Ronald Hendel

The Book of Genesis: A Biography

Lives of Great Religious Books


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Over the past several decades Ronald Hendel has contributed in substantial ways to the critical study of Genesis,¹ and this rich history of scholarship has laid the groundwork for the present volume: an accessible and enlightening tour through the “life” of Genesis, part of Princeton University Press’s sharply presented Lives of Great Religious Books series. Here Hendel’s wide-ranging interests are on display, as he not only touches on issues of relevance to traditional biblical scholarship but also draws comfortably from a number of ancillary fields and subject areas that contribute in significant ways to this important study.

Hendel introduces the book by pointing out several issues that inform the larger project, including the notion that the ways in which people have read and understood Genesis throughout history correlate broadly with their notions of reality. As such, the diverse ways in which Genesis has been read can help us trace how understandings of reality have

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changed over time. This trajectory—“from realism to figuralism and back again” (11)—is important to keep in mind, as it helps give shape to Hendel’s biographical sketch.

In chapter 1 (“The Genesis of Genesis”) Hendel explores the birth (or births) of Genesis. Here Hendel introduces the reader to literary sources in a section heavily indebted to traditional source criticism, using Gen 6–9 and the Yahwistic and Priestly accounts to illustrate how scholars have identified different sources in the text of Genesis. The chapter then explores the ancient Near Eastern context out of which Genesis emerged, returning again to the flood narrative as well as the creation accounts of Gen 1–2, highlighting ancient parallels and the distinctive ways in which the biblical authors reshaped older traditions. What emerges is a picture of a book “born from a combination of stories and sources that derived from the traditions of ancient lore,” a “plural and complex book, which corresponds to a multifarious world” (44).

The second chapter looks at the beginnings of interpretation, and here Hendel draws on the four assumptions that, according to James Kugel, shaped biblical interpretation in the earliest eras in which these texts were read: that the Bible is cryptic, relevant, perfect, and divine. These assumptions would lead early readers and interpreters to employ figural interpretation, and the two main forms of figural reading that emerge from this are what Hendel refers to as apocalyptic and Platonic, approaches that would function as the dominant reading strategies for centuries to follow.

Chapter 3 (“Apocalyptic Secrets”) unpacks in more detail apocalyptic readings of Genesis. The rise of apocalyptic is accompanied by two factors, according to Hendel: the advent of critical crises, beginning with the Babylonian exile, and the increasing availability of sacred texts. Apocalypticism is thus an attempt to provide hope at a time of great difficulty, and the early chapters of Genesis would provide much fodder for this type of interpretation. Drawing on Ezekiel, texts from Qumran, and Pauline material, Hendel traces the use and reuse of the rivers of paradise and various appropriations of Adam, all of which attempt to unlock the apocalyptic secrets embedded in the material of Genesis.

Chapter 4 (“Platonic Worlds”) explores the second of Hendel’s figural approaches, focusing on the influence of Greek thought in early interpretation of Genesis. Following a brief introduction to Plato, the chapter introduces the reader to the Septuagint, Philo, and Paul, all of which demonstrate Greek influence in unique ways. The chapter concludes with explorations of gnostic appropriations of Genesis, as well as various ascetic uses of Adamic motifs, namely, in relation to issues of corporeality.

In chapter 5 Hendel investigates the liminal space “Between the Figural and the Real,” focusing on the late medieval and Reformation eras, when “the figural sense of Genesis
became strained and began to break” (110). This chapter focuses on three individuals, with particular attention given to their contributions on Genesis. The first is Rashi, with his focus on the “plain sense” of Scripture. Hendel suggests that Rashi “travels a middle path between the figural and the real, embracing the claims of reason while preserving … the legacy of traditional commentary” (120). The second is Martin Luther, and here attention is given to the convergence of Luther’s Renaissance heritage, appeals to the light of reason, the rise of sola scriptura, and the concomitant rejection of tradition. Finally, Hendel looks at François Rabelais and the first volume of his comic novel, Gargantua and Pantagruel. The mockery and parody of both Genesis and figural thinking that is found in this work demonstrates the way in which figural readings were losing their grip in the advent of modernity.

