

Ronald Hendel, *The Book of Genesis: A Biography* (Lives of Great Religious Books; Princeton – Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013). Pp. xii + 287. Hardcover. U.S. \$ 24,95. ISBN 9780691140124.

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Terentianus Maurus' famous phrase *Habent sua fata libelli* ("Books have their destiny / fates," *De litteris, De syllabis, De Metris* 1286) is an excellent summary for the *Lives of Great Religious Books* series published by the Princeton University Press. The recounting of the complex and fascinating histories of important religious texts in a concise form through the literary skills of gifted authors is a task that is necessarily destined for success from the outset. The intriguing fates of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the irresistible charm of Augustine's *Confessions*, and the drama of Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison* are interesting, in and of themselves. When recounted by guides like John J. Collins, Martin E. Marty, and Garry Wills, they make every reading a true intellectual adventure.

The fact that the Book of Genesis has pride of place among the most important religious texts is not a surprise. The prominence of this book, not only for the Western world, but also for the global community cannot be overestimated. Painters and sculptors, composers and musicians, writers, philosophers, and theologians – they all have found in the Book of Genesis an inexhaustible source of inspiration over the centuries.

In tracking the vicissitudes of the life of the Book of Genesis, the challenge lies not in the scarcity of material, but rather in its excess. Thus, to reveal a clear path through this maze is a real challenge for any potential guide. This task was entrusted to Ronald Hendel, the Norma and Sam Dabby Professor of Hebrew Bible and Jewish Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. This choice is unsurprising when one considers the contributions that Hendel has made in the field of critical study of Genesis. His works on Genesis (*The Text of Genesis 1-11: Textual Studies and Critical Edition*, Oxford 1998; *Remembering Abraham: Culture, Memory, and History in the Hebrew Bible*, Oxford 2005; and *Reading Genesis: Ten Methods*,

Cambridge 2010) and ongoing projects (e.g. Scholars Hebrew Bible project and a new commentary on Genesis for the Anchor Yale Bible commentary series) betray not only a qualified and reliable scholar, but also a real enthusiast who can successfully meet this challenge. His academic experience, erudition, and wide-ranging interests have made this response truly intriguing.

In the introduction to his biography of Genesis, Hendel provides a sketch of his approach to the question of the life of Genesis. As he notes, “over the generations, the ways that people have understood Genesis tend to correlate with the ways that people have understood reality” (8). The variety of approaches to this book mirrors changes in humanity’s understanding of reality. At the same time, human perception of reality was shaped for centuries by their understanding of the first book of the Bible. In Hendel’s view, these changes throughout history map the trajectory “from realism to figuralism and back again, but at a different level” (11). These subsequent stages, as identified by Hendel, are discussed in consecutive chapters of his work. Thus, he begins with realism in the Genesis accounts of human life, death, and knowledge (chapter 1). He then tracks the beginnings of the figural sense (chapter 2) and its full bloom in apocalyptic (chapter 3) and Platonic (chapter 4) interpretations of Genesis. The move away from the figuralism that began in early modern times (chapter 5) prepared later interpreters for the significant encounter between the vision of Genesis and the modern scientific view of the world (chapter 6). The final point of Hendel’s reflection on Genesis constitutes the modern return to realism (chapter 7) in which Genesis “still has capacity to inspire” (12), despite the fact that the mythical and legendary character of Genesis has been widely recognized.

In the first chapter, Hendel addresses the origins of Genesis – with its “birth,” or rather “births” (15). He pays attention to the composite character of this book, which resembles a palimpsest: “composed of different sources and texts, from different times and with different philosophies” (24). Hendel briefly discusses the issue of literary sources (J, E, and P) and describes “their distinctive styles and outlook” (18). He also notes that the process of redaction consisting in combination of very different sources “creates a need for interpretation, in order to make sense of these internal contradictions” (24). In this process, it is necessary to interpret Genesis in the context of Ancient Near Eastern texts and traditions. This contextualization can fully demonstrate both the dependence of this book on the cultural background of the Levant and its original character. Finally, Hendel presents the picture of reality according to the principals of biblical cosmology, anthropology, and theology as presented in Gen 1–3.

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As mentioned above, the complexity of Genesis itself necessitates the interpretive process. Hendel examines the beginnings of this process in the second chapter of his book. He notes that traces of the interpretation of Genesis can be detected already in both the biblical and extra-biblical texts from the Second Temple Period. Hendel discusses four assumptions that undergird this phenomenon: “the Bible is cryptic, relevant, perfect and divine” (49). Thus, a road to the figural interpretation has been opened. Hendel understands it as “a way of reading in which the biblical text has a second level of meaning that pertains to another metaphysical or temporal order of reality, distinct from the reality of the here and now” (60-61).

In the two following chapters, Hendel focuses on two styles of figural interpretation that he calls “apocalyptic” and “Platonic”, respectively. At the outset of the third chapter, Hendel notes, “For over two thousand of years, the life of Genesis has been shaped by the belief that it is a repository of apocalyptic secrets, that is, revelations about the end of days, when the world will be remade” (64). He associates the beginnings of this process with the crisis of the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem and the fifty years of Babylonian exile in the 6th century BCE. Apocalyptic interpretations of Genesis originate from the need for hope that today’s crisis can give way to a more optimistic tomorrow, even if that future is still enveloped in secrecy. In this approach, the text of Genesis, with its mythic symbols and ideas, becomes a key to the enigma of an unspecified future. Hendel examines some elements of this code (the rivers of paradise, Jacob’s blessing, and the figure of Adam) and their impact on prophetic texts of the Bible, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and Paul’s letters.

The fourth chapter of Hendel’s book is dedicated to the second branch of figural interpretation, namely Platonic interpretation. After a short introduction to the Platonic world of ideas, Hendel presents the problem of the encounter between the realm of the Hebrew Bible and the Hellenistic world. He introduces the reader to the first Greek translation of the Bible (LXX), to Philo’s and Paul’s allegorical interpretations of Genesis, to the world of Christian Gnosticism, and that of the Desert Fathers. As he observes, it is in early Christian monasticism that the two styles of figural interpretation meet: in the “lives of humility and spiritual grace” lived by the Desert Fathers, “the apocalyptic and the Platonic senses of Genesis come together” (108).

In the fifth chapter, Hendel discusses the period between the medieval and early modern world, which can be considered a turning point in the passage “from realism to figuralism and back again”. He explains this transitional epoch by focusing on three representative personages: Rashi with his “plain sense” of Scripture; Martin Luther and his “sola Scriptura”; and finally François

Rabelais with his mockery and parody of Genesis and figural thinking as expressed in his novel *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. It was also during this period that the four assumptions that had constituted an unshakable basis for figural interpretation for over a thousand years (“the Bible is cryptic, relevant, perfect and divine”) appeared to be feeble. A road for a new approach to the old Genesis was opened: “once all four assumptions come under question, the life of Genesis becomes part of a new debate about the nature of God, nature, reason and reality” (144).

In the two final chapters of his biography of Genesis, Hendel describes the return to a realistic reading of the book. In chapter six he explores the confrontation between Genesis and the world of scientific discoveries, theories, and ideas. Consequently, “the life of Genesis began a new phase – a long midlife crisis [...]. Old assumptions were questioned, and new problems, which had previously been unthinkable, became unavoidable” (195). This “long midlife crisis” has not only resulted in the appearance of modern scientific methods and approaches to the biblical text, but also opened the road for fundamentalism in dealing with biblical text. In chapter seven, the author gives a sketch of elements of Genesis’ life (or *after-life*) in modern times. Hendel addresses some social phenomena (e.g. slavery and emancipation processes) and relates them to the changes described in the previous chapter. This new approach to the old story in Genesis is exemplified by the author through three modern authors, whose artistic activities are hallmarks of confrontation with biblical text. Emily Dickinson, Franz Kafka, and Erich Auerbach – they all read Genesis with new eyes, “unencumbered by the burden” of traditional authorities, yet they demonstrated that Genesis remains “an astonishing book of marvelous realism” (241) that can still be used and understood.

Hendel proves himself a very skillful and competent biographer. His book is recommended to all those who would like to strike up an acquaintance with Genesis in its austere beauty and intriguing complexity. Nevertheless, certain aspects of Hendel’s book leaves readers wanting more. For example, the pattern chosen by the author to narrate the biography of Genesis (“From realism to figuralism and back again”) seems reductionistic at times and the dichotomy between realistic and figural interpretations too conventional. The author refers to the distinction between the text’s *life* and its *after-life*, but this clear division is, in fact, blurred. We still know very little about its redactional process. When does the *after-life* of Genesis really begin? Has its *life* really finished? After all, it is still one of the most important books for both Jews and Christians; it is still used in liturgy and personal prayer. This fact finds only a faint echo in Hendel’s discussion. In his presentation of

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critical studies of Genesis, Hendel focuses on Spinoza's contribution, but he bypasses the exegetical achievements of the two last centuries. His discussion focuses only on two problems of modern times and only three examples taken exclusively from the field of literature can leave the reader unsatisfied.

The Book of Genesis: a Biography is an interesting and important work on Genesis. "Many people don't read Genesis anymore – which I think is a loss," concludes Hendel, "but we still fight over the meanings and consequences of the stories, and over their myriad interpretations in Western culture... It may be fearsome, even blasphemous, to read it in a modern style, as a compendium of our alley's legends. But it is unavoidable, since they are our stories and we are their children" (244-245). We should never cease reading and developing our reading abilities. For the full quotation from Terentianus Maurus reads: "Pro captu lectoris habent sua fata libelli" (according to the capabilities of the reader, books have their destiny / fate). The destiny / fate of Genesis is now in our hands.