Ronald Hendel

The Book of Genesis: A Biography

Lives of Great Religious Books


Bill T. Arnold
Asbury Theological Seminary
Wilmore, Kentucky

Books have life cycles. They are born, have a period of maturation and usefulness, and, for most, a period of decline and demise. Some books are so important and profound, their life spans so long and influential, they deserve to have a “biography” written about them. Princeton University Press’s Lives of Great Religious Books series offers such biographies for the most important religious texts for general readers. Fittingly, Ronald Hendel was selected as the biographer for Genesis in light of his numerous other contributions and also for his gifted writing style. This biography of Genesis, “our story,” begins “with the birth of the book in a small country in the ancient Middle East” (13).

Hendel’s biography of Genesis is a delight to read. There is nothing quite like it. He has chosen to tell the story of the main character—the book of Genesis—by making a distinction between the realism of the book at its birth, on the one hand, and the subsequent development of new conceptions of reality, on the other, that is, apocalyptic religious conceptions and a “higher” Platonic view of reality. He treats these two newer conceptualizations of reality together as “figural.” The life of Genesis is mapped along a trajectory from realism to figuralism and back again, but at a different level. In an introduction, Hendel acknowledges that this plot (from realism to figuralism and back
again) emphasizes certain bits of the biography of Genesis while overlooking others, but he avers that such a plotline has the advantage of making a coherent story (11). As I will explain here, this is both the strength and the weakness of Hendel’s biography.

In an opening chapter, “The Genesis of Genesis” (14–44), Hendel traces the realism of the biblical universe as portrayed in Genesis. The various sources used in the birth of the composite text, including the “tribal poem” of Gen 49, the oldest portion, have been organized and arranged by a tribal genealogy, giving explanation to a genealogical tree that culminates in the tribes of Israel. The essential realism of this young book, with its “carefully composed senses,” quickly changed, as it matured into full adulthood, into something different altogether. In chapter 2, “The Rise of the Figural Sense,” (45–62), Hendel explores various motives for interpreting Genesis, and relying on James Kugel he distills these motives into four assumptions. The four assumptions are that the Bible (and for Hendel’s purposes especially, Genesis) is (1) cryptic with hidden meanings, (2) relevant in all its parts even when obscure to us, (3) perfect or without internal inconsistencies and necessarily in congruence with the world outside the text, and (4) divine, as constituting divine speech, either authorized or authored by God. Because of these assumptions driving interpretive models, the realism of young Genesis eventually morphed into a figural dual reality. The universe we know as readers is a flawed version of a more perfect world, and Genesis is a cryptic version of a more perfect text.

The hidden, more perfect world has two modalities, each with its own cryptic, relevant, perfect, and divine ways of understanding the text of Genesis. These two orders of reality are beyond the “here and now” levels of meaning in the text of Genesis. These other realities have their own interpretations of the cryptic, relevant, perfect, and divine aspects of Genesis, one in the near future and the other in a spiritual plane that is beyond the material world (60–61). These figural interpretations—the apocalyptic and the Platonic—were dominant in Western culture for nearly two millennia, from approximately 300 BCE to 1600 CE. So, for examples, Enoch, Jubilees, and the Dead Sea Scrolls are apocalyptic in their interpretations of Genesis, while Philo is Platonic, and rabbinic interpretation is a complicated mixture of both (62).

