

GENESIS

THE PEOPLE'S
BIBLE COMMENTARY



GERALD
WEST

A BIBLE COMMENTARY FOR EVERY DAY

PBC GENESIS: INTRODUCTION

It is a scary thing to write a commentary on any book of the Bible, knowing that others will use it as a guide to their understanding. The responsibility is overwhelming. This is especially the case with the book of Genesis. This book of beginnings shapes so much of our theological thinking; indeed, even if we would not consider ourselves particularly theological people, the book of Genesis has left its mark on us. From Sunday school to modern cinema, from popular culture to classic literature, from art to activism, Genesis permeates our conception of the world. When we touch Genesis, we touch something close to us, whether we can explain the closeness or not. So commentary writers, beware!

Those of us who are Christian or Jewish or Muslim bring a great deal of theological heritage (and so ‘baggage’) to our reading of most biblical texts, but particularly to the book of Genesis. This is not wrong or inappropriate, but it does often get in the way of a close and careful reading of the text. This commentary is designed to facilitate an engagement with the text. Once we have really ‘heard’ the text, we can then decide what to do with it theologically. But let us not pre-determine what the text says.

So this commentary is no substitute for the text. It is assumed that readers of this commentary will have read the portion of text being commented on and will have the Bible open at this passage as they read the commentary. Indeed, this commentary is a companion to your own reading of the book of Genesis.

A literary product

The commentary begins with the presupposition that the book of Genesis is a literary product. As we will see, it is a complex literary product. But it is a literary product. We must therefore pay careful and close attention to the text. The translation that we will follow in order to do this is the NRSV. Where necessary (and this will happen fairly regularly), we will depart from the NRSV to try to get a feel for the Hebrew text itself. In many of the stories of Genesis there is a play on words, which is often missed in translation. Generally speaking, however, the NRSV does a pretty good job and will prove a worthy basis for our reading. Having said that, although the NRSV is the English text usually referred to, any translation can be used together

with this commentary. Indeed, more than one translation will be most helpful.

Biblical scholarship on the book of Genesis has been dominated by historical and, more recently, sociological concerns. This has tended to fragment the text, dividing it up into different ‘sources’. However, the process that led to these concerns came from a close and careful reading of the text. It was as scholars attempted to make sense of the text that they noticed tensions and discrepancies in the text itself. This, together with the emergence of modern science and various historical discoveries in the 19th century, generated an interest in the socio-historical dimensions of the text.

Given that biblical scholarship continues to be dominated by these socio-historical interests, commentaries tend to begin with this perspective, depriving the reader of the chance to follow the path that the commentators themselves have trod. This commentary attempts to follow that path by beginning with the text itself. We will read the text and try to make sense of it as it is. We will therefore allow the reading process to generate its own questions. When we encounter something that we cannot make sense of from our own reading of the text, we will then begin to delve into the socio-historical dimensions behind the text, to see if they can explain our reading experience.

The stories of the book of Genesis individually and the book as a whole demonstrate a quite remarkable literary quality. This is what has made them so memorable. The language and images are rich and complex and worthy of our careful attention.

A composite book

Having said this, even a cursory reading of Genesis makes it clear that we are dealing with a composite text. Genesis is composite in a number of ways. First, the book of Genesis consists of different kinds of literature. There are many different genres, including narratives, poetry and genealogies. Among the narratives there are also a number of sub-genres, including long novellas, like the Joseph story (chs. 37—50) and short sagas, like the series of connected stories about Abraham (chs. 12—25).

Second, Genesis is composite in that its literature comes from different socio-historical contexts. The earliest stories would have started their life as oral accounts, and probably go back to the very earliest periods of the ancestors of Israel. There are also stories that

come from considerably later periods and quite different sociological contexts, such as the exilic and post-exilic times. Different parts of the book of Genesis come from periods reaching back as far as 1300BC, and up to about 200BC. The socio-historical locations during this timespan are also considerable, ranging from the context of rural nomadic herders to the context of the courts of the kings of Israel and Judah, to the context of the exile in Babylon, to the contexts of the Persian and perhaps even Hellenistic occupations in Palestine.

Briefly, the history of Israel includes the following formative periods.

- An ancestral but historically difficult to determine period.
- A tribal/clan period from about 1300 to 1200BC.
- A period of political consolidation against the city-states of Egypt and Canaan from about 1000BC.
- The united monarchy under Saul, David and Solomon, from about 1000 to 930BC.
- The division of the monarchy after Solomon, with Israel in the north and Judah in the south, from about 930BC.
- The conquest and exile of the northern kingdom, Israel, by the Assyrian empire in 722BC.
- The conquest and exile of the southern kingdom, Judah, by the Babylonian empire in 586BC.
- Exile in Babylon from 586 to about 538BC.
- The return of some exiles to Judah under Persian colonial control from 538 to 332BC.
- A shift from Persian colonial control to Hellenistic colonial control of Judah from 332 to 140BC.

