THE THEOLOGY OF THE BOOK OF GENESIS

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Preface

When I began seriously to think about the writing of this book, two things struck me. Neither was new, but each struck me with fresh force, in the kind of way that changed my thinking and so also my writing.

First, of all the books in the Old Testament, Genesis is probably the most appealed-to and most used in contemporary discussion. To cite a few examples, the biblical portrayal of creation, and the contemporary phenomenon of creationism, feature regularly in "science and religion" debates, such that the question of what to make of the first few chapters of Genesis remains a live issue. Global warming is directing enormous attention to our understanding of, and appropriate interaction with, the environment; in such a context, the implications of the divine mandate to humanity to "have dominion" over the earth, and what kind of stewardship is envisioned, becomes important in a way that it was not a hundred years ago. Greater population mobility raises issues about the interrelationship of different religious traditions, such that interfaith dialogue is increasingly on the agenda of those to whom faith is important; and dialogue among Jews, Christians, and Muslims regularly appeals to Abraham as some kind of "ecumenical" figure, who may represent common ground among the dialogue partners. Millions of Americans believe that the United States of America

should support the state of Israel because of God's promise in Genesis to bless those who bless Abraham and his descendants.

Second, a strongly negative stance toward the Old Testament tends to be an integral element within the currently fashionable atheist critique of religious faith in general and Christianity in particular. To be sure, not all express themselves quite as eloquently and forcefully as Richard Dawkins: "The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully."[1] Nonetheless, anxiety, suspicion, and hostility, not least toward famous stories within Genesis, are on the increase. Is not the story of Cain and Abel an archetypal example of the murderous violence that the biblical conception of God can generate?[2] If one can but stand back from familiar interpretations, should one not see that the God of the story of Adam and Eve, or the Abraham who is willing to reduce his son to smoke and ashes, is each alike a "monster"?[3] If these stories were merely museum pieces, their doubtful values perhaps would not matter so much. But it is because these are part of the sacred scripture of more than a billion people today that what these stories say, envisage, and possibly mandate *matters*.

[1] Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam, 2006), 31. See further the discussion in Chapter 3.

[2] See Regina M. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997) and the discussion in Chapter 5.

[3] So, respectively, David Penchansky, *What Rough Beast? Images of God in the Hebrew Bible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 5–20; and Richard Holloway's review of *After These Things*, by Jenny Diski, *The Guardian*, April 24, 2004, 26.

I have therefore decided against one time-honored scholarly way of writing on the theology of Genesis – namely, to focus primarily on a depiction of the religious thought and practice within Genesis as a constituent element within the wider history of the religion of ancient Israel. At the present time, this would mean distinguishing between Priestly and non-Priestly strands within the text; focusing on the nature of the Priestly perspective; discussing whether it is appropriate still to think in terms of a Yahwist and, if so, what particular emphases characterize the Yahwist; examining how the various Genesis traditions may reflect and relate to various contexts within ancient Israel and Judah; and so on. These are all valid issues. The difficulty is that they are increasingly issues of interest only to professional biblical scholars. The wider public interest that attended pentateuchal criticism in the nineteenth century has long since ceased. Even among scholars, interest in the wider issues about the nature and development of Israel's religion and its possible enduring significance, an interest that clearly motivated the nineteenth-century debate that climaxed with Wellhausen's famous synthesis,[4] is hardly to the fore of the many technical debates that continue. Yet it is not just the nonscholarly public that tends to put different questions to the biblical text, for scholars themselves are recognizing that many different questions may validly be put to the biblical text, depending on the purposes that motivate one's inquiry. And so, we are back at the first point.

Thus my approach to the theology of Genesis is via various contemporary debates about, and appeals to, the biblical text. My concern is still to discover and engage with the intrinsic theological

[4] Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*, trans. J. Sutherland Black and Allan Menzies, repr. ed. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994 [German orig., 1878]).

meaning of the Book of Genesis, only to do so in the context of its reception and use. The debates I interact with are mostly scholarly debates, but scholarly debates that are more obviously engaging with the questions that many readers of Genesis are actually asking; even so, there is space for only some of those questions. I am also painfully aware that much of Genesis and its theological meaning remains undiscussed in the pages that follow, but I hope that the studies that follow are at least representative of Genesis and its theology as a whole.