Hendel develops these figural readings in several of the next chapters. The conviction that the book of Genesis is a repository of apocalyptic secrets, mostly about the end of days, is the oldest form of figural reading (ch. 3, “Apocalyptic Secrets,” 63–82). Creation and the paradise of the garden of Eden are especially important to this way of reading Genesis. The other figural reading assumes dual realities, in which Genesis is perceived by the senses and also perceived by the philosophical mind (ch. 4, “Platonic Worlds,” 83–108). Gnosticism produced several interesting readings that blended Plato and Genesis.
Between the medieval world and the early modern world (ca. 1200–1600 CE), the figural readings of Genesis began to break apart. In chapter 5 (“Between the Figural and the Real,” 109–44) Hendel explores how both Jewish and Christians interpreters began to abandon figural senses in which they understood Genesis as a cipher about another world and moved closer to simpler, more realistic readings. So Rashi developed what he called “the plain sense” (peshaṭ) of Scripture, and Martin Luther’s sola Scriptura rejected the early church’s use of allegory and embraced the plain sense of the text. Once the foundations for figural readings were thoroughly undermined, the life of the book of Genesis changed. Hendel traces the return to plain or realistic readings of Genesis in chapters 6 and 7 with an astounding breadth of competence (ch. 6, “Genesis and Science: From the Beginning to Fundamentalism,” 145–95; ch. 7, “Modern Times,” 196–241). Starting with Baruch Spinoza, Hendel explores the implications of this way of understanding the book of Genesis in Copernicus and Galileo, Isaac Newton, James Hutton, Darwin, A. A. Hodge and Benjamin B. Warfield, Emily Dickinson, Franz Kafka, and others.

Few scholars other than Hendel could write such a book as this. His near omnicompetence is evident everywhere. I turn now to a few comments that are not so much a critique or series of objections as they are a warning that any of us might raise about such a book. Such a broad, sweeping treatment is vulnerable to the charge that the paradigm is given too much explanatory power. Indeed, there are places where I believe Hendel’s distinction between the real and the figural is overwrought. The dichotomy is not so much false (in which case, my objections would be more serious than I intend in this review), as it appears at times reductionistic, coming close at times to serving as a straightjacket into which Hendel squeezes his subjects.

Here I will mention briefly two examples. While I agree with much of Hendel’s summary of the so-called conflict between Genesis and science, it is a slight overstatement to say that the world of Genesis is “not compatible with modern science.” This portion of the discussion might be nuanced by a rejection of the modern assumption that a conflict necessarily obtains between religion and science. The real conflict is only between religion and materialism, as has been demonstrated by Stephen M. Barr (Modern Physics and Ancient Faith [Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003], 4–18). Judaism and Christianity led the way in desacralizing and depersonalizing the natural world in a way that made science possible centuries later. Many of the great founders of modern science were deeply religious thinkers, including Copernicus, Galileo, Kepler, Newton, Ampère, and others, and in some cases they were merely attempting to bring their “sensory experience” and “necessary demonstrations” (Galileo’s language) into conformity with realistic readings of Genesis.
Additionally, it is somewhat imprecise to interpret the apostle Paul as reading apocalyptic “secrets” in Genesis (75–79) instead of understanding Genesis as an *Urzeit* retrieved in an *Endzeit* made possible by Christ. The “first Adam” concept in Paul does not assume a figural reading of Genesis in the sense of an apocalyptic or Platonic approach, so much as the Adam-Christ typology is making moral and ethical points in the argument, as well as to explain what Paul means by the resurrection (see Victor P. Hamilton, *Genesis 1–17* [NICOT; Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1990], 212–18, esp. 217). I question whether Paul can be put in the category of a reader who saw in Genesis a book of apocalyptic secrets, notwithstanding the similarities with earlier Qumran texts. It seems more likely that Hendel’s treatment reduces Paul’s Adam-Christ typology almost beyond recognition from what the apostle intended, especially in 1 Cor 15. On the other hand, I concede that in the case of Paul the most we can say is that “the blessed life of Adam before his transgression” was viewed as a mystery revealing to the faithful interpreter “God’s plan for the glorious future” (79–80).

Despite these minor quibbles, I recommend Hendel’s biography to all interested students of Genesis. Like most good biographies, Hendel leaves the reader with great insight into the personality and character of the towering figure of Genesis. The enjoyment of the book is enhanced by artwork provided by William Propp at the head of each chapter. These fascinating sketches draw the reader in and can be studied and taken in slowly with great profit.