

Approaches to Genesis: A Review Article

David W. Baker*

Recent publications on the first book of the Bible give a useful overview of the various approaches which can elucidate a biblical text. This brief survey shows that publishers find a niche for things ranging between reprints of older classics and more popular thematic studies, coffee table books with illustrations and detailed scholarly investigations. All readers should find something of interest from the works reviewed here.

Herman Gunkel was a pioneer in the area of the form critical analysis of the Bible, most particularly Genesis and the Psalms. The Mercer Library of Biblical Studies has provided a useful translation from German of the third edition of his very important commentary, which originally appeared in 1901.¹ Placing Gunkel in his context, Ernest W. Nicholson provides a 7 page introduction.

The volume is important as a landmark in the history of interpretation of Scripture, especially exemplifying the critical perspective. This is noteworthy for the reader when seeing the division of the text, and comment upon it, into the sources proposed by the Documentary Hypothesis. Since Gunkel also has his own view on how the text is to be reordered, finding comment on any particular section can be a bit daunting, especially since there is scripture index for all the passages discussed apart from genesis itself. For example, the brief discussion of Gen 2:4a (attributed by Gunkel to the Priestly source) immediately precedes the discussion of 1:1-23, and follows the commentary on 'The Primeval History According to J', which itself covers 2:4b-3:24; 4:2-16; 4:1, 17-24; 4:25, 26, 5:29; 6:1-6; the J rendition of the Flood story (various verses and parts of verses between Gen 6-8); 9:18-27; the Table of Nations (9:18, 19, 10:1b, 8-19, 21, 25-30); and 11:1-9.

The book, while very dated, provides interesting and intriguing points of theology and exegesis which, even if one does not agree, deserve thought and interaction. His introduction, entitled 'The Legends of Genesis,' lays out his understanding of form criticism and how it applies to genesis. This includes a discussion of the various genres, the most important being 'legend,' as well as the history of their purported development and transmission.

If nothing else, the work is ingenious, but does raise questions as to its relation to a real, existent text. Even those who do not agree with the author's suggestions as to textual composition and structure must grapple with

*David Baker (Ph.D., University of London) is Professor of Old Testament and Semitic Languages at ATS.

the real problems that do reside in the text and its interpretation. The book uses untransliterated Hebrew and Greek, so the lay person will find the going difficult. The book should be in all academic theological libraries, but pastors and teachers would probably not find it as a high priority for them.

A completely different audience and approach lies behind the UBS Handbook Series, which also just released a volume on Genesis.² The goal of the series is “to assist practicing Bible translators as they carry out the important task of putting God’s Word into the many languages spoken in the world today.” To do this they provide “valuable exegetical, historical, cultural, and linguistic information” (i). They thus have a much more practical than academic purpose. This is illustrated, for example by the inclusion of sections on translating *‘adam* and the names of God, but none on hypotheses concerning composition and transmission of the text.

The layout of the commentary is to provide sections in both the Revised Standard version and Today’s English Version. Then comment is provided, usually on every word or phrase of each verse. There are no foreign languages used, nor are there many references to secondary sources apart from other translations (and E. Speiser’s Anchor Bible commentary volume), which is both boon and bane. Attention is drawn directly to the text, rather than what many others have said about it, so there is more immediacy to the commentary. A disadvantage is not knowing in every case whether the interpretation presented is generally accepted, unanimous, or idiosyncratic.

The volume will probably not be the sole source which readers will consult in studying the book, but it provides a good commentary in a succinct and readable form. All theological libraries need the volume, and many teachers and preachers will surely consult it often.

A completely different, visual approach to Genesis is taken by Ada Feyerick in what is described as “a pictorial panorama of the ancient Near East, its history, its culture, its people, and its impact on Genesis.”³ In the foreword, William G. Dever, a leading American archaeologist, briefly discusses the importance of archaeology for providing a context for the biblical stories. Cyrus Gordon and Nahum Sarna, both distinguished scholars of the ancient Near East and the Bible, provide 2-3 pages of introductory comment to each of the chapters, which are headed: “Mesopotamia: Land of Myths,” “The Mists of Time: Genesis 1-11,” “Canaan: Land Between Empires,” “The Patriarchs: Genesis 12-36,” “Egypt: The Nurturing Land,” and “Joseph: Prelude to Nationhood: Genesis 37-50.” Apparently Feyerick wrote the text which accompanies the illustrations within each chapter, though her role is not spelled out.

There is no textual commentary on Genesis, but many lavish photographs of sites, landscapes, artifacts and texts engagingly illustrate a

number of biblical passages. These are supplemented by maps, chronological timelines, and a family tree. The format and size suggest that the book is intended for coffee table and casual perusal, which is a valid entre into the biblical text, as long as one is aware that this is only a beginning. The volume will be useful for teachers looking for illustrative material, and would be well placed in church libraries. It is unfortunate that some of the photographs, especially of geographical locations, were not professionally done, since a number are somewhat blurred.

The last two works reviewed here are more detailed studies of different aspects of the book of Genesis. Desmond Alexander, formerly of The Queen's University, Belfast, goes beyond the strict parameters of this review in that he explores important theological themes through the entire Pentateuch.⁴ His study is at an elementary level since he found that "first-year students of theology and religious studies have very limited understanding of the basic contents of the Pentateuch" (xiv). The same can be said for seminary students and parishioners, so the volume should have a wide appeal. To aid those with only rudimentary knowledge of the Pentateuch, Alexander provides simple maps of the ancient Near East in the 2nd millennium, the Sinai wilderness and 2 suggested routes for the journey from Egypt to Canaan, and diagrams of the layout of the Israelite camp surrounding the Tabernacle, a schematic floor plan of the Tabernacle, and a cut-away diagram of it. The first chapter of the book also briefly surveys the content of the Pentateuch.

