

GENESIS

R. R. RENO



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SERIES PREFACE

Near the beginning of his treatise against Gnostic interpretations of the Bible, *Against the Heresies*, Irenaeus observes that Scripture is like a great mosaic depicting a handsome king. It is as if we were owners of a villa in Gaul who had ordered a mosaic from Rome. It arrives, and the beautifully colored tiles need to be taken out of their packaging and put into proper order according to the plan of the artist. The difficulty, of course, is that Scripture provides us with the individual pieces, but the order and sequence of various elements are not obvious. The Bible does not come with instructions that would allow interpreters to simply place verses, episodes, images, and parables in order as a worker might follow a schematic drawing in assembling the pieces to depict the handsome king. The mosaic must be puzzled out. This is precisely the work of scriptural interpretation.

Origen has his own image to express the difficulty of working out the proper approach to reading the Bible. When preparing to offer a commentary on the Psalms he tells of a tradition handed down to him by his Hebrew teacher:

The Hebrew said that the whole divinely inspired Scripture may be likened, because of its obscurity, to many locked rooms in our house. By each room is placed a key, but not the one that corresponds to it, so that the keys are scattered about beside the rooms, none of them matching the room by which it is placed. It is a difficult task to find the keys and match them to the rooms that they can open. We therefore know the Scriptures that are obscure only by taking the points of departure for understanding them from another place because they have their interpretive principle scattered among them.¹

1. Fragment from the preface to *Commentary on Psalms 1–25*, preserved in the *Philokalia* (trans. Joseph W. Trigg; London: Routledge, 1998), 70–71.

As is the case for Irenaeus, scriptural interpretation is not purely local. The key in Genesis may best fit the door of Isaiah, which in turn opens up the meaning of Matthew. The mosaic must be put together with an eye toward the overall plan.

Irenaeus, Origen, and the great cloud of premodern biblical interpreters assumed that puzzling out the mosaic of Scripture must be a communal project. The Bible is vast, heterogeneous, full of confusing passages and obscure words, and difficult to understand. Only a fool would imagine that he or she could work out solutions alone. The way forward must rely upon a tradition of reading that Irenaeus reports has been passed on as the rule or canon of truth that functions as a confession of faith. “Anyone,” he says, “who keeps unchangeable in himself the rule of truth received through baptism will recognize the names and sayings and parables of the scriptures.”² Modern scholars debate the content of the rule on which Irenaeus relies and commends, not the least because the terms and formulations Irenaeus himself uses shift and slide. Nonetheless, Irenaeus assumes that there is a body of apostolic doctrine sustained by a tradition of teaching in the church. This doctrine provides the clarifying principles that guide exegetical judgment toward a coherent overall reading of Scripture as a unified witness. Doctrine, then, is the schematic drawing that will allow the reader to organize the vast heterogeneity of the words, images, and stories of the Bible into a readable, coherent whole. It is the rule that guides us toward the proper matching of keys to doors.

If self-consciousness about the role of history in shaping human consciousness makes modern historical-critical study critical, then what makes modern study of the Bible modern is the consensus that classical Christian doctrine distorts interpretive understanding. Benjamin Jowett, the influential nineteenth-century English classical scholar, is representative. In his programmatic essay “On the Interpretation of Scripture,” he exhorts the biblical reader to disengage from doctrine and break its hold over the interpretive imagination. “The simple words of that book,” writes Jowett of the modern reader, “he tries to preserve absolutely pure from the refinements or distinctions of later times.” The modern interpreter wishes to “clear away the remains of dogmas, systems, controversies, which are encrusted upon” the words of Scripture. The disciplines of close philological analysis “would enable us to separate the elements of doctrine and tradition with which the meaning of Scripture is encumbered in our own day.”³ The lens of understanding must be wiped clear of the hazy and distorting film of doctrine.