Chapter 6 continues the conversation with a more topical theme, “Genesis and Science: From the Beginning to Fundamentalism,” which follows on nicely from the previous chapter. After some reflections on ancient cosmology and early figural readings, the story jumps to Galileo, where Hendel offers a clear and helpful account of Galileo’s views of science and Scripture. Galileo’s appeals to figural readings of the text were deemed insufficient in large part, Hendel suggests, because “realism was ascendant,” and “the figural interpretation of Scripture was rooted in the figural interpretation of nature” (163). Hendel turns next to Spinoza, recounting how he took Galileo’s scientific method and began to employ it with the Bible, paving the way for what would become the historical-critical method. The chapter then offers a concise summary of a number of the debates that would ensue in the pushback to these developments, including various attempts to once again make Genesis compatible with science. In this period, Hendel notes, “Old assumptions were questioned, and new problems, which had previously been unthinkable, became unavoidable” (195).

The final chapter, “Modern Times,” looks at the increasingly fragmented use of Genesis in light of the changing perspectives noted in the previous chapter. The highlight of the chapter is Hendel’s engagement with three modern writers who used Genesis in various ways and with differing effects. Emily Dickinson’s complex relationship with the Bible is illustrated, noting that, while she is aware of the legendary nature of the Genesis material, “she perceives its literary capacity for truth” (215). Franz Kafka’s The Trial is seen as an example of the author’s parabolic use of the Bible. Like Dickinson, Kafka clearly recognized the legendary nature of Genesis; however, his work suggests that these are narratives “that expose greater possibilities,” in part because they are stories that are “at the same time impossible, redemptive, and obscure” (229). Finally, Erich Auerbach’s reading of Gen 22 not only highlights the literary art of the text but also “points to the complexity of our modern consciousness of history” (239), and in doing so links Genesis to the beginnings of realism.
Hendel concludes that we, like these writers, “live on the far side of tradition” (241). The stories of Genesis can no longer be understood in the ways in which they have been in the past; however, unencumbered by tradition, Genesis is open to new ways of being used and understood, as these writers so ably demonstrate.

This is an enlightening and entertaining volume, one that is accessible and yet steeped in broad learning and critical scholarship. Hendel has chosen to tackle issues that give an expansive picture of the life of Genesis, touching on key figures and important hermeneutical developments that even readers familiar with the history of interpretation of the Bible’s first book will no doubt appreciate. Further, his forays into territories less familiar to biblical scholars are insightful and refreshing and will offer an important point of reference for those working with the reception of Genesis.

In spite of these strengths, there are aspects of the volume that left this reader wanting more. For example, one gets the impression reading the volume that, for all intents and purposes, critical biblical studies climaxed with Spinoza. Of course, one cannot be exhaustive in such a study; however, the uninitiated reader will gain little awareness of the methods and approaches that have proliferated in recent decades and that have added in significant ways to the biography of Genesis (one thinks, for example, of the contributions made by feminist readings of Genesis). Further, Hendel makes the case that Genesis can and should be read today “on the far side of tradition,” and he gives numerous engaging examples of such readings. Still, Genesis continues to be read as Scripture by Jews and Christians around the world, and, given the religious nature of the material, such continued use of the text seems an aspect of the biography of Genesis that is worth noting. Indeed, the fact that it continues to be read within the traditions is perhaps one of the more fascinating aspects of the life of Genesis, and I found myself wishing for further reflection on how such use might fit within the broader trajectory of Hendel’s biographical account.

These quibbles notwithstanding, this is a fascinating and learned account of the life and afterlife of Genesis. Hendel is to be commended on the volume, particularly for its erudition and accessibility. Indeed, one hopes that its readers will pick up Genesis for themselves and so perhaps contribute in new ways to the afterlife of this foundational text that Hendel has so skillfully explored.