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The Life of Genesis

INTRODUCTION

Despite predictions of its demise, the book of Genesis is still alive and well in the twenty-first century. From political and religious debates to consumer culture, Genesis is all around us. One has only to glance at the headlines to find controversies that take their heat and light from Genesis. The question of whether the contents of Genesis 1 should be taught in science classes—under the names “creationism” or “intelligent design”—preoccupies school boards and political candidates. Proponents and opponents of gay marriage and gay clergy appeal to the testimony of Genesis. The “new atheist” writers criticize the irrationality of Genesis, much as the old atheists, like Thomas Paine, did more than two centuries ago. Evangelical scholars argue whether Adam and Eve were historical figures.

In our popular and commercial culture, references to Genesis pop up regularly. “Jacobs Ladder” is an upscale exercise machine, priced around \$3,000. “Am I My Brother’s Keeper” is the name of an album by the hip-hop group Kane and Abel. The Methuselah Foun-

dation supports scientific research into extending human life. Adam and Eve is the name of a sex toy company. Examples of such creative branding could be multiplied indefinitely. Recently an illustrated version of Genesis, by the comics icon R. Crumb, topped the New York Times best-seller list. A favorite tourist destination, the Creation Museum (built in Kentucky by a group called Answers in Genesis), has attracted over a million visitors. This modern shrine to Genesis features high-tech dioramas of the Garden of Eden and Noah's Ark, complete with dinosaurs, a well-muscled Adam, and a supermodel Eve. In its halls Genesis becomes a simulacrum of science, providing comfort for its target audience.

In earlier centuries Genesis was alive in different ways. In the Middle Ages ascetics and mystics tried to gain access to the heavenly Garden of Eden through spiritual exercises. The stories of Genesis were reproduced in illustrations in stained-glass windows and paupers' Bibles. Monks and nuns chanted sublime songs dedicated to the patriarchs. Figs and apples, identified as the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden, were eaten as aphrodisiacs. Christians made pilgrimages to great cathedrals and shrines, where they could still perceive the aura of Genesis and its famous events. Although most people could not read the book, the evidence of Genesis was everywhere.

For roughly two and a half thousand years, people in Western culture have been living cheek by jowl with the book of Genesis. It is this mutual engagement—in

which Genesis colors our lives, while we strain to understand it—that is the subject of this book. Within the large scope of the life of Genesis, three interwoven themes animate our story: (1) The life of Genesis involves an interplay between its original meanings—its “plain” senses—and its multiple forms of interpretation over the centuries. (2) The life of Genesis involves an ages-long relationship between truth and error, in which the boundaries between the two are fiercely contested. (3) The keys to understanding the book of Genesis in every age correspond to the keys to understanding reality generally. But these keys change over time, and they open different doors. Let us explore these themes and their implications.

Life and Afterlife

A book does not have a life in the most literal sense, because it is not an organic life-form. A book is an object, made of paper—or in the early life of Genesis, papyrus or parchment. We can only say that it has a life in an extended sense, as part of our past and present. The book of Genesis is alive because it is a formative part of the human life-world, and it has been so for a long time. It is the relationship that people have had with this object that gives it a life and makes it a subject for a biography. Its life story—which is what the word “biography” means—is one subplot in the complicated history of our collective life in Western civilization. Its

life is a part of our own biography in the long span of human culture.

It is important to make a careful distinction *within* the life of Genesis. This concerns the difference between the book's original meanings—those that are properties of the “plain” or grammatical sense of the ancient Hebrew words, sentences, and narratives—and its later interpretations. The latter often rely on assumptions and categories that are foreign to the world of ancient Israel. For example, interpretations that rely on Platonic philosophy or apocalyptic expectations are anachronistic when applied to Genesis, because these categories of thought were created after the book was written. Like a Shakespeare play set in a rocket ship, this is a transposition of the text into a modern idiom. It is an imaginative revision, which takes liberties with the plain sense, whether self-consciously or not. Later interpretations are usually modernizations of the stories, which keeps their meanings fresh and relevant, but which may diverge significantly from the stories' native conceptual horizons.

Walter Benjamin drew a valuable distinction between a text's “life” and its “afterlife.” He wrote, “in its afterlife—which could not be called that if it were not a transformation and a renewal of something living—the original undergoes a change.”¹ Through its transformation—or more precisely, its incessant variety of transformations—the text takes on new layers of sense, some of which may have been unthinkable previously. The book becomes a historical agent, which enters into

new religious and political configurations. The biography of Genesis includes what Benjamin calls its life *and* its afterlife, its original meanings and its effects on later generations. Its afterlife transforms, renews, and extends its life.

But the life and afterlife of Genesis are not two wholly different things. The plain senses of Genesis are never lost as long as people pay attention to the verbal details and resonances of the text. Even if one believes that the true meaning has to do with abstract spiritual truths or coded prophecies, its narrative force and style are apparent to any careful reader. Its plain meanings are always available, even if they are partially obscured under spiritual castles. As Erich Auerbach observed, it is the narrative style of Genesis—with its mysterious events, laconic dialogue, and sparse background details—that gives rise to the necessity of interpretation: “even the factual and psychological elements . . . are mysterious, merely touched upon, fraught with background; and therefore they require subtle investigation and interpretation, they demand them.”² The life of Genesis, in this respect, demands a rich and complicated afterlife.

A text’s afterlife inevitably affects one’s reading of it, even if one is trying to attend to its plain or native senses. How difficult is it to read the Garden of Eden story without importing later interpretations, such as Original Sin, Eve as erotic temptress, or the snake as Satan? These are products of Genesis’s afterlife, which are hard to see around. The life and afterlife of Genesis

are perpetually in a tangled relationship with each other, which is to say that Genesis has a complicated biography.

The Uses of Error

The relationship between the book's life and afterlife raises another complicated issue. One theme within the interpretation of Genesis has been the falsity of many of its interpretations. As we will see, in medieval and early modern times daring commentators such as Rashi and Martin Luther criticized figural interpretations of Genesis as arbitrary or untrue. For Luther, the falsity of much traditional interpretation undermined the authority of the Catholic Church. A century later, Galileo criticized the Church doctrines about biblical cosmology and argued that it was wrong to take the testimony of Genesis as scientific evidence. Half a century later, Spinoza argued that scientific method should be brought to bear on the interpretation of Genesis, casting aside the traditional interpretations of church and synagogue. Modern biblical scholarship also argues that much of the history of the interpretation of Genesis is a history of error.

Why then should we be concerned with the biography of Genesis? If much of its afterlife in Western civilization has been false, or based on faulty premises, why not simply give it an honorable burial? The answer to these questions has to do with the importance of

error in human life. As Friedrich Nietzsche compellingly argued, illusion and error are necessary in human life, especially in our collective memory. Too much historical criticism “uproots the future because it destroys illusions and robs existing things of their atmosphere in which alone they can live.”³ People and cultures need illusions in order to live fully, to flourish. If we consider the afterlife of Genesis from this perspective, we can see that it mostly consists of such creative illusions. Sometimes these illusions are profound, providing the means for human life to flourish. Sometimes they are cruel, justifying the forces of injustice and oppression. But in either case, they provide the inevitable atmosphere of human life.

Frank Kermode has commented insightfully about the history of error in biblical interpretation:

The history of interpretation, the skills by which we keep alive in our minds the light and the dark of past literature and past humanity, is to an incalculable extent a history of error. . . . The history of biblical interpretation will provide many instances of fruitful misunderstanding. It arises because we want to have more of the story than was originally offered, or we want to see into the depths of that story. We have always been pretty sure that the literal sense is not enough, and when we try to go beyond it we may err, but sometimes splendidly.⁴

It is because people want more and more urgent meanings that “fruitful misunderstanding” arises. The sto-

ries of Genesis serve as the occasion for such meanings, because Genesis is an authoritative book. That these interpretations are often tissues of error tells us what we already know about humanity—that we are producers and consumers of illusion. (Franz Kafka has a lot to say about this in his reflections on Genesis; see chapter 7.) The afterlife of Genesis is a record of how people have produced, maintained, and repaired this necessary atmosphere over the millennia. There are many uses of error—some beneficial, some reprehensible—but we could hardly survive without them. They are our errors, and we are responsible for them. The biography of Genesis tells us much about the uses of error, both in our lives and the lives of our ancestors.

Genesis and Reality

The interpretation of Genesis in Western civilization opens up another set of issues relating to the question of truth and error. Over the generations, the ways that people have understood Genesis tend to correlate with the ways that people have understood reality. It is not just that Genesis provides an account of the origins of reality—which it does—but that the *kinds* of meaning that people expect to find in Genesis are the same kinds that they expect in the world outside the book. In other words, the ways that people perceive Genesis both shape and reflect their perception of reality. What

is perhaps surprising is how radically these ways of perceiving Genesis and reality have changed over time, and how in some respects our perceptions have gone back to the way they were at the time when the book of Genesis was born.

Genesis envisions a single, God-created universe in which human life is limited by the boundaries of knowledge and death. We are earth-bound, intermittently wise, often immoral, mortal creatures. There is often a harsh realism in the Genesis accounts of human life. But in the centuries after the birth of Genesis, two new concepts of reality arose. The first of these was apocalyptic religion, which expects a new era in the future, when the dead will rise and existence will be perfect. In the apocalyptic reinterpretation of Genesis, this will be a return to the Garden of Eden at the End of Days. The second new concept, in origin a Greek import, envisions an invisible “higher” world, which one can attain through wisdom and spiritual discipline. This concept, which was given classic form by Plato, became a dominant concept in Jewish and Christian religious thought. By the third century BCE, most interpretations of Genesis came to be colored by apocalyptic and Platonic views of reality, either separately or mingled together. The interpretation of Genesis in terms of apocalyptic or Platonic meanings is what I call *figural* interpretation. Figural interpretation was the rule for over a thousand years in Judaism and Christianity, until it started to lose its footing in the early modern era, a process that accelerated in the age of science. In the

twenty-first century we are still dealing with the problems that accompanied the loss of the figural sense. The meanings of both Genesis and reality have become problematic, and we are still stumbling over how to deal with the loss of the figural sense of things.

The theme of the relationship between realism and figuralism in the life of Genesis derives from the work of Erich Auerbach (whom we will meet in chapter 7). Auerbach showed how the history of Western literature—starting with Genesis and Homer—is also a history of the ways that people have understood reality. This history begins with the different Greek and Hebrew styles of realism. The terse style of Genesis offers a wealth of psychological perspective, a sense of historical becoming, and a concern for the problematic. In contrast, Homer has an elaborately descriptive style in which all things are illuminated, but which gives a static sense of history and character. Western literature begins with these two styles of realism, but in late antiquity and medieval times adopts a figural style, in which texts and reality are figures or prophecies of the World to Come or the Perfect World: “Life on earth is . . . the figure of the life beyond.”⁵ The figural interpretation of Genesis and reality became problematic in early modern times, and with the Renaissance and the rise of science new forms of realism took root. Western literature therefore began with the realism of Genesis and Greek epic, and returned to a revitalized realism in the modern era.

This trajectory—from realism to figuralism and back again, but at a different level—provides an illuminating story line for the biography of Genesis. A biography can be plotted in innumerable ways, or it can be mostly unstructured, in the manner of Henry Ford’s definition of history as “one damn thing after another.” My plot will emphasize certain bits of the biography of Genesis and overlook others, but it has the advantage of making a coherent story.

In this plot, the realism of the biblical universe (chapter 1, “The Genesis of Genesis”) morphs into a figural dual reality, in which this world is a flawed version of a more perfect world, and Genesis is a cryptic version of a more perfect text (chapter 2, “The Rise of the Figural Sense”). The hidden world, which Genesis reveals, has two modalities: one is in future time, at the End of Days (chapter 3, “Apocalyptic Secrets”) and the other is in metaphysical space, the Higher World (chapter 4, “Platonic Worlds”). The kinds of figural worlds that Genesis opens up are not just ideas, but are lived and experienced realities, and have practical and political consequences. People do things with Genesis in order to influence and change reality.

In early modern times (between 1200 and 1600), people in the West began to return to a single world, a universe, in which our lives are bounded spatially by the earth and temporally by death. The foundations of a figural world were undermined (chapter 5, “Between the Figure and the Real”), and so—among other con-

sequences—people began to read Genesis in its plain or realistic sense, not as a cipher about another world. Of course, the real world in Genesis does not precisely map onto the modern scientific view of the world (chapter 6, “Genesis and Science”). Its philosophical concepts don’t precisely map onto modern concepts either, yet it remains a part of our moral, religious, and political lives (chapter 7, “Modern Times”). Despite the fact that it is mostly myth and legend, in modern times Genesis is still good to think about and to do things with.

In my view, the modern return to realism is a good thing, because it allows us to read Genesis passionately and critically in the world as it is. Genesis is a magnificent work of religious literature, which still has the capacity to inspire. It represents a world that is real, although its world is created and influenced by miraculous beings (angels, God, and sundry other divine beings). Perhaps we can describe its style as “magical” realism, in the sense that its reality is surrounded and influenced by the supernatural. The category of the magical has become a problem in our modern view of reality, influenced as we are by science and scholarship. We live—or think we live—in a largely disenchanted world. I suggest that our ancient enchantments are still alive in our world, although their forms and influences have changed over time. Religion, art, and culture still draw on the resources of Genesis to explore and articulate reality, even when the veracity of Genesis is con-

tested. To put it in a different way, our pursuit of Genesis and reality still go hand in hand.

But this gets us ahead of our story, which begins with the birth of the book in a small country in the ancient Middle East.

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