During each of these very different periods, texts that make up the book of Genesis were produced.

The third way in which Genesis is a composite text is closely related to the second. Not only does the literature come from different socio-historical times and locations, but the literature was also constantly revised and reworked during these periods and in these places. Texts from earlier periods and places were collected, included into larger narratives, and these larger narratives were then themselves revised and reworked by others in still later times and locations. Two primary concerns can be discerned in this process of constant revision and reworking. They are collection and composition.

Ancient communities were great collectors of stories, poetry, genealogies, legal and other texts, whether written or oral. Such literature was remembered and passed down from one generation to another. Very little was abandoned, although its shape may have changed with the constant retelling. At certain moments in the history of a community, however, there was a need to combine these collected resources into a more coherent account, in order to tell ‘the story’ of the community. In the emergence of ‘Israel’—and the inverted commas are deliberate, for the book of Genesis does not overtly deal with ‘Israel’ in any clearly defined or demarcated sense—there were a number of defining moments when it was necessary to reflect on its identity. The most important of these moments were probably the period of the united monarchy, when ‘Israel’ was for a brief moment a regional power, and the period of the exile, when the leaders of ‘Israel’—really Judah—found themselves exiled from the land that God had promised them. Such moments would have led to serious theological reflection and would have generated the need for some kind of coherent account. But none of these accounts were static; they were always dynamic, constantly being revised and reworked by various composers (or, to use the scholars’ term, editors or redactors).

Among the more famous of the compilers or redactors of the book of Genesis are those known as the Yahwist or ‘J’ (because of the preference for the name ‘Yahweh’ for God), the Elohist or ‘E’ (because of the preference for the name ‘Elohim’ for God), and the Priestly writer or ‘P’. Pick up almost any commentary or scholarly work on Genesis and you will come across them. They are, of course, the constructs of scholars. Scholars have postulated them to account for the different ‘sources’ that make up the book of Genesis. What complicates the matter somewhat is that each of these composers, J, E and P, themselves used various ‘sources’ in their compositions. In scholarly terms, however, the major ‘sources’ underlying the book of Genesis have traditionally been J, E and P. They can be detected, scholars have argued, by the names they use for God, their vocabulary, and their theological orientations. So, for example, J prefers the name ‘Yahweh’ for God, tends to use the name ‘Israel’ for the patriarch Jacob, and often portrays God anthropomorphically. Much of this argumentation is circular, however, for we only know what J’s characteristics are when we can identify J. And how do we identify J? Well, we look for

the characteristics of J! This does not mean that compilers like these did not exist, for there is clear evidence of multiple composition by different hands. We do well, though, to be circumspect about dogmatic conjectures about these hypothetical constructs.

This kind of recognition—namely, that the book of Genesis is a composite text put together by generations of collecting and composing—has produced copious amounts of scholarly work, as biblical scholars have endeavoured to understand a complex process. What seemed fairly certain 50 years ago is less certain now, however. The more we learn, the less certain we have become. Part of the problem is the difficulty of exact socio-historical reconstruction. We simply do not have enough external evidence to be sure about dates and places.

What is clear is that the book of Genesis draws on a range of resources from each of the various periods and locations of its formation. Genesis belongs to its socio-historical context, difficult as it is to determine these contexts accurately. There is no doubt that the various texts making up the book engage with the world that produced them. What is also clear, however, is that successive generations brought their own, new questions and concerns to the texts they inherited. These people were not as constrained as we are with texts, so constantly revised and reworked them in order to express their own understandings.

The book of Genesis is like a beloved patchwork quilt that has been handed down from generation to generation for more than a thousand years. Some of the original patches can still be seen, although they too have probably been retouched. Panels of patches have been sewn together in an attempt to convey a message, and have then been unpicked and resewn in a different order or with new patches included. From time to time, borders have been added, to try to show the design of the whole, but these borders have also themselves been unpicked, reworked and then resewn, providing fresh perspectives and understandings of God's purposes.

Theological contestation

The various 'hands' and 'voices' that we encounter in this complex text are not innocent. They each have something to say. As we know, history tends to be written by the winners, so it is not surprising that the priestly community that came to dominate and control 'Israel'

after the exile had the final word. In terms of our metaphor, they did the final work on the quilt, providing it with its final shape. After them, the book achieved its present canonical form and was no longer allowed to be altered.