Postmodernity, in turn, has encouraged us to criticize the critics. Jowett imagined that when he wiped away doctrine he would encounter the biblical text in its purity and uncover what he called “the original spirit and intention of the authors.”⁴ We are not now so sanguine, and the postmodern mind thinks

2. *Against Heresies* 9.4.

3. Benjamin Jowett, “On the Interpretation of Scripture,” in *Essays and Reviews* (London: Parker, 1860), 338–39.

4. *Ibid.*, 340.

interpretive frameworks inevitable. Nonetheless, we tend to remain modern in at least one sense. We read Athanasius and think him stage-managing the diversity of Scripture to support his positions against the Arians. We read Bernard of Clairvaux and assume that his monastic ideals structure his reading of the Song of Songs. In the wake of the Reformation, we can see how the doctrinal divisions of the time shaped biblical interpretation. Luther famously described the Epistle of James as a “strawy letter,” for, as he said, “it has nothing of the nature of the Gospel about it.”⁵ In these and many other instances, often written in the heat of ecclesiastical controversy or out of the passion of ascetic commitment, we tend to think Jowett correct: doctrine is a distorting film on the lens of understanding.

However, is what we commonly think actually the case? Are readers naturally perceptive? Do we have an unblemished, reliable aptitude for the divine? Have we no need for disciplines of vision? Do our attention and judgment need to be trained, especially as we seek to read Scripture as the living word of God? According to Augustine, we all struggle to journey toward God, who is our rest and peace. Yet our vision is darkened and the fetters of worldly habit corrupt our judgment. We need training and instruction in order to cleanse our minds so that we might find our way toward God.⁶ To this end, “the whole temporal dispensation was made by divine Providence for our salvation.”⁷ The covenant with Israel, the coming of Christ, the gathering of the nations into the church—all these things are gathered up into the rule of faith, and they guide the vision and form of the soul toward the end of fellowship with God. In Augustine’s view, the reading of Scripture both contributes to and benefits from this divine pedagogy. With countless variations in both exegetical conclusions and theological frameworks, the same pedagogy of a doctrinally ruled reading of Scripture characterizes the broad sweep of the Christian tradition from Gregory the Great through Bernard and Bonaventure, continuing across Reformation differences in both John Calvin and Cornelius Lapide, Patrick Henry and Bishop Bossuet, and on to more recent figures such as Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar.

Is doctrine, then, not a moldering scrim of antique prejudice obscuring the Bible, but instead a clarifying agent, an enduring tradition of theological judgments that amplifies the living voice of Scripture? And what of the scholarly dispassion advocated by Jowett? Is a noncommitted reading, an interpretation unprejudiced, the way toward objectivity, or does it simply invite the languid intellectual apathy that stands aside to make room for the false truisms and easy answers of the age?

This series of biblical commentaries was born out of the conviction that dogma clarifies rather than obscures. The Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible advances on the assumption that the Nicene tradition, in all its diversity and

5. *Luther's Works*, vol. 35, ed. E. Theodore Bachmann (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 362.

6. *On Christian Doctrine* 1.10.

7. *On Christian Doctrine* 1.35.

controversy, provides the proper basis for the interpretation of the Bible as Christian Scripture. God the Father Almighty, who sends his only begotten Son to die for us and for our salvation and who raises the crucified Son in the power of the Holy Spirit so that the baptized may be joined in one body—faith in *this* God with *this* vocation of love for the world is the lens through which to view the heterogeneity and particularity of the biblical texts. Doctrine, then, is not a moldering scrim of antique prejudice obscuring the meaning of the Bible. It is a crucial aspect of the divine pedagogy, a clarifying agent for our minds fogged by self-deceptions, a challenge to our languid intellectual apathy that will too often rest in false truisms and the easy spiritual nostrums of the present age rather than search more deeply and widely for the dispersed keys to the many doors of Scripture.

