

BOOK REVIEWS

Hebrew Myths: The Book of Genesis. By Robert Graves and Raphael Patai. Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2005. ISBN 1-857-5466-1. Pp. 328. \$78.87.

Genesis: The Movie. By Robert Farrar Capon. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2006. ISBN 0-802-86325-6. (paper). Pp. 356. \$34.00.

The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis. By Leon R. Kass. New York: Free Press, 2003. ISBN 0-743-24299-8. Pp. 700. \$35.00.

The book of Genesis continues to fascinate believers and nonbelievers alike. Scores of commentaries have been written upon this work, demonstrating that its contents present topics and raise issues that humanity considers perennial. This ancient text (with its attendant worldview) has arguably received more discussion than any other biblical book. Since the advent of the Enlightenment and the rise of historical criticism, scholars have also become increasingly aware of the "text" and worldview that each expositor brings to this ancient text. Simply put, there is the world of the text, and the world of the expositor. Virtually all scholars continue to debate which world should dominate the exposition; the spectrum at least encompasses those (at one end) who think the ancient world should dominate interpretation, while others consider the attempt to reconstruct the ancient world of the text so fraught with vagaries that it is best left unaddressed.

These three works demonstrate the dynamics involved when the world of the text intersects the world (and agendas) of the expositor. None of these three works comprises a commentary on Genesis in the traditional manner. Rather, each presents a rather free-flowing exposition of materials contained in the biblical text. Although each of the authors is a scholar, none is a biblical scholar in the traditional sense (with the possible exception of Raphael Patai). Because of that, none feels the need to address numerous topics one would typically find in a traditional commentary on Genesis.

The book by Robert Graves and Raphael Patai is a reprint of a work originally published in 1963 and reflects an understanding of Genesis that was somewhat idiosyncratic in that era and is largely dismissed by biblical scholarship today. Graves, a prolific writer, is best known for his eagerness to debunk the traditional (i.e., religious) understanding of Christianity, more specifically Jesus. Graves, fascinated with Greek mythology, repeatedly attempted in his writings to expose the mythical underpinnings of Christianity and the Christ event. Patai, a Hungarian who migrated to Israel as a Zionist, ultimately finished his career at Dropsie and the Herzl Institute in New York. Though true intellectuals, both lived mostly outside the mainstream academy and were considered mavericks. Both were fascinated with exposing the mythological component underlying (if not undergirding) the theological component. Patai's work somewhat reflects the spirit of James Frazer's

(*Golden Bough*) world. Patai, like Frazer, often engages in sweeping generalizations and seemingly random comparisons, seldom addressing the issues of historical linkage or linguistic synchrony. Because of that, comparisons drawn between the Genesis materials and Greek and / or ancient Near Eastern myths, while intriguing, often do not meet the methodological criteria for comparison presumed by the majority of scholars working in comparative Semitics.

Working almost through "free association," Graves and Patai mention numerous Hellenistic myths, as well as myths from Mesopotamia, Phoenicia, and Canaan, with virtually no mention of the cultural complexities of the associations, nor the differences between the various myths. (For example, the authors cite the mythological exploits of Behemoth and Leviathan but fail to provide methodologically clear lines between these figures in the world of Canaan and in the world of the Bible.) Because of that, the uninformed reader is left with a highly skewed picture of life in the ancient world and the intersection of the book of Genesis with that larger, ancient Near Eastern world.

However, this work not only treats texts deriving from the same larger world that produced Genesis, it also provides extensive documentation of the subsequent rabbinic legends that arose in an attempt to understand the "fuller meaning" of the text. In this arena, *Hebrew Myths* offers the reader a treasure trove of Talmudic lore. For those unfamiliar with the early rabbinic writings, this work offers a plethora of gems from these ancient expositions. Readers familiar with the Bible know that Genesis leaves unanswered questions on virtually every page. Perhaps less familiar to non-Jewish readers is the extent to which the rabbinic tradition attempted to "fill in the gaps" and address these unanswered questions. Thus, one finds in this book the conversation between Cain and Abel prior to Abel's murder, the nature of the mark of Cain, the distinction between the descendants of Seth and Cain, and its relevance for understanding the enigmatic paragraph in Genesis 6 regarding the sons of God and daughters of men (the former being Seth's descendents, the latter Cain's descendents). One also finds intriguing speculation about the nature of the sin of Noah's son toward his father, the significance of Nimrod, and the tower of Babel. In reality, after the initial few chapters of Genesis (primarily chapters 1-3), *Hebrew Myths* devotes the bulk of its concerns with the rabbinic lore and exposition surrounding this book. Each of the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph) receives extensive attention, although not surprisingly, the attention largely focuses upon the enigmatic and opaque (e.g., Abraham's vision of the severed carcasses in Genesis 15, the "hand under the thigh" ritual, the prenatal conversations of Jacob and Esau, Jacob's dream at Bethel, the rape of Dinah, the interaction of Judah and Tamar [Genesis 38], Joseph's encounter with Potiphar's wife, etc.). While interesting reading, this work ultimately lacks a clear delineation of its overarching theme and purpose. Far better works exist for readers interested in either of the topics *Hebrew Myths* addresses—the comparative mythological world of the ancient Near East or the rabbinic world responding to the biblical narrative.

Whereas *Hebrew Myths* suffers from a clear statement of purpose, *Genesis: The Movie* clearly states its goal and methodological approach from the outset. Robert Capon, an Episcopal priest best known for popular devotional works on Jesus (e.g., *The Supper of the Lamb; The Mystery of Christ ... And Why We Don't Get It*), calls upon his readers not to *read* the book of Genesis as a manual of religious instruction, but to *watch* Genesis as a historical movie whose director is God.

Given Capon's clear vision of purpose, one might expect a work steeped in post-modernism and replete with references to contemporary movies. While there is some of this (e.g., Capon cites analogies from such contemporary movies as "American Beauty"), his book reflects an eclecticism that is at times staggering. Capon regularly cites verses in the Hebrew, Septuagint, Vulgate, KJV, RSV, and NRSV. He also extensively cites the works of one of his early church heroes—Augustine (especially the *Confessions* and *De Genesi ad Litteram*). Not surprisingly, his own exposition shows the interpretive freedom with which the early fathers approached scripture. Like the early fathers, the Trinity is central to Capon's interpretation. The Father is the Producer, the Son is the Star, and the Holy Spirit functions as Director.

In reality, Capon's work covers only the first three chapters of Genesis. Like *Hebrew Myths*, Capon utilizes Genesis 1-3 to present extensive commentary upon a variety of topics that interest him. Again, the scope and breadth of his interests are large. He moves easily from discussing Augustine's understanding of the paradox of being and non-being; i.e., before things *happened*, they both were and were not (they *were not* physically, but *were* in the mind of God) to analyzing contemporary American pop culture. On numerous occasions, Capon digresses into extensive philosophical and theological discussions (e.g., the temptation by the serpent [= Satan for Capon]) becomes the springboard for an extensive exposition of Job's testing and Jesus' temptation in the desert; the tree of life provides the impetus for a discussion of the meaning of life and death; the tree of knowledge of good and evil provides the backdrop for a discussion of our relationship to the world). Augustine's distinction of God's *intellectual* creation and *physical* creation fascinates Capon. While the digressions are often engaging and thought-provoking, they typically exhibit far more eisegesis than concern to exegete the original message of the text. A classic example occurs in his discussion of the rivers in Genesis 2. The four streams flowing forth from Eden provide Capon a backdrop to discuss the sea as the "source of all life" (from the fetus in amniotic fluid to the rivers of the world functioning as the arteries of all creation's economic life).

Following his movie analogy, Capon reads each day in Genesis 1 as a separate "act;" intermission occurs after day seven. Although Capon utilizes the movie metaphor as his dominant mode of interpretation, he does not shy away from other metaphors. He argues Genesis 1 is best understood as a real estate agent taking a potential buyer on a walk-through of a house. He also fearlessly tackles the challenges his movie analogy (specifically the "Star" as God's eternal word) creates.

Capon is no biblical fundamentalist and so refuses to find Jesus "hidden" in every passage or to engage in simplistic "prediction-fulfillment" categories. Rather, for him the Star as the eternal Word of God incarnate appears in several "characters" before appearing as Jesus in the climactic scenes of the New Testament. True to his hero Augustine, for Capon, creation is neither simply an act nor an occurrence but an ongoing mystery. He acknowledges "transactional theology" as one of his pet peeves, and one reason for his writing this book. For Capon, God has an abiding presence in our history and world; he has not simply inserted himself "after the fact" in a few key cases.

While often engaging reading, Capon's work suffers from unnecessary (and at times annoying) digressions and ramblings. Such digressions include taking potshots at American (conservative) politics, biblical higher criticism, male chauvinism (birthed by Adam when he first called Eve "she"), and using this work to promote his earlier two books. However, perhaps most troubling is Capon seems unable to maintain his movie analogy rigorously. In reality, in numerous instances, Capon would be better served utilizing the analogy of a novel, since he repeatedly is fascinated more with the nature and development of characters in the story than simply with movement and action.

In many ways *The Beginning of Wisdom* by Leon Kass is the most interesting of the three books reviewed here. Kass is Addie Clark Harding Professor at the University of Chicago. He also has served as the chair of the President's council on bioethics. Thus, his academic specialty is most distant from biblical studies. Kass, a self-acknowledged secular Jew, states that his interest in the book of Genesis began through casual conversations with colleagues, and more importantly, with a small weekly discussion group of students. Kass became interested in learning more of this ancient classic that has had such a profound influence on Western civilization. Like Capon, Kass articulates his purpose and methodology at the outset of his work. Kass reads Genesis as a "philosophical classic" (rather than as a compositional mystery, cultural relic, linguistic puzzle palace, or even a document proffering religious doctrine). For Kass, one can read Genesis as one reads Plato or Nietzsche. Like biblical scholars, Kass divides Genesis into two major blocks: Genesis 1-11 (the primeval period) and Genesis 12-50 (the patriarchal period).

Like the works of Graves, Patai, and Capon, this work reflects much of the creative genius of Professor Kass. His primary "reading partners" and sources for background information to the book of Genesis are the well known (but now seriously dated) biblical scholars Umberto Cassuto and Robert Sacks. Kass states his threefold purpose early on: 1) to demonstrate by example a wisdom-seeking approach to the Bible that attempts to understand the text in its own terms while also trying to show how such an understanding may address us in our current situation of moral and spiritual neediness; 2) to recover in their full power the stories of Genesis as tales to live with, stories illuminating some of the most important and enduring questions of human existence; 3) to make plausible the

power of the biblical approach and response to these questions, with its emphasis on righteousness, holiness, and reverence for the divine. Kass also thoroughly reflects his indebtedness to the modern scientific approach in his methodological assumptions: 1) there is a coherent order and plan to the whole of the book (the order of the stories is of more than chronological significance); 2) every word counts; 3) juxtapositions are important (what precedes or follows a given sentence or story may be crucial for discovering its meaning); 4) teachings of the text are not opaque but can be discovered through human reason. Importantly, Kass acknowledges that for him human reason trumps awe and reverence in reading and determining the significance of a given text.

Kass's attempt to read Genesis as a philosophical classic manifests a decided unevenness. Not surprisingly, his agenda moves forward much more smoothly in Genesis 1-11 than in 12-50. For Kass, Genesis 1-11 presents a "coherent anthropology" with insights into the problematic character of human reason, speech, freedom, sexual desire, love of the beautiful, pride, shame, anger, guilt, death, et al. In these chapters, Genesis, quintessentially a book about beginnings, presents Adam and Eve as the paradigmatic man and woman, Cain and Abel as paradigmatic brothers, and Babel as the quintessential city (and reflection of "civilization"). Genesis is not so much about *what happened* as *what always happens!* Thus, Genesis can function as a powerful pedagogical beginning for the moral and spiritual education of the reader. However, Kass the "objective" academician and secularist always maintains control over the text. Simply put, the text remains for Kass an object of reflection, providing possible helpful insights into human nature and potentially valuable advice. Since Kass makes no faith commitments, this text never questions him, or makes claims upon him. At this stage he is true to the commitments of the academy.

Though verbose, in Genesis 1-11 Kass engages numerous valuable topics. He argues the main teaching of Genesis 1 is the non-divinity of the cosmos (to counter the natural human inclination to worship nature). He reads Genesis 2 anthropologically and morally (rather than historically). Eating the fruit introduces the "death of innocence;" naming the animals manifests an early use of reason; Adam naming Eve and himself demonstrates awareness of self and the other. He rightly notes that Genesis 1-11 manifests considerable interest in the blessings and curses that come with civilization. Kass's exposition of these chapters provides engaging reading. He talks of sexual difference and love of one's own, judgment, shame, and beauty (Genesis 3), fratricide and the "twisted roots of civilization" (Genesis 4), death, beautiful women, and heroic temptation (Noah and the flood), (un)fatherhood and filial piety / rebellion (Genesis 9), and the ultimate failures of civilization (Tower of Babel). Interestingly, in contrast to Genesis, Kass shows far more fascination with Babel than with the flood.

Unfortunately, as the focus turns dramatically in Genesis 12 to a specific group of people (Abraham and his ancestors), so Kass is unable to maintain his single-

minded focus upon larger philosophical matters. Kass argues that Genesis 12-50 details the struggle to launch a new way for humanity, informed by the Abrahamic covenant. This covenant attempts to address the problems of humanity's natural propensities, and in so doing provides eternal wisdom about marriage, parenting, brotherhood, education, justice, political and moral leadership (simply put, "how to live a good life"). For him, chapters 1-11 and 12-50 connect through understanding the dangers and accepting the limits of human power so that one can open the door to a good life, a life defined not for a solitary individual, but for the entire community. This good life is one devoted to righteousness and holiness (interesting language for one wedded to the academy). In actuality, beginning with the patriarchal materials, *The Beginning of Wisdom* becomes a much more straightforward exposition of the biblical narrative. Largely absent are any greater philosophical principles. The work from this point forward talks much more of historical matters, pushing into the background the larger philosophical and moral issues of the text. Genesis 12-50 presents challenging ethical and social dilemmas; however, one wonders if because of Kass's commitment to human reason, he chooses not to engage in these more dicey matters.

These three works all provide interesting reading and often offer grist for meaningful and significant discussion. Not surprisingly, all three perhaps tell more about the author of the book than the work of Genesis. While every expositor brings a worldview to the book of Genesis that impacts the manner in which the ancient text is read, these three works demonstrate that liability more than many works on Genesis. If one is looking for solid expositions rooted primarily in the text of Genesis, far better resources are available. However, if one is looking for works on Genesis that engage the text from a particular angle and utilize that angle to shape and significantly influence the Genesis text, these books offer valuable reading.

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Missionary Writing and Empire, 1800-1860. By Anna Johnston. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003. ISBN 0-521-82699-3. Pp. xii + 262. \$85.00.

Borrowed Gods and Foreign Bodies: Christian Missionaries Imagine Chinese Religion. By Eric Reinders. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2004. ISBN 0-520-24171-1. Pp. xvi + 266. \$49.95.

More than fifteen years ago, historian Brian Stanley observed in his book, *The Bible and the Flag* (1990), that numerous academic investigations since the 1960s

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