I am grateful to my wife, Jenny, and my colleague Richard Briggs, for their reading and commenting on draft chapters and suggesting helpful changes, which I have generally (but not always) followed. I am also grateful to Brent A. Strawn and Patrick D. Miller, the series editors, for the honor of being invited to contribute this volume, for their putting up with my delays and idiosyncrasies, and for their constructive editorial improvement of my text. As a result of all this wise and friendly help, my text, whatever its continuing deficiencies, is much better than it would have been otherwise. My thanks also to Douglas Earl for compiling the indexes, which we hope will be user-friendly.

Biblical citations are taken from the NRSV.

CHAPTER 1

What Is a "Theology of Genesis"?

The book of Genesis contains some of the most memorable and moving narratives within the Old Testament, which have engaged the hearts and minds of (quite literally) millions of people down the ages. Neither Jewish nor Christian faiths – nor, more distantly, Islam – can be understood without some appreciation of the enduring impact of the Book of Genesis. Likewise, much of the literature and art of Western civilization, at least until recent times, is deeply imbued with motifs and images from Genesis.

In Genesis, God creates a world, which is the object of his approval, indeed delight ("very good"). Yet Eve and Adam listen to the serpent in Eden and eat the forbidden fruit, hide from God, and are expelled from Eden. Cain resents God's preferential acceptance of Abel's sacrifice, ignores God's warning, murders Abel, and is condemned by God to be a marked and restless wanderer on the earth. Noah builds an ark in wordless obedience to God and enables a faithful remnant to live through the unmaking and remaking of the known world. The great building project at Babel – Babylon, an early center of human enterprise – is overturned by God so as to scatter people and make human language and culture complex.

Against this backdrop Abraham is called by God to leave his Mesopotamian home on the basis of God's promise to make him the ancestor of a great people, in a land of their own, blessed by

God, and esteemed by other peoples. Abraham does many things, yet his life fundamentally involves waiting for a son by Sarah to begin to fulfil the promise; his son Ishmael by his servant-girl Hagar also gives rise to a people, but is nonetheless a false start. When finally the long-awaited son Isaac, the symbol of Abraham's future, is born and begins to grow, Abraham is told by God to reduce him to ashes and smoke in a sacrifice; Isaac's knife-edge survival anticipates that of his descendants.

Isaac himself does relatively little. The longest narrative in which he appears focuses on how his wife, Rebekah, conspires with his younger twin son, Jacob, to deceive him, so that he pronounces his blessing on Jacob rather than on his older, preferred, and intended twin son, Esau.

Jacob does not walk before God in the mode of Abraham. Rather, he appears to be relentlessly, and more often than not successfully, self-seeking, whether in deceiving his father Isaac or in trying to outsmart his uncle Laban to whom he flees to escape Esau's murderous anger. When God appears to fleeing Jacob at Bethel, Jacob thinks in terms of making a deal with God. Only years later, when Jacob, returning home, fears for his life and wrestles through the night with a mysterious figure does he appear genuinely to encounter God and thereafter builds an altar to God. However, Jacob remains a poor and querulous father of his twelve sons, the ancestors of the twelve tribes. Yet remarkably, he, and not Abraham, is the eponymous ancestor of the whole people of Israel.

Joseph, Jacob's favored son, pays for his youthful arrogance toward his brothers by being sold by them into slavery in Egypt, where he faces prolonged darkness, is traduced by Potiphar's wife, and is abandoned in prison. Yet eventually his interpreting of the Pharaoh's dreams gives him a meteoric rise to power. His brothers, seeking food in Egypt in time of famine, do not recognize Joseph,

and Joseph appears to toy with them. Yet eventually Joseph's brothers and father are brought to food and safety in Egypt, and there is a family reconciliation (of sorts). When Joseph dies, the Genesis narrative comes to an end with Israel's ancestors established in Egypt, with the promise of settlement in Canaan left open for the future.

It is a rich and frequently surprising narrative. Though there are some comings and goings from and to the two great centers of early civilization, Mesopotamia and Egypt, the main action is in the seemingly insignificant land of Canaan. God makes promises and guides, and his blessing overarches the whole; yet for long stretches, God appears absent and inactive. Sinners at Sodom and Gomorrah perish; yet deceitful Jacob prospers and lives long. Younger sons are consistently favored over their older siblings, so that the "proper" order of things is regularly subverted. Significant space is given to Abraham's untypical military campaign, Jacob's breeding of sheep and goats, Joseph's management of the Egyptian economy. The more one looks at the material, the less it fits typical notions of what "God" and "religion" are all about.