The themes or motifs which are presented follow a canonical order. They are shown as they are 'born' in the biblical text of the Pentateuch, and traced as they 'grow up' into the New Testament. The themes explored are: "the royal lineage in Genesis" which looks at the importance of family line, seed and genealogy; "paradise lost" and the importance of the motif of the earth/land from creation on; "the blessing of the nations" looks at blessing and curse beginning with Eden; "by faith Abraham" and the seminal covenant with him and his descendants. Exodus introduces "who is Lord?" looking at the name and nature of the covenant God of Sinai, "the Passover" as redemption and ritual, "the covenant at Sinai," and "the Tabernacle." Leviticus allows the study of holiness, sacrifice and food regulations. Numbers explores the people's murmurings, while Deuteronomy leads to study of "love and loyalty" where God's love is set in a covenantal or treaty context, and election.

As can be seen by the number of motifs which are covered in such a short space, they all are only superficial, but that fits the scope, and need, of the volume. This volume also deserves a place on church library shelves and would well serve for an adult Bible study class.

Finally we will look at a massive technical analysis of the "Blessing of Jacob" (Gen 49).⁵ The author, Raymond de Hoop, a Dutch scholar, has

worked on this passage for a decade and shares here the fruits of his study. This theologically significant chapter is fraught with textual, translational, historical and interpretational issues which the author addresses. Verse 10, which speaks of a sceptre and Shiloh illustrate some of the difficulties, as does J. Astruc using the chapter as an example of isolating two separate sources because of differences in the use of the divine names.

In the first chapter, “Status quaestionis,” de Hoop points out translational problems with no less than 22 words and phrases from the chapter. He presents the views of 6 scholars regarding the chapter’s origin, which is related to identification of its genre (5 additional scholars) and provenance (most viewing it to be old- 1400-1000 BC). Following a useful recapitulation of the questions involved, the author lists 6 desiderata (correct translation, structural analysis, genre analysis in light of ancient Near Eastern literature, a synchronic analysis seeking ideological purpose, a diachronic analysis seeking to determine the growth of the tradition, and an analysis of the chapter against the background of Israelite history).

Chapter 2 addresses text, translation and structure. The fact that we are dealing with Hebrew poetry, which itself is only very inadequately understood, exacerbates the difficulties. Here he painstakingly examines each word, verbal form and strophe. The analysis itself is very technical and necessitates a good measure of Hebrew sophistication, though this does not hold for the entire book, which non-Hebrew readers will be able to follow with perseverance. This chapter, like all of the book, is very heavily footnoted with supporting secondary literature. De Hoop takes ‘Shiloh’ in v. 10 to be ‘tribute...to him,’ based on Ugaritic and following a proposal made by W. L. Moran. This analysis covers 167 pages. In chapter 3, the author suggests the genre of the chapter to be a collection of ‘testamentary sayings’ similar to those legitimizing royalty. He also finds it necessary (chapter 4) to look at the passage in its larger context of 47:29-49:33, which he calls ‘the Deathbed Episode.’ He looks at this passage synchronically, how it fits into the present Genesis as a whole and its own content and structure.

Previous study on the chapter is recounted and evaluated in chapter 5, and a diachronic study follows in chapter 6. Here de Hoop concludes that there are two layers or textual tendencies which are an earlier ‘pro-Joseph’ and a current ‘pro-Judah,’ though the chapter should be read as a unit with its context. He finds the final purpose of the section is to legitimize the rise of Judah, a younger brother, to a position superior to that of his older siblings. He holds that the ‘pro-Joseph’ version had a northern, Israelite origin around Shechem, dating from about 1250 BC, and the final version from about the time of Solomon, much earlier than much critical scholarship has recently placed any of Genesis, or the Pentateuch as whole, for that matter.

While there are elements of the analysis and interpretation with which scholars from across the spectrum will disagree, the work is a model of method and presentation, starting with the text itself on its own terms and thoroughly analyzing it before seeing how others have understood it. The book is also a model of clarity, being very 'user-friendly' with frequent summaries of what has been discussed and the conclusions reached. All Genesis scholars will need to consult the work, which will, unfortunately, be restricted mainly to libraries due to its unconscionable price.

Endnotes

¹ Herman Gunkel, *Genesis*, transl. Mark E. Biddle (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997). lxxxviii + 478 pp., cloth, \$60.00.

² William D. Reymund and Eun McG. Fry, *A Handbook on Genesis* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1997). x + 1149 pp., paper, \$37.99.

³ Ada Feyerick, with Cyrus H. Gordon and Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: World of Myths and Patriarchs* (New York: New York University Press, 1996). 256 pp. Cloth, \$60.00. Quote is from the back dust jacket.

⁴ T. Desmond Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land: An Introduction to the Main Themes of the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998). xxv + 228 pp., paper, \$14.99.

⁵ Raymond de Hoop, *Genesis 49 in its Literary and Historical Context*, OTS 29 (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 1999). xvi + 695 pp., cloth, \$200.00.