For this reason, the commentators in this series have not been chosen because of their historical or philological expertise. In the main, they are not biblical scholars in the conventional, modern sense of the term. Instead, the commentators were chosen because of their knowledge of and expertise in using the Christian doctrinal tradition. They are qualified by virtue of the doctrinal formation of their mental habits, for it is the conceit of this series of biblical commentaries that theological training in the Nicene tradition prepares one for biblical interpretation, and thus it is to theologians and not biblical scholars that we have turned. “War is too important,” it has been said, “to leave to the generals.”

We do hope, however, that readers do not draw the wrong impression. The Nicene tradition does not provide a set formula for the solution of exegetical problems. The great tradition of Christian doctrine was not transcribed, bound in folio, and issued in an official, critical edition. We have the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, used for centuries in many traditions of Christian worship. We have ancient baptismal affirmations of faith. The Chalcedonian definition and the creeds and canons of other church councils have their places in official church documents. Yet the rule of faith cannot be limited to a specific set of words, sentences, and creeds. It is instead a pervasive habit of thought, the animating culture of the church in its intellectual aspect. As Augustine observed, commenting on Jeremiah 31:33, “The creed is learned by listening; it is written, not on stone tablets nor on any material, but on the heart.”⁸ This is why Irenaeus is able to appeal to the rule of faith more than a century before the first ecumenical council, and this is why we need not itemize the contents of the Nicene tradition in order to appeal to its potency and role in the work of interpretation.

Because doctrine is intrinsically fluid on the margins and most powerful as a habit of mind rather than a list of propositions, this commentary series cannot settle difficult questions of method and content at the outset. The editors of the series impose no particular method of doctrinal interpretation. We cannot say in advance how doctrine helps the Christian reader assemble the mosaic of Scripture. We have no clear answer to the question of whether exegesis guided by

8. *Sermon* 212.2.

doctrine is antithetical to or compatible with the now-old modern methods of historical-critical inquiry. Truth—historical, mathematical, or doctrinal—knows no contradiction. But method is a discipline of vision and judgment, and we cannot know in advance what aspects of historical-critical inquiry are functions of modernism that shape the soul to be at odds with Christian discipline. Still further, the editors do not hold the commentators to any particular hermeneutical theory that specifies how to define the plain sense of Scripture—or the role this plain sense should play in interpretation. Here the commentary series is tentative and exploratory.

Can we proceed in any other way? European and North American intellectual culture has been de-Christianized. The effect has not been a cessation of Christian activity. Theological work continues. Sermons are preached. Biblical scholars turn out monographs. Church leaders have meetings. But each dimension of a formerly unified Christian practice now tends to function independently. It is as if a weakened army had been fragmented, and various corps had retreated to isolated fortresses in order to survive. Theology has lost its competence in exegesis. Scripture scholars function with minimal theological training. Each decade finds new theories of preaching to cover the nakedness of seminary training that provides theology without exegesis and exegesis without theology.

Not the least of the causes of the fragmentation of Christian intellectual practice has been the divisions of the church. Since the Reformation, the role of the rule of faith in interpretation has been obscured by polemics and counterpolemics about *sola scriptura* and the necessity of a magisterial teaching authority. The Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible series is deliberately ecumenical in scope, because the editors are convinced that early church fathers were correct: church doctrine does not compete with Scripture in a limited economy of epistemic authority. We wish to encourage unashamedly dogmatic interpretation of Scripture, confident that the concrete consequences of such a reading will cast far more light on the great divisive questions of the Reformation than either reengaging in old theological polemics or chasing the fantasy of a pure exegesis that will somehow adjudicate between competing theological positions. You shall know the truth of doctrine by its interpretive fruits, and therefore in hopes of contributing to the unity of the church, we have deliberately chosen a wide range of theologians whose commitment to doctrine will allow readers to see real interpretive consequences rather than the shadow boxing of theological concepts.

Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible has no dog in the current translation fights, and we endorse a textual ecumenism that parallels our diversity of ecclesial backgrounds. We do not impose the thankfully modest inclusive-language agenda of the New Revised Standard Version, nor do we insist upon the glories of the Authorized Version, nor do we require our commentators to create a new translation. In our communal worship, in our private devotions, in our theological scholarship, we use a range of scriptural translations. Precisely as Scripture—a living, functioning text in the present life of faith—the Bible is not semantically

fixed. Only a modernist, literalist hermeneutic could imagine that this modest fluidity is a liability. Philological precision and stability is a consequence of, not a basis for, exegesis. Judgments about the meaning of a text fix its literal sense, not the other way around. As a result, readers should expect an eclectic use of biblical translations, both across the different volumes of the series and within individual commentaries.

We cannot speak for contemporary biblical scholars, but as theologians we know that we have long been trained to defend our fortresses of theological concepts and formulations. And we have forgotten the skills of interpretation. Like stroke victims, we must rehabilitate our exegetical imaginations, and there are likely to be different strategies of recovery. Readers should expect this reconstructive—not reactionary—series to provide them with experiments in postcritical doctrinal interpretation, not commentaries written according to the settled principles of a well-functioning tradition. Some commentators will follow classical typological and allegorical readings from the premodern tradition; others will draw on contemporary historical study. Some will comment verse by verse; others will highlight passages, even single words that trigger theological analysis of Scripture. No reading strategies are proscribed, no interpretive methods foresworn. The central premise in this commentary series is that doctrine provides structure and cogency to scriptural interpretation. We trust in this premise with the hope that the Nicene tradition can guide us, however imperfectly, diversely, and haltingly, toward a reading of Scripture in which the right keys open the right doors.

R. R. Reno

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

Years ago I suggested to Rodney Clapp that a series of biblical commentaries written by theologians might be interesting. He responded, "Great, let's do it!" I demurred, observing that it was a mad idea. Eventually I guess I got just crazy enough to begin to take the idea seriously—and Rodney never got sane enough to question his initial enthusiasm. To him I owe a great debt, not only for the opportunity to tackle (or better, to be tackled by) Genesis, but also for the Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible as a whole.

The editorial board of the Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible has provided indispensable help. Robert Jenson and Robert Wilken gave helpful editorial comments during the final stages of the draft. I am grateful to Ephraim Radner, who offered pastoral support in my moments of despair, reminding me that it is the nature of holy scripture to humiliate the efforts of commentators who imagine themselves capable of the task. Michael Root and George Sumner provided encouragement and good cheer.

I have benefited from the opportunities to present portions of this commentary in public lectures: Gen. 3 at a session of the Bible, Theology, and Theological Interpretation group at the 2007 annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature; Gen. 22 at the 2007 Spirit and Letter Conference; and Gen. 1 at Calvin Theological Seminary in 2007 and at Hillsdale College in 2008. Many thanks to Joel Green, Scott Hahn, Arie Leder, and Don Westblade for extending the invitations.

The staff at Brazos Press provided expert support for this volume, as they have for all the volumes in the series. All writers should be as lucky as I have been. Lisa Ann Cockrel provided cheerful and capable assistance, as did Rebecca Cooper before her. David Aiken carefully corrected errors, ironed out confused syntax, and put up with my seemingly invincible inability to get the right chapter and verse for biblical quotations.

I would like to thank Creighton University and the Center of Theological Inquiry at Princeton for institutional support as I worked on this commentary.

Finally, I need to offer a special thanks to Peter Ochs and Stacy Johnson for asking me to participate in the Scriptural Reasoning Project sponsored by the Center of Theological Inquiry (2004–2007). The collective commitment of the group to close and God-saturated reading inspired and energized my own interpretive voice. To Peter and his tribe of postcritical readers I dedicate this attempt to reason scripturally.