TOWARD A "THEOLOGY OF GENESIS"

The Contested Nature of "Theology"

How then might one approach the task of articulating a "theology of Genesis"? This is tricky and controverted, for a variety of reasons. For example, people often point out that Genesis is not a work of theology in the sense that people usually understand that term – in the kind of way that, say, Origen's *On First Principles*, or Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*, or Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, or even von Rad's *Old Testament Theology* are recognized as works of theology. But this means that it is vital at the outset to define what is, and is not, meant by "theology."

"Theology," like "history" and many of the other major categories that scholars use to interpret the biblical text, is not itself a biblical term; it originated in classical Greek and rose to prominence in the works of the church fathers. Of course, it need not be a problem to use postbiblical terms to designate and interpret the content of the Bible,[1] as long as the terms are used with appropriate nuance and sensitivity. But this already reminds us that biblical interpretation generally involves a dialectic between the content of the text itself and the categories and frame of reference within which one seeks to understand and perhaps also appropriate it. Notions such as the plain sense of the text have their place, but they can easily obscure the subtlety and complexity of what in fact goes on when people read any text from the past, never mind one that is held by Jews and Christians to be enduringly authoritative.

The term "theology" has a long and complex history from the Fathers to the present day, which makes it far from straightforward to use. Not least there has been a tendency from the early Enlightenment in the seventeenth century onward to use theology as a counterpart of religion, both of which are used in distinctively modern and contracted senses. "Religion" in the modern West is often used to denote a generic kind of thought, piety, and practices, quite distinct from those of politics, economics, and the natural sciences; it designates what happens primarily in an inward, subjective, and largely private realm, distinct from what happens in public – so that religious people who transgress these distinctions tend to encounter strong opposition. Theology is then sometimes conceived as an attempt to talk about religious experiences, which risks being a kind of psychobabble with religious jargon;

[1] Such terms even include the basic structuring categories Old Testament, Hebrew Bible, and New Testament.

alternatively, theology may be a kind of metaphysical speculation about invisible and intangible entities – an activity that bears no relation to, and certainly makes no difference to, the realities of everyday life. One reason, therefore, why it can be difficult to articulate a theology of Genesis is that so much of the content of Genesis does not conform to modern theological preconceptions of what one should find there. Only if one can recover a more classic sense of theology, as an attempt to understand everything in the world in relation to God, will one be better placed to start to make sense of the theology of Genesis.

Historical Criticism and Socially Valued Knowledge

One common scholarly approach, which tries to deal with the problem of possibly distorting preconceptions, is to understand theology in relation to the Bible as a primarily philological and historical discipline, a descriptive and analytic account of religious thought and practice. In this sense, to give an account of the theology of Genesis is to characterize its content in the categories of religious history: to show what certain terms and ideas and practices mean in their originating context, in the tenth or sixth century BCE (or whenever), and to map them in relation to each other and to other aspects of ancient Israel's developing religious thought and practice, and possibly those of Israel's neighbors also. Such a theology of Genesis is not in principle different from giving an intelligent account of the content of any religious text, biblical or otherwise – one would not in principle handle Augustine's *Confessions*, the Qur'an, or the Bhagavad-Gita differently. The task requires good philological and historical understanding, so that one can appreciate the content of the text for what it is, without prematurely assimilating it to the perspectives of other texts, ideas, and practices from other periods of history and different cultural

contexts. Theology thus becomes, in essence, a history of Israelite religion in some form or other.[2]

There is obvious value in such an enterprise. Not least, those who hold the Bible to be God's self-revelation, a gift and a truth that is given to Israel and the church for the benefit of the world, have an interest in wanting to discern as accurately as possible what the text really says, lest God's word be misunderstood, or lest it be confused with their own preferences and predilections. On any reckoning, the insights of good philology and history will only be downplayed or despised by those who have never come to appreciate what those insights are or who have failed to master the disciplines necessary to acquire them.

Nonetheless, it is the thesis of this book that a theology of Genesis needs to be more than, and somewhat different from, this, primarily because Genesis is not a freestanding ancient text, like the Epic of Gilgamesh, but is part of the authoritative scriptures of synagogue and church, wherein there has been an unbroken history through the centuries of living with the text in a variety of ways, not least its incorporation into regular worship, both through reading aloud and in liturgical texts. Among other things, this means that one does not, indeed almost cannot, come to the text "cold," but only in the context of an enduring Jewish and Christian, and consequent wider, cultural reception. This reception forms a kind of

[2] There have been many twentieth-century debates as to how, if at all, to distinguish between theology and the history of Israelite religion. Usually those advocating the distinction have presented their theology in thematic/systematic categories, more recently also in synchronic form, as distinct from providing diachronic, comparative, and developmental accounts (history of religion). Yet it is doubtful whether any of these, even Gerhard von Rad's influential concept of retelling (*Nacherzählung*), succeeds in doing more than, as it were, reshuffling the pack so as to provide a fresh hand to set on the table of accurate historical understanding of ancient religious data.

plausibility structure, a context for bothering with the text and for taking it seriously, in a way that would not be the case otherwise. It means, among other things, that Genesis (or any other biblical book) is approached with expectations, or at least arguments, about its enduring significance and possible truth that are not the case when one approaches most other religious texts of antiquity.