Recent biblical scholarship has attempted to interpret the book of Genesis as the product of this priest-controlled community, with fascinating results. Perhaps the best example is Mark Brett's book, *Genesis: Procreation and the Politics of Identity*, in which he argues that Genesis in its final form is a direct response to the ethnocentrism of the Persian period. After the exile in Babylon, those who returned to Judea became excessively focused on their ethnic identity, and began to exclude those who were not considered 'pure' Judeans. But the book of Genesis, which came to its present form during this same period, rejects this narrow understanding of what it means to be a Judean/Jew. The way Genesis does this, Brett suggests, is by embodying theological contestation. So while the final form does represent the voice and hand of the priestly community who were in control, it also preserves what they inherited, giving different voices a presence. By paying close and careful attention to the text, therefore, we can hear multiple voices and see different ideologies. The book of Genesis, in other words, resists restriction to a single message.

This is important, because Genesis is a dangerous book. As Clare Amos says in her own commentary on the book of Genesis, in the so-called Middle East today, 'real people really get killed in part because of beliefs some human beings may hold about the book of Genesis'. 'I will never forget,' she says, 'my incredulity at being told by a Palestinian friend of mine, an educated Christian woman from Ramallah, a town on the West Bank, how on a visit to Jerusalem she had had a conversation with a Western tourist. On discovering that she was a Christian living on the West Bank, this person had informed her, quite categorically, that "she couldn't be a real Christian, because if she were a real Christian she would of course have been willing to leave her home town, since she would know that God had given the land to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob".' A close reading of Genesis shows that Ishmael, the ancestor of Muslims, is included in God's promise. Although the favoured line seems to be Isaac's, there are many indications in the text that God does not abandon Ishmael.

Genesis has also done extensive damage in South Africa and in the

world more generally by providing support for racial discrimination. The curse on Ham/Canaan in Genesis 9 and the story of the tower of Babel in Genesis 11 have been used to provide theological underpinning for the evil political system of apartheid in South Africa. Furthermore, the creation story in Genesis 1, the story of the garden of Eden in Genesis 2—3 and the story of Noah in Genesis 9 have all been used to justify human exploitation of the environment. Genesis 2—3 has also been used to justify the inferiority of women, not least by the writer of 1 Timothy, who has been followed by generations of male commentators. Finally, the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18—19 has been read as a text condemning homosexuality. Indeed, Genesis is a dangerous book.

But a close and careful reading of the text suggests a host of other more redemptive interpretations. Genesis does deal with cosmic matters, but on the whole it is about family matters. Most of the stories are about a family, although this family has had to bear the heavy weight of our theological and ideological baggage. They can and do, therefore, speak to each one of us about ordinary but important matters, such as the fear of being unable to have children, the responsibilities of having children, the tensions within a family; they speak about jealousy, envy, lust, love, forgiveness and trust; they speak about leadership; and they speak about God's presence and absence in human life.

Genesis frames our reading of the whole Bible and is therefore a very important book in our theological understanding. It begins with God and ends with the chosen family waiting for God to call them from Egypt. It is intensely theological. The challenge that awaits us as we re-read Genesis with this commentary is to try to hear it afresh, trusting that, as we do so, we will hear the voice of God.

A commentary among commentaries

Of commentaries and books about Genesis, there are many. For those with a historical interest, these are worth considering:

John Skinner, *Genesis* (T&T Clark, 1930). An old commentary, but a fount of information and detail for the serious reader.

Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis* (SCM, 1972). A readable commentary, though aimed at the scholar, with plenty of historical and theological comment.

Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1982). A profoundly theological commentary, suitable to a wide range of readers.

Claus Westermann, *Genesis* (T&T Clark, 1988). A historical commentary aimed at a scholarly audience.

John Rogerson, *Genesis 1—11* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1991). A general overview of how this important section of Genesis has been read through the ages. Accessible by a range of readers.

Clare Amos, *Genesis* (Epworth Press, 2004). A new and engaging commentary accessible by a wide range of readers.

For those with a literary interest, these are worth considering:

Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (Norton, 1996). An accessible commentary, but aimed at the scholar.

David W. Cotter, *Berit Olam Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry: Genesis* (Liturgical Press, 2003). A beautifully written commentary, full of literary and theological insight, and suitable for a wide range of readers.

For those with an interest in the final form of Genesis, the following is worth considering:

Mark Brett, *Genesis: Procreation and the Politics of Identity* (Routledge, 2000). A scholarly analysis, but worth the effort.

And for those interested in Genesis and ecology, the following is worth considering:

Norman C. Habel and Shirley Wurst (eds.), *The Earth Story in Genesis* (Sheffield Academic Press, 2000). A range of essays, most of which are very interesting, though aimed primarily at a scholarly readership.

Back to the book of Genesis

Just like our theological baggage, commentaries too can determine how we read a particular text. So while it is possible to say much more by way of introduction to the book of Genesis, sufficient has been said for us to begin reading the text itself. 'In the beginning...'

ADAM *to* SHEM: *an* OVERVIEW

A hundred years ago, the main concern of biblical scholarship was to reconcile Genesis 1—11 with the scientific discoveries of the 19th century. In the 1970s and 1980s its main concern has been to interpret Genesis 1—11 in the light of liberation theology, feminist theology and the ecological crisis.

So writes John Rogerson as he reflects on the changing fashions of biblical interpretation with respect to Genesis 1—11.

Geography and biology

Voyages of trade and exploration in the 15th to 18th centuries raised questions about the world envisaged by Genesis. The world being discovered was much bigger and more diversely populated than Genesis 10 implied, suggesting that this text was not an authoritative account geographically. While doubts were raised about Genesis 10, however, at the beginning of the 19th century it was still generally believed that Genesis 1 was in harmony with scientific discoveries and that Genesis 2—3 was a historically true story about the earliest ancestors of the human race. Geological discoveries and Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection in the mid-19th century generated further questions. Geological study showed that the world was much older than the age suggested by biblical chronology. Evolutionary theory offered an alternative account of how humankind had come into being. So, during the late 19th century, dialogue between the discourses of science and biblical scholarship provided the framework for the interpretation of Genesis 1—11.

Sources and history

Another voice joined the discussion during the same period. In the late 1800s, the discovery of ancient Babylonian texts demonstrated that the creation story in Genesis 1 almost certainly draws upon a Babylonian creation story. At the same time, another Babylonian text was found which showed many similarities with the flood story in Genesis 6—8. The task of biblical scholarship became one of examining the similarities and differences between the texts of this region, and in so doing to attempt to identify what was unique about the beliefs of ancient Israel.

This socio-historical concern continues into the present, with much

of biblical scholarship continuing to focus on the relationships between Genesis 1—11 and the socio-historical world that produced it. Interest remains not only in the sources that were used to construct the accounts in Genesis 1—11, but also in how those sources were used and then combined. The ‘how’ question, it is argued, gives us a glimpse of the theological orientation of those who used the available resources and reworked them for their own purposes.

By locating these texts historically, even if the dates are tentative, scholars provided a base from which to do sociological reconstructions of the world at that time, providing invaluable information on the world that produced the text. So, for example, by dating the creation story in Genesis 1 to the exilic or post-exilic period, scholars were able to examine how the so-called Priestly writer/s used and reworked Babylonian stories to convey their own message.

Literature

Alongside this interest in the socio-historical dimensions of Genesis 1—11, another strand of interest arose in the 1970s. Instead of trying to get behind the text to the socio-historical world that produced it, some scholars began to focus on the text itself. Genesis 1—11, they argued, was not primarily history but literature. As literature, it deserved to be read closely and carefully. Furthermore, while reconstructing the history behind the text is a task fraught with problems, we actually have the text itself! By paying attention to the literary dimensions of the text, we could discern things that socio-historical work had missed. So, for example, a careful and close reading of Genesis 2—3, feminist biblical scholars showed, did not advocate an inferior position for women. Similarly, a literary approach to the flood story placed a different emphasis on it, demonstrating that although the story might have originated from two different sources, what we have is a careful literary composition.

These different methods have brought a great deal of vitality to the study of Genesis 1—11, as have the many and various ‘life interests’ that different readers bring to the text. One of the most creative has been the relatively recent interest in ecological issues.

PRAYER

We give thanks, our God, that we can bring the questions and concerns that fill our lives to our reading of the Bible.

From Sunday school to cinema epics, from popular culture to classic literature, from art to activism, Genesis has left its mark on us. This book of beginnings shapes so much of our theological thinking that when we touch Genesis, we touch something close to us, whether we can explain the closeness or not!

While Genesis certainly deals with questions of cosmic significance, it is also the unfolding story of a family. The stories speak to us of ordinary, but important, matters such as the fear of being unable to have children, the responsibilities of having children, the tensions within a family; they speak about jealousy, lust, love, forgiveness, trust; they speak of leadership; and they speak about God's absence and presence in family life.

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The People's Bible Commentary is planned to cover the whole Bible, with a daily readings approach that brings together both personal devotion and reflective study. Combining the latest scholarship with straightforward language and a reverent attitude to Scripture, it aims to instruct the head and warm the heart. The authors come from around the world and across the Christian traditions, and offer serious yet accessible commentary. The People's Bible Commentary is an invaluable resource for first-time students of the Bible, for all who read the Bible regularly, for study group leaders, and anyone involved in preaching and teaching Scripture.

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