-needed appreciation over the last few years of how context and culture impacts interpreters and interpretation. One need look only to the Texts@Contexts series published by Fortress Press (of which, see my review on the Genesis volume in RBL) as evidence of the myth of disinterested interpretation and the value in foregrounding one’s interpretive context and presuppositions. A forthcoming book, also with Fortress, entitled Sounds in Cultural Criticism: Perspectives and Methods in Culture, Power, and Identity in the New Testament (ed. Greg Carey and Francisco Lozada Jr.) demonstrates the ever-growing importance of this hermeneutical posture. It is in this vein that Miguel De La Torre’s commentary on Genesis emerges as another stimulating voice worth hearing.

This volume is the first in the Belief commentary series to treat a book from the Old Testament. A more recent volume covering Lamentations and the Song of Songs was published in 2012, and a more robust offering is currently available on the New Testament side of things, with contributions covering Mark, Luke, Ephesians, Hebrews, and 1 and 2 Peter and Jude. The stated aim of this new series is to bridge the gap between academy and church by paying specific attention to distinctively theological readings of the biblical text. Each volume is authored not by a trained biblical scholar but by
theologians of various stripes. As such, the biblical book is put in conversation with Christian history and tradition—both as advocate and antagonist—to elucidate “why the church needs this book and why we need it now” (xii). These commentaries thus seek to be contemporary, timely, theological, liberating, and of service to both budding and seasoned pastors.

Miguel De La Torre, professor of Social Ethics and Latino/a Studies at Iliff School of Theology in Denver, offers an intentional, unabashedly, self-admitted subjective commentary on Genesis. Taking up Gustavo Gutierrez’s well-known dictum that God has a “preferential option for the poor,” De La Torre sets outs to read Genesis with a focus on “a preferential hermeneutical option for those (ordinary people of faith and academicians) who read the Bible from the margins” (xvi). His “chief dialogue” remains with the marginalized—both in the ancient text and our contemporary context—in the attempt to see the face of God in the face of the so-called other.

The commentary portion of the book is divided into six sections covering a sensible thematic unit in Genesis: the story of beginnings, the story of rebellion, the story of Abraham and Sarah, the story of Isaac and Ishmael, the story of Esau and Jacob, the story of the twelve sons of Israel. An introduction and epilogue frame the commentary. With an appreciation for the diversity, depth, and breadth of material covered, this review will focus only on a few representative examples to illuminate De La Torre’s method of reading Genesis and its value for contemporary communities of faith. Quotation boxes from notable ancient and contemporary authors, as well as “further reflections” sections on topics from Satan to angels to grace to tricksters, among many others, pepper the commentary.

The introduction, “Why Genesis? Why Now?” provides the underpinnings for De La Torre’s hermeneutical approach, as well as the presuppositions that he brings to the text. De La Torre employs Jacob’s wrestling match with God in Gen 32 as an apt metaphor for what we are to do with the biblical text: struggle, wrestle. Such a contest with the text has its liabilities and inherent dangers: one may leave, as did Jacob, with a limp. Yet it also has its benefits: a blessing successfully wrested and a glimpse of the face of God. The fact that God is one with whom Jacob wrestled and we wrestle yet today is paramount for De La Torre. He rightly observes that the “timeless issues” of injustice, oppression, migration, sexual abuse, disenfranchisement, and powerlessness are not confined to the Genesis text; these issues continue to be our issues, ones that challenge and sometimes obscure the Christian life of faith even today. Therefore, given this overlap, Genesis serves as a powerful and liberating crucible in which to hold this dialogue. De La Torre cautions that wrestling in such a way with the text may call into question presuppositions or
interpretations we have long held dear, but the pain of this loss is not for him an end but a new beginning, the birthing of a new self. It is the maturing of faith.

De La Torre gives a brief nod to the presuppositions he brings to the Genesis text, specifically on issues of composition (Genesis’s “political thesis” of land, morally justifying Joshua), authorship (JEDP, with a seemingly agnostic and apathetic [see 4 n. 2] acceptance of more or less the classical Documentary Hypothesis), myth or history (affirming the stories are “real” whether they happened or not, and their communicative power resides in their ability to reveal the God we worship and who we are in relation to this God), plot line (goodness of God’s creation despite humanity’s “shortcomings”).

With this in place, De La Torre proposes reading Genesis as testimony (los testimonios), citing the parallel importance of testimony in the Latina/o church. The metaphor of testimony allows one to (1) voice suffering to the faith community so they may minister appropriately; (2) witness to God’s activity in the community; (3) create solidarity with the sufferer through difficult times; (4) realize that one is not alone in one’s suffering; (5) “enter the reality of the metaphysical presence of the Divine in the everyday.” Not all testimonies, De La Torre affirms, are inerrant, nor are all godly; hence, the metaphor of wrestling is fitting. He also cautions against “Christianizing Genesis” as a way of domesticating its unsettling testimony. He poignantly challenges the reader: “Our goal is to discover God’s character and God’s relationship with humanity from what the text says, and not necessarily from whatever Christian theology I may read into the text” (10).

Read in this way, with an ear especially attuned to marginalized voices, Genesis “becomes a text of hope, a hope in a God whose essence is the liberation of all who are oppressed” (10).

The commentary section is, again, organized around the theme of testimony. For example, Gen 1:1–25 is labeled “First Testimony of the Earth” and 1:26–27 as “Testimony of the First Humans.” The whole of Genesis is seen through this lens of testimony. This testimony is quickly and keenly channeled into contemporary questions and issues with which (segments of) Christianity continue(s) to be challenged. As an illustration, within Gen 1 De La Torre equates primordial chaos with sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism, “and all the other –isms” that exist, yet intermingled with the testimony that God’s spirit still hovers with us. Additionally, he reads the text as one written for refugees in the context of exile in Babylon. De La Torre also addresses in Gen 1–2 issues of science versus creation, the “gender” of God (cf. Gen 1:26), human stewardship of creation, rabbinic legends of Lilith, and the divine blessing of human sexuality. On this final point one may see De La Torre’s comment about our willingness to allow the text to challenge tradition in practice. He traces early Christian attitudes about sex, citing Augustine among others, as challenging the “pro-sex, pro-body reading” of Gen 1; this culminated in the
unfortunate divide between flesh and spirit, a concept informed more by Neo-Platonism and Stoic philosophy than the Old Testament and Genesis. Therefore, De La Torre is not beyond challenging Christian tradition where relevant and in the interest of liberation.

Testimony about Abraham and Sarah provides another fertile locus for illustrating De La Torre’s empowering reading of Genesis. For him, Abraham’s story—indeed, all of Israel’s story—is the story of illegal aliens. De La Torre presses further, labeling the incarnation as a radical move where Godself becomes alien. The testimony of Hagar and Ishmael is especially powerful. De La Torre proposes reading Hagar as the center of the story. She becomes a teenager “forced to have sex with a very senior man,” made into a “womb to be used by Sarai, who owned her body” (173). She becomes the object of divine abuse with the instruction that she return and submit to Sarai (16:8), yet she concomitantly names the deity and receives a promise, showing that divine concern is not limited only to Israel. De La Torre emphasizes that this unexpected and unparalleled promise is made to “not just any woman, but an oppressed woman” (176). Not even Sarai, the mother of the promise, receives such an accolade. Yet this promise is tempered by El Roi, a God who sees, being apparently blind to Hagar and Ishmael’s plight in Gen 21. Marking a powerful contemporary application, De La Torre writes: “We can rejoice that God saves mother and child in the desert, but how many other mothers and children (as well as fathers and brothers) who are of Hispanic descent are presently dying in the U.S. Sonoran Desert (on the southern border) due to unjust immigration laws? Are they any less worthy than Hagar and Ishmael? Does the God who sees not ‘see’ them?” (214).

One final illustration, from Gen 25–27 and the testimony of Jacob and Esau, will prove worthwhile. De La Torre marvels at the two twins. Both become emblems of the disenfranchised: Esau, as stated in the divine oracle in 25:23, is marginalized from birth (and De La Torre poignantly asks, “Why bring into existence one who is already rejected?” launching into a discussion of double predestination), while Jacob as second born is marginalized by the societal structures of his time yet liberated and elevated by the free choice of God. It is these social structures at work against Jacob that De La Torre insightfully suggests stand behind the text’s (and God’s!) reticence to vilify Jacob for his trickery. He writes: “Maybe for those who are in situations where the social structures (religious and cultural) are stacked against them, the ethical response is to undermine those very structures because they are unfair constructs designed to maintain oppression” (249).

A brief epilogue concludes the volume, offering a basic summary of method and hermeneutical implications moving forward. De La Torre again defends his method and focus on the marginalized throughout, suggesting that doing so begins to move away from the hegemony of how these texts are “normatively read” as a vector toward
“consciously or unconsciously legitimiz[ing] the interpretations that resonate with the dominant culture because it protects their privilege” (347). The true value, the true theological profundity of Genesis, therefore emerges for De La Torre in the ancient text’s ability to bridge centuries and speak to our contemporary context. In Genesis, De La Torre notes, he found his own story: of refugees, like Adam and Eve; of alien, like Abraham; of one overworked and taken advantage of, like Jacob; of a faithful yet stereotyped servant, like Joseph. It is when the biblical text encounters us in such a transformative way that we embrace opportunities “for our own new beginnings” (349), providing the impetus to bring about important and necessary changes in our own contemporary society.

With an embarrassment of riches in terms of Genesis commentaries—both already in print and currently in progress—one may wonder at the need for yet another. But this is no ordinary commentary. The Belief commentary series is a welcome addition to biblical studies, and the Genesis volume is no exception. Its importance lies not in its breaking of new ground but in its fresh appraisal of the text on its own terms, evidencing the ability of these truly tired texts to continue to edify and serve as fertile ground for theological reflection. The text does not read like a traditional commentary; larger sense units are treated together as opposed to a more pesher style. The commentary does not ask the traditional questions of the text one would expect of a commentary. Moreover, the commentary does not simply recapitulate the biblical text, as some commentaries are apt to do. What one encounters, instead, is a seamless and insightful movement from text to applications and implications and back again. This truly makes reading the commentary, from beginning to end, an enjoyable activity.

One casualty, however, emerges, given this style. There are very few explicit footnotes in the text, which some may welcome, but for a commentary this may be an unforgivable sin. To be fair, the various quotation boxes throughout the text do cite appropriately, and De La Torre does engage the famous voices from Christian history: Tertullian, Augustine, Calvin, Luther, among a host of others, with appropriate citations. But the absence comes primarily when he is presenting various views of biblical scholars without any references. For example, in discussing Gen 27, De La Torre is indeed correct that “scholars have argued that Isaac was never really convinced, that he knew it was Jacob all along,” and also quite right in saying, just after, “still, some believe Isaac went along with the charade because he recognized God’s will” (251). These blanket statements, attributed to the unnamed and amorphous “scholars” is ultimately unhelpful and frustrating to the reader who may wish to follow up on such ideas. It is also a bit rhetorically misleading, as the implication seems to be that this is a normative view held by all “scholars”; it is, rather, by no means the case that all scholars, or even the majority, share this view regarding Gen 27.
De La Torre has also provided an excellent example, evident in both the volume itself and in the questions he raises, of the importance of hermeneutical awareness and transparency in approaching the text. Despite being a more theologically minded commentary, in which one may expect a more conservative reading, De La Torre rightly eschews the asking of purely historical questions as a misunderstanding of what the biblical text is equipped to do. He cites Allen Verhey, who wisely quipped, “If we ask the wrong questions of Scripture, we will get the wrong answers—and then we should blame not Scripture but our questions” (64). As anyone who has taught Old Testament to undergraduates and/or seminary students will readily attest, the preoccupation with historical certitude as the only vector toward the full reliability and truth of the biblical text is a difficult hurdle to overcome. De La Torre demonstrates the profundity of the Genesis text without concern for questions such as “did Adam and Eve really exist” or “did the serpent really speak.”

Another welcome feature is De La Torre’s willingness to challenge theological a prioris, both in contemporary readers of Genesis as well as those readings that have become normative throughout church history. For example, De La Torre offers a wonderfully insightful treatment of the serpent in Gen 3 that may unsettle many who maintain, uncritically, that the serpent is to be equated with Satan. He rightly affirms: “Seeing the serpent as evil may have ore to do with the imposition of Christian theology on the text than its possible purpose—to serve as a literary device to introduce a new reality to the story. We are never told that the serpent is evil, only that it is subtle and crafty” (66). He goes on to discuss the development of the idea of Satan (on this more fully, see De La Torre and Hernandez, The Quest for the Historical Satan [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011]) within Christian history, dating the confluence of evil and serpent to the intertestamental period. For him, “God as absolute good is a theological proposition read into the Scriptures, even though it is not necessarily supported by a close reading of the text” (65). This willingness and ability to challenge Christian theological a prioris while still highlighting the theological value of the text for contemporary communities of faith is of great benefit to readers who may see such claims as an assault on their faith. The tendency to see Christian theology as unassailable, even where the Bible calls it into question (and here I tip my own, Protestant/Lutheran hand), has the propensity to mute many of the rich theological voices De La Torre is able to raise in probing Genesis.

It seems, however, that De La Torre himself is not entirely able to give up his own theological a prioris; they show through in several places. One tension comes out in his discussion of the flood, where he echoes Walter Brueggemann’s reading that it is not
humanity that changes after the flood but God (120). I would share this assessment, but some twenty-two pages later, reflecting on Abraham in Gen 11:27–12:4, he writes “Because God’s ways never change, we can expect that God will appear not to U.S. presidents or members of Congress, regardless of their professions of faith, but to those most marginalized in the land because of these politicians’ policies” (142, emphasis added). Which is it? Does God change or never change? To be sure, the Hebrew Bible witnesses to the truth of both statements, but the tension makes more sense in the Bible, given what we know of its history and compilation, and less sense as a theological defense for De La Torre’s “preferential option for the marginalized.”

I cannot help also but wonder whether the idea of Genesis as “testimony” may be helped here by Walter Brueggemann, who views Old Testament theology through the lens of testimony—more specifically, core, counter, and unsolicited testimony. What do we do as communities of faith when, for example, the testimony in Gen 6–9 that God changes runs up against testimony elsewhere that God does not change? In short, understanding the Old Testament through the metaphor of testimony may itself be a multivalent enterprise that embraces testimony as De La Torre describes (see above) as well as Brueggemann.

One final concern warrants mention. In the epilogue De La Torre describes reading Genesis from the margins as a “subversive” task, one that “encompasses challenging and changing what we have come to accept as reality, regardless of how oppressive reality is” (348). I share this sentiment and resonate with it. My question, however, is: What place does this hermeneutical posture carve out for me—as a white male, the purveyors and protectors of power as outlined by traditional readings of the text—to engage in similar “subversive” readings for the sake not of self but of others? As De La Torre presents the issue, it seems to be an either/or: either one reads toward oppression or toward liberation. The former is revealed in the traditional exegesis of Genesis, the latter in De La Torre’s own reading. But is there not some overlap? Cannot “oppressive” readings be true to the sense and spirit of the text, insightful and compelling, and perhaps even liberating in their ability to unmask their own oppression? And is not a “subversive” reading ultimately oppressive for another? This is not to undermine the value of either; rather, my quibble is with whether this issue is so easily compartmentalized as an either/or, us/them. De La Torre seems to hint this direction when he continues: “For Genesis to come alive, to have meaning, to be transformative, requires those of us from marginalized communities to read the text with our own eyes, situated within our own social location, surrounded by our own community of faith” (348, emphasis added). Is this a task to which others are invited or not? The next two sentences provide the stipulations: “And what about those from the dominant culture who also seek to read Genesis with new eyes? The hope of their salvation rests in a humbling reading with the disenfranchised, willing to learn from those who they may have difficulty accepting as having anything relevant to add” (348).
Such strong language—“the hope of their salvation”—presents a stark contrast that seems to embellish the either/or dichotomy to an unhealthy degree. Again, cannot both ways of reading be edifying and true?

De La Torre has given us a theological tour de force in Genesis, challenging traditional readings and carving out new meanings. The book would work well in a graduate-level course on Genesis, though I would recommend assigning it alongside a more traditional, critical commentary for balance. Those questions are not De La Torre’s questions, but I am grateful and appreciative for the questions he has asked of Genesis. This commentary stands as a beautiful indicator of ancient text meeting contemporary context done right. De La Torre has made a compelling case that, when asked the right questions, Genesis continues to speak even today with a voice that is so seldom heard but so urgently needs to be heard.