Biblical scholars often take this plausibility structure for granted. Sometimes, however, they reflect on it, and one striking example is this excerpt from Brevard Childs:

> I do not come to the Old Testament to learn about someone else's God, but about the God we confess, who has made himself known to Israel, to Abraham, Isaac and to Jacob. I do not approach some ancient concept, some mythological construct akin to Zeus or Moloch, but our God, our Father. The Old Testament bears witness that God revealed himself to Abraham, and we confess that he has broken into our lives. I do not come to the Old Testament to be informed about some strange religious phenomenon, but in faith I strive for knowledge as I seek to understand ourselves in the light of God's self-disclosure. In the context of the church's scripture I seek to be pointed to our God who has made himself known, is making himself known, and will make himself known. . . . Thus, I cannot act as if I were living at the beginning of Israel's history, but as one who already knows the story, and who has entered into the middle of an activity of faith long in progress.[3]

Childs's formulation is rather distinctively Christian; Jews often express their own self-understanding in relation to the Bible quite differently. Yet for Christian and Jew alike, there is a common preconception. It is one thing to come to the biblical text without allowing church and synagogue to prejudge the outcome of one's

[3] Brevard S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (London: SCM, 1985), 28–29. Although the thought is basic to Childs's work, its expression is untypical, as Childs generally eschews such first-person "confessional" terminology.

philological, historical, and other inquiries. It is quite another to recognize that one might well not bother with studying this text in the first place were it not for the general assumptions and expectations with regard to its enduring significance and truth – assumptions that depend on the continuing health of synagogue and church, and their wider cultural recognition. As Jon D. Levenson crisply puts it, in the context of discussing the role of historical criticism in biblical study,

> [t]he very value-neutrality of this [that is, historical-critical] method of study puts its practitioners at a loss to defend the *value* of the enterprise itself. In a culture saturated with religious belief involving the Bible, this weakness was less apparent, for the defense was less called for. Now, however, after secularism has impugned the worth of the Bible, and multiculturalism has begun to critique the cultural traditions at the base of which it stands, biblical scholars, including, I must stress, even the most antireligious among them, must face this paradoxical reality: the vitality of their rather untraditional discipline has historically depended upon the vitality of traditional religious communities, Jewish and Christian.... Indeed, in the humanities today, every "canon," cultural as well as scriptural, is under intense suspicion, and every selection of subject matter is increasingly and correctly understood to involve a normative claim and not merely a description of value-neutral fact. In all cases, what scholars study and teach is partly a function of which practices and beliefs they wish to perpetuate.[4]

Ideological Criticism of the Biblical Text

What, then, of one of the fashionable trends in contemporary biblical scholarship, ideological criticism of various kinds? Ideological

[4] Jon D. Levenson, "Historical Criticism and the Fate of the Enlightenment Project," in Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), 106–26 (109–10).

criticism generally encourages readers to read "against the grain" of the biblical text, critique it in the light of the best cultural values of the present time, and bring to critical consciousness, with a view to repudiation, issues of, say, gender or power that are simply taken for granted within the biblical text.

Interestingly, proposals to read against the biblical grain tend to get their critical and rhetorical purchase from an apparent unwillingness on the part of mainstream scholarship to put hard questions to the biblical text or to take sufficiently seriously what the text might "do to you" – thereby apparently encouraging rather unthinking biblicism. So, for example, David Clines criticizes typical historical approaches to the Bible and insists that a reader can only maintain ethical integrity by reading the Bible against the grain:

> The practitioners of the historical-critical method, like the inventors of the atomic bomb, were ethically irresponsible. Their commitment was to the "truth," whatever that might be and wherever it might lead. And that is unquestionably a whole sight better than a commitment to falsity. But it systematically ignored the question of effects on readers, and it is about time we regarded such study as part of our scholarly discipline and task. . . .
>
> I am rather insistent on a programme of judging interpretations by standards other than their own; for if we do not judge them by our own standards of reference, we cannot be ethical. If we judge the references in our texts to slavery or to the oppression of women by the standards that operated in the ancient world, we might well find ourselves approving those practices, or at least being less antithetical to them. We do not owe any such debt to the past, however, and it is a more truly human activity to make serious and well-informed judgments than merely to acquire knowledge or "understanding. . . . "
>
> What it boils down to is this: To be truly academic, and worthy of its place in the academy, biblical studies has to be truly critical, critical not just about lower-order questions like the authorship of

> the biblical books or the historicity of the biblical narratives, but critical about the Bible's contents, its theology, its ideology. And that is what biblical studies has notoriously not been critical about at all. To be critical, you have to take up a standard of reference outside the material you are critiquing; but, traditionally, biblical scholars have been believers, ecclesiastics or, at the least, fellow-travellers and sympathizers with the ideology of the Bible. When the academy begins to view the Bible as a cultural artifact, and is not seduced or pressured by religious commitments, the hallmark of criticism will be that it steps outside the ideology of the text.[5]

The issues at stake here are complex, and part of the force of Clines's rhetoric depends on some oversimplifications. For example, it is hardly the case that mainstream biblical scholarship has eschewed critiquing the biblical text in all sorts of ways. Clines's stance is reminiscent of the kind of critique offered by deists in the eighteenth century, which was the period in which historical-critical approaches started to dominate the field. Strong ethical critiques characterized this scholarship, and there are still historical-critical scholars today who see themselves as continuing within such a mold.[6] Moreover, one response to the pronouncement of the Bible's inadequacies from a modern (and often irreligious) European perspective has been precisely to promote a more rigorous and thoroughgoing historical awareness.[7] In other words,

[5] David J. A. Clines, "Why Is There a Song of Songs and What Does It Do to You If You Read It?" in Clines, *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible*, JSOTSup 205 (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 94–121 (107–10).

[6] See, e.g., Heikki Räisänen, "Biblical Critics in the Global Village," in *Reading the Bible in the Global Village: Helsinki*, ed. Heikki Räisänen et al. (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), 9–28; and John J. Collins, *The Bible after Babel: Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005).

[7] It is notable that the German Enlightenment, which quickly came to lead the field in the study of ancient history and the Bible, remained more religiously

there is a dialectical relationship between historical understanding, critical appraisal, and possible contemporary response to the biblical text.

In certain ways, ideological criticism often represents a secularized version of a religious rule of faith, an issue to which we will return. Moreover, in its own way, ideological criticism does not deny the force of Levenson's sociological observation cited at the end of the previous section. For, if one takes time minimizing the enduring significance and impact of the Bible, or denying that its deity is the one true deity, or at least querying some of its cultural (e.g., "patriarchal") presuppositions, then this is essentially a reactive exercise premised on Jewish and Christian affirmations and their historic and enduring cultural impact – and so, is unnecessary if writing about Zeus or Marduk and the religious ideas and practices respectively associated with them. Some indeed appear to study the Bible primarily so as to oppose the perpetuation of its beliefs and practices, whether in overtly religious or in secularized forms;[8] but the presupposition of the exercise is that there is something there that needs opposing. Of course, if such ideological scholars become a predominant voice, they could in the long term diminish the interest of universities, publishing houses, and inquisitive students in the Bible, and resources will be redirected to where they are considered more worthwhile.[9]

engaged certainly than its French counterpart and generally than its English counterpart. Thus German historical work on the Bible characteristically was articulated with an eye to the enduring significance, in one form or other, of the material.

[8] See the discussion of Regina M. Schwartz's work in Chapter 5.

[9] One might compare the recent book by Hector Avalos, *The End of Biblical Studies* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2007).

A PROPOSAL FOR A "THEOLOGY OF GENESIS"

Biblical Text and Canonical Contexts

For present purposes, the significant factor in an ideological program such as that of Clines is that it brings us back to the point that the Book of Genesis comes to us, not as an interesting papyrological or epigraphic discovery from exploration of the Middle East that can enlarge our knowledge of ancient religion, but in the context of the canonical scriptures of Judaism and Christianity. In this context, Genesis has a seemingly inexhaustible history of interpretation and appropriation, which gives rise to continuing expectations and assumptions as one comes to the text. Whatever the complexities and ramifications of the debates about the relationship between scripture and tradition that have characterized both Jews and Christians down the ages, and however much it may become necessary periodically to reassert a certain kind of scriptural primacy over the formulations of continuing traditions of interpretation,[10] the fact remains that Genesis is received within the context of continuing traditions of faith, life, and thought, however variously these may be conceived.

Although there can be an undoubted heuristic value in imaginatively bracketing these contexts of reception, so that the meaning of the Genesis text as an ancient text can better be appreciated, the appropriate stance for a theology of Genesis is not only to bracket but also to incorporate. The task will certainly have dimensions of what might be included in a history of Israelite thought and

[10] This can take many forms. In Jewish contexts, the Karaites and modern Reform Jews have in differing ways appealed to scripture to relativize rabbinic traditions of interpretation. And apart from Protestantism's classic appeal to scriptural primacy, there are movements within contemporary Roman Catholicism to renew the foundational role of scripture.

practice, but it will also engage with the reception of the text as a resource for probing its significance and exploring its possible appropriation.

To be sure, a proposal such as this makes some scholars nervous. They may complain that this prematurely fuses what should at least provisionally be separated. One of the best-known twentieth-century expressions of such anxiety was Krister Stendahl's 1962 essay on "Contemporary Biblical Theology," which argued for the importance of separating what the text "meant" (the descriptive task) from what it "means" (the hermeneutic question).[11] The serious deficiencies in such a program have not infrequently been spelled out.[12] Nonetheless Stendahl has recently clarified his concern in writing the essay, which was to "dethron[e] the theological imperialism that biblical scholars often enjoyed, or presumed, in the heyday of Biblical Theology," with a specific view to preventing a particular (mis)appropriation of the Bible:

> The issue was the ordination of women in the Church of Sweden. And the triggering factor was the signing of a public statement to be signed by the New Testament teachers in Uppsala and Lund Universities. They declared ordination of women to the priesthood to be contrary to the Bible – with no if, and, or but! It was the early 1950s. I was a doctoral student at the time, also a part of the teaching staff. When asked to sign, I found myself in a strange position. I was quite convinced that the ordination of women was the right thing,

[11] Krister Stendahl, "Biblical Theology, Contemporary," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. G. A. Buttrick et al., 5 vols. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1962), 1:418–32; reprinted in Heikki Räisänen et al., eds., *Reading the Bible in the Global Village: Helsinki*, 67–106.

[12] The most telling critique of which I am aware is Nicholas Lash, "What Might Martyrdom Mean?" in *Suffering and Martyrdom in the New Testament*, ed. W. Horbury and B. McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 183–98; reprinted in *Ex Auditu* 1 (1985): 14–24, and in Nicholas Lash, *Theology on the Way to Emmaus* (London: SCM, 1986), 75–92.

> and that for many reasons. At the same time I found the arguments of teachers and colleagues exegetically sound. I did not want to make Paul and/or Jesus into proto-feminists. Certainly the overwhelming biblical perception of the role of women could not easily be brushed aside, for example by reference to those docile women in Luke's gospel. I had to give reasons for not signing on, and when you are in a minority of one, you have to think harder. Hence the urgent need to take the hermeneutical gap seriously.[13]

Whatever one feels about the ordination of women, one can concede Stendahl's point that there are problems in trying to resolve a significant issue in contemporary life solely on the basis of biblical exegesis – as though one could, as it were, take the biblical text and just lay it down on the table as the ace of trumps. Neither Jews nor Christians typically operate thus. The sacred and authoritative text must indeed be considered and appropriated, but *other considerations must also come in* – the problem is to articulate precisely what these are and how they might function. Stendahl argued for a certain kind of gap between biblical past and ecclesial present, whereas Clines (one imagines) would simply wield his ethical knife. But neither shows much appreciation of the difference that may be made by long-term living with the biblical text, its ever-renewed reception and appropriation in worship and study – at least the difference that can be made in principle and on a good day, for in none of this do I wish to deny that Christian interpretation and appropriation of the Bible has often been deeply problematic.

One key aspect of the canonical preservation and reception of a book such as Genesis is *recontextualization.* As part of a canonical collection, Genesis is read alongside other texts, with other

[13] Krister Stendahl, "Dethroning Biblical Imperialism in Theology," in *Reading the Bible in the Global Village: Helsinki*, ed. Heikki Räisänen et al., 61–66 (62–63).

perspectives and practices, many of which may not have been envisaged by those writers and editors responsible for Genesis (though on numerous points of detail, one can of course argue the issue either way, at least within the Old Testament canon) – but which now form part of the frame of reference within which Genesis is received. For Christians, this canon includes the New Testament, in which God becomes definitively understood in the light of the incarnation – the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

One of the features that characterizes the phenomenon of the canon and its appropriation by the church is the very thing that Clines insists on – perspectives beyond that of the specific text being commented on. To be sure, the perspectives tend not to be quite those that Clines seems to prefer, though both Deuteronomy and Qoheleth, never mind the Gospel of John or the Letter to the Ephesians, are all interestingly distinct from Genesis. Ecclesial reflection on Genesis, and mutatis mutandis that of the synagogue, is generally characterized neither by harmonizing nor by distancing but by a range of highly complex synthetic moves, many of which are fluid and open to varying kinds of reformulation; and questions of practical appropriation are always mediated by questions of the wider life of the community in relation to scripture as a whole.[14]

Among other things, this means that characteristic Christian and Jewish reading of scripture tends to be a complex matter that is always indebted to some kind of rule of faith, which provides a way

[14] A fundamental weakness of the biblical theology movement, to which Stendahl refers, was its tendency to separate "pure" biblical thought (of a Hebrew nature) from the distorting influences especially of patristic interpretation (of an unduly abstract Greek nature), without realizing that to separate the biblical text from the continuing tradition of Christian thought and practice is to deprive oneself of the necessary resources for responsible weighing and appropriating of the text – however difficult the exercise may sometimes be.

of relating the parts to the tenor of the whole.[15] Rules of faith can vary markedly in their application and are not separable from wider contexts of faith and practice. So, for example, Calvin's Reformed identity and resistance to the Roman Catholic Church and von Rad's Lutheran affiliation, membership in the Confessing Church, and resistance to Nazism influenced the ways they articulate their readings of scripture. But the basic point is that what is recognized to count as good theology in relation to the Bible is far more subtle and differentiated than is often recognized and draws, consciously and unconsciously, on numerous resources in the literature and life of the last two thousand years.

How this all may work is unpredictable. The fact that Genesis countenances, for example, polygamy, sharp practice in sheep breeding, or scattered construction of altars has not generally moved interpreters to suppose that they should adopt such practices. However, Noah's curse of Ham/Canaan did lead some Christians, most notoriously in North America and South Africa, to suppose that those who could be identified as Ham's descendants should be induced to serve those who identified themselves as descendants of Shem – though this has been abandoned not just

[15] There has been a resurgence of Christian interest in this issue in recent years. As introductions, see K. Greene-McCreight, "Rule of Faith," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin Vanhoozer et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 703–4; and Ephraim Radner and George Sumner, eds., *The Rule of Faith: Scripture, Canon, and Creed in a Critical Age* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 1998). There is, I think, less work from Jewish perspectives, and in any case the language and frame of reference of rule of faith is Christian rather than Jewish; nevertheless, a good example of an articulation of a Jewish rule of faith is Moshe Greenberg, "On the Political Use of the Bible in Modern Israel: An Engaged Critique," in *Pomegranates and Golden Bells: Studies in Biblical, Jewish, and Near Eastern Ritual, Law, and Literature in Honor of Jacob Milgrom*, ed. David P. Wright, David Noel Freedman, and Avi Hurvitz (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 461–71.

because of secular pressures (though they helped) but because it has also been seen to compromise the fundamental Christian understanding of God and humanity.

The theological interpretation of scripture – its reading with a view to articulating and practicing its enduring significance for human life under God – involves a constant holding together of parts and a whole which is regularly reconfigured. It is in the meeting of biblical text with canonical context and the ongoing life of communities of faith that theology is done – and where one may hope to try to articulate a theology of Genesis.

Text and Contexts: An Example

One consequence of the understanding of theology just outlined is that the context of the interpreter becomes significant in a variety of possible ways. The entrance point into working theologically with Genesis need not arise from systematic reading of the biblical text itself, but rather from some issue or challenge within continuing Christian life.

One example, typical of countless others, can be seen in the following recent remarks by Stanley Hauerwas, in the context of a discussion of the difference that Christian faith should make to education, with special reference to the work of Luigi Giussani:

> Consider the implications of Giussani's almost throwaway observation – "Luckily, time makes us grow old" (p. 72) – for how medicine, and the sciences that serve medicine, should be understood. I think there is no denying that the current enthusiasm for "genomics" (that allegedly will make it possible to "treat" us before we become sick) draws on an extraordinary fear of suffering and death incompatible with Giussani's observation that *luckily* time makes us grow old. Our culture seems increasingly moving to the view that aging itself is an illness, and if it is possible, we ought to create and fund research that promises us that we may be able to get out of life alive. I find it

> hard to believe that such a science could be supported by a people who begin Lent by being told that we are dust and it is to dust we will return.
>
> For Christians to create an alternative culture and alternative structures to the knowledges produced and taught in universities that are shaped by the fear of death, I think, is a challenge we cannot avoid.[16]

My interest here lies in Hauerwas's appeal to the words of God spoken to the first humans in Genesis 3:19b: "You are dust, and to dust you shall return." This verse, probably known best from its use in funeral services, may or may not feature in a conventional theology of Genesis, although there can be little doubt that the nature of human life as mortal under God is an important concern within Genesis: It is central to the story of the Garden of Eden; the repeated "and he died" has a key role within the list of long-lived antediluvians in Genesis 5; the dying words and actions of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph play a crucial role within the overall narrative sequence.[17] Yet although this issue offers a real entrée to the theological concerns of Genesis, it is the twenty-first century context, with a Western culture increasingly influenced by the fear of dying, that gives Genesis 3:19 the possibility of making some real difference to how people today think and act.

[16] Stanley Hauerwas, "How Risky Is *The Risk of Education*? Random Reflections from the American Context," in Hauerwas, *The State of the University: Academic Knowledges and the Knowledge of God* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2007), 45–57 (53). His constructive engagement is with Luigi Giussani, *The Risk of Education: Discovering Our Ultimate Destiny*, trans. Rosanna Frongia (New York: Crossroad, 2001).

[17] I take the liberty of including Abraham's commissioning of his servant to find a wife for Isaac in Genesis 24 under this heading, as it is premised on Abraham's old age and incapacity to fulfil the task himself, even though it is not the kind of impending death scenario that we encounter in Genesis 27, 48–49, 50:24–26.

Moreover, Hauerwas is not appealing to the theology of Genesis as such, but rather to a particular Christian liturgical use of the Genesis text: It is the Genesis text as recontextualized within a frame of reference other than its own literary context that is significant, indeed authoritative. This other context indeed takes seriously the plain sense of the Genesis words in their own right, as a pronouncement of human mortality and a reminder of human continuity with the wider material environment. Yet as part of a Lenten liturgy, it does this within a frame of reference that looks to Good Friday and Easter where God's own entering into, and overcoming of, death is portrayed – a frame of reference beyond the ken of the Genesis writers.

So, if Genesis 3:19 is to have some contemporary cutting edge and allow some of the theology of Genesis to bear on a culture fearful of death, it will do so not by appeal to Genesis in its own right but by virtue of continuing Christian faith and worship providing a context within which an important concern of the Genesis text can still be meaningfully articulated and heard, in a way that may be timely.[18]

It follows from this that there is something intrinsically contextual and provisional about theological use of the biblical text. Theology is not a once-for-all exercise in finding the right words and/or deeds, but rather a continuing and ever-repeated attempt to articulate what a faithful understanding and use of the biblical text might look like in the changing circumstances of life. To be sure,

[18] Much of what I say here and elsewhere applies also, mutatis mutandis, to Jewish contexts for hearing and appropriating Tanak. My predominant emphasis on Christian understanding and use is primarily a reflection of my limited expertise and the constraints of a word count and is not intended to downplay the significance of Jewish contexts. My Christian reading of Genesis may, I hope, be heuristically useful for Jewish readers, who can then themselves articulate what a Jewish understanding and appropriating might entail.

philological and historical insights into the nature and meaning of the text should enter into these ever-renewed attempts, so that one does not say silly things willy-nilly; and one can always learn from the giants among earlier generations of biblical commentators. So, one does not start afresh each time, but in principle one has an accumulated wisdom to draw on. However, this is easier said in theory than realized in practice.

CONCLUSION

In the light of what has been said, I offer two final observations about the nature and scope of this study. First, the approach to the text of Genesis taken here will typically be via particular arguments about it and particular uses of it. In the dialectic between ancient text, reception, and contemporary context, reception and/or contemporary context will usually be the starting point. I hope that this will shed illumination on the theological significance of the biblical text in ways that would not be possible if a different approach were adopted.

Second, the discussion of the biblical text will necessarily be selective. Otherwise this book would simply need to be much, much longer. Although I have tried to include most of the famous passages whose discussion one might reasonably expect to find in a work such as this, I am painfully aware of what is not included; for this I ask the reader's indulgence (and forgiveness). What follows is a guide to, rather than a comprehensive coverage of, what theological understanding and appropriation of Genesis today may involve.