INTRODUCTION

The book of Genesis presents an inviting prospect. Source of some of the most well-known stories in the Bible, the chapters of Genesis sparkle with memorable characters and dramatic scenes. The six days of creation, the garden of Eden, the subtle serpent who tempts Eve, Cain and Abel, the flood, the tower of Babel, Sodom and Gomorrah, the trial of Abraham on Mount Moriah, Esau selling his inheritance to Jacob for a bowl of porridge, Jacob's ladder and his wrestling match with God—these names and episodes evoke knowing nods, even from folks who otherwise know little of the Bible. Unlike the strange ritual world of Leviticus or the vertiginous logical leaps of Paul's letters, only a person raised without exposure to Western culture will come to Genesis as to a new vista.

The familiarity is not surprising. Esther is a dramatic tale in its own right. Samson's blind fury and David's triumph over Goliath provide memorable images. Renaissance painters devoted many canvases to the chilling moment when Judith slays the sleeping Holofernes. But we know Genesis so well, because of what it promises. The word "Genesis" means *birth* or *origin*, a fitting title for the first book of the Bible, in which the first word—"in the beginning"—expresses the theme of the entire sweep of its fifty chapters. For Genesis tells of the origin of reality, the source of evil, the birth of the many languages and cultures that fill the earth, and then turns to tell the story of Abraham and his troubled descendants, the seed of the people of Israel, who will themselves give birth to the redemption of the whole world. Its episodes and scenes are not just memorable; they are telling.

Therein lies the problem for the interpreter. As a book of origins, Genesis is a seminal text, and its influence extends so far and so deep that discerning and explaining what it says can seem an impossible task. When Gen. 3 depicts the first sin, to explain the full meaning of the verses presses the commentator outward toward a fully developed account of the depths of human depravity. There is nothing about the tasty apple and the fateful first bite that suggests the mud-filled trenches of the Somme or the ash-stained winter skies above Auschwitz or the

bodies frozen into cruel Soviet Siberian mud or the shadows of men and women burned into the concrete of Hiroshima—nothing, that is, except the firstness and originalness of the transgression that so quickly bears the fruit of Cain’s murder of Abel. Here, then, in just a few short verses, the interpreter finds the whole sad history of humanity, crowding in with its relevance, demanding a place in the exposition. One truly knows the source only when one sees and feels the fullness of its consequences.

Yet the problem is greater still. Genesis is famous for its opening account of creation and then the first sin, both of which give the reader a picture of the origin of the world and human history. But the cosmic and primeval perspectives are not why Genesis has ever been read. This book of origins did not find its way into the sacred scriptures of the people of Israel—and from there into the Christian church and thus into the DNA of Western culture—because it tells us of the origin of things as they are, fascinating and informative as that may be. God’s promise to and covenant with Abraham and his descendents are the topic of most of Genesis, and this promise and this covenant are precisely *not* an explanation of the source and origin of what is. The chapters that recount for us the careers of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph reveal the source and origin of what will be. This future is not simply a natural or expected outworking of an original creation. It is something new and unexpected: God creates for a purpose greater than creation itself.

Thus, the truly impossible task for the interpreter of Genesis is to bring into view the fullness of the promised future that pulls on the characters, scenes, and episodes of Genesis like a supernaturally powerful magnet. The small mark of circumcision in Abraham’s flesh, the seed of the promise first planted in Sarah’s womb, the thin, fragile line of inheritance that finds its way through Isaac to Jacob—these original impregnations of human history reach through the entire history of Israel toward an embrace of Christ. The sweep of the narrative from Gen. 12 onward echoes with the great exhortation of Deuteronomy: Choose life! It is the exhortation repeated and obeyed with all the implacable force of God’s own will in the death and resurrection of Christ.

Once the promise is heard, our reading of Genesis inevitably takes on an anticipatory flavor. The seemingly permanent architecture of the universe created “in the beginning” starts to march forward into the promise with joyful anticipation. The painful, familiar reality of human sinfulness becomes an insane, horrifying romance with death, whose rotting image we paint with lipstick and rouge and prop up in the warehouses of our souls. The primeval past comes alive, both reaching toward the promised future and remaining darkly, mysteriously resistant.

Where, then, can the commentary end? Nothing in the scriptures is manageable, nothing untouched by the consummating gift of life. Yet, in Genesis, the waters of consequence flow from the beginning, and they so quickly divide into the great rivers that irrigate the entire world that the interpreter is quickly drowned in the magnitude of it all. Commenting can feel like standing at the headwaters of the Colorado River and trying to see, as in a vision, its long flow as it reaches

to the Gulf of Mexico. How does one bring others to see the Grand Canyon in the reflections of the small ponds of the Rocky Mountains?

I have despaired over the impossible task of providing satisfactory commentary on any one chapter of Genesis, to say nothing of its rich trove of fifty, but I have nevertheless persevered. In order to sandbag against the flood of interpretive possibilities, I have adopted an eccentric but I hope coherent approach.

My main method has been to identify what I hope are some of the telling verses in Genesis and then focus my comments accordingly. Sometimes, the verse is fitting simply because it introduces or summarizes the main thrust of a discrete episode or scene. For example, 5:1 (“this is the book of the generations of Adam”) introduces a chapter-long genealogy, and I use this verse as the hook on which to hang comments on the significance of the shift from narrative to genealogy at this point, as well as to discuss the general theological significance of genealogies in the Bible. In other places, I single out a verse because it has long been a point of conflicting interpretations. Genesis 15:6 (“and he believed the LORD; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness”) provides the clearest instance. This verse evokes the main issues at stake in centuries of post-Reformation controversy and debate about the relationship between faith and works. Sometimes verses stand out because they suggest important theological questions. Is the serpent in the garden a worldly form of Satan? In what sense is the covenant of circumcision everlasting? In other cases, I dwell on a verse because it provides an image taken up in the New Testament or because it calls to mind a different and seemingly contradictory verse in scripture. If God rests after he completes the six days of creation, then why does Jesus say, “My Father is working still” (John 5:17)? It’s a question that gets us very quickly to the crux of the divine plan for the world: God working for us for the sake of our rest in him.

No single rule or principle guides my judgments about what makes for a telling verse, and as a result I do not follow a consistent method or pattern of exegesis. The reasons for commenting on 15:6 are different from those that lead to a focus on 3:1a. This naturally means that what makes for a sensible, useful interpretation will differ as well. For example, by my reckoning, we need to understand the gist of Reformation controversies over the doctrine of justification in order to arrive at a satisfactory reading of 15:6. This is not because the oral and editorial traditions that gave rise to this verse were thinking in terms of sixteenth-century theology, but rather because most contemporary Western Christians continue to think in these terms. We can’t bring the authority of God’s word to bear on the mind of the church by ignoring the way she thinks. In contrast, the thrust of my comment on 3:1a draws on different material. The church has been of one mind when it comes to reading the serpent as Satan. The interesting question is why.

It should be obvious, therefore, that this diverse and eclectic approach interpolates all sorts of issues and questions into Genesis, and readers who wish for a self-contained commentary that approaches Genesis on its own terms will be disappointed. I can’t see any other way to proceed. It is precisely a feature of

any view of scripture as the word of God that, when read on its own terms, the seemingly narrow particularity of the texts opens out onto the world. The first chapters of Genesis are obvious examples. They raise fundamental questions about metaphysics, the nature of evil, and the relation of God to the world and humanity. The same holds for the promise that through Abraham all the nations will be blessed. As a result, it is hard to see how anything is irrelevant to reading Genesis on its own terms. The problem is to limit the scope to a manageable size.

Although this commentary ranges widely in topic and method, the individual books of the Bible have unique foci and distinctive themes, and this holds true for Genesis. As a book of origins, Genesis is far less concerned with the source of what *is* than what *will be*. In order to do justice to this overall thrust, I offer an insistent reading of Genesis as a promise-driven, future-oriented text. As the covenant with Abraham makes clear, God blesses his creatures with a new future. The promises break the bonds of sin, because God secures their fulfillment. They perfect our created natures, because God fulfills them in our flesh. I have divided my comments into five main portions in order to draw out this forward movement more clearly.

1. *Creation*: readers quickly notice the odd way in which Genesis gives a double account of creation. I read these two accounts as complimentary portrayals of the same, stage-setting divine act. The architecture of the six days of creation is made plastic and mobile by the possibility of the seventh day, a literary effect that, I argue, reveals the goal of the divine plan “in the beginning.” God creates in order to consummate; nature is for the sake of grace; everything leans toward something *more*. The dynamic, forward-reaching structure of creation is even clearer in the second, more human-focused account of creation. It ends with the aching desire of the first man for companionship. This poignant moment of human subjectivity illustrates the way in which all creation groans for fulfillment. It is a yearning taken up and intensified in the nuptial fulfillments that echo throughout scripture.
2. *Fall*: a world yearning for *more* is not a stable place, and Gen. 3 tells of the fateful slide of the human will toward resistance to the divine plan. The choice to seek to rest in the world as it is rather than as God wishes it to become emerges as a mysterious and unexpected possibility. Explaining this choice requires (as I argue at length) the theological hypothesis that human beings do not originate the choice of evil, but instead respond to the devil’s prior sinful choice. The consequences of human alliance with Satan’s choice for history are soon spelled out in the story of Cain and Abel in Gen. 4, which I group with the famous scene of Adam, Eve, and the serpent as part of the original, continuing fall of humanity.
3. *Dead ends*: creation and fall are standard theological topics, and my training in theology prepared me to think clearly about some of the issues and

questions raised in Gen. 1–4. But reading and rereading Gen. 5–11, I struggled to understand their importance. What are we to say about the genealogy flowing from Adam in Gen. 5, the complicated flood narrative in Gen. 6–9, the tower of Babel and further genealogies in Gen. 10–11? As I worked on the later chapters of Genesis and saw the profoundly future-oriented thrust of the promises to Abraham, I realized that, in spite of the long, seemingly forward moving lists of “begats,” these chapters go nowhere. After Cain kills Abel, Adam and Eve start the human family over again with Seth—yet by the time we get to Noah, the human family is stained by sin once again. God seems to regret creating humanity, and the engulfing floodwaters wipe the slate of creation clean. But the stain of sin remains in the sons of Noah, and God utters words that reveal all we need to know about the future role of universal cleansing in the divine plan: “Never again” (9:11). What looks like new initiatives and forward movements turns out to be dead ends.

4. *Scandal of particularity*: the dead ends throw Gen. 12 into sharp relief. When Abraham is called and given the promises of land, prosperity, and progeny, the ensuing sequence of events does not lead to a dead end. On the contrary, Abraham begins a history that works its way toward fulfillment in Christ. The call of Abraham embodies the metaphysical heresy that defines the theological and spiritual essence of Judaism and Christianity. God does not rain down his righteousness from on high. He does not apply the metaphysical balm of eternity to the human condition in a grand, cosmoswide gesture. On the contrary, in the covenant with Abraham, the creator pursues his purposes for the whole world by way of covenant with a single household. The many chapters that recount the career of Abraham and his descendants are preoccupied with impediments to future fulfillment of God’s strangely focused plan. Infertility and conflict between brothers draw attention to perilous transmission of the promises from generation to generation. The gate of particularity is frightfully narrow, and the career of Abraham and his descendants inevitably strikes our natural religious instincts as a crazy, fragile, vulnerable way for God to fulfill his plan for all creation.
5. *Need for atonement*: two features of the later chapters of Genesis are striking. First, as readers work their way through the final chapters, they cannot help but feel as though Jacob, the final patriarch, fades into the background. Biblical scholars mark the break at Gen. 37, pointing out that most of the rest of Genesis is concerned with Joseph. By my reading, the break is real, but less distinct, and not entirely focused on Joseph. In the chapters after the wrestling match with God (Gen. 32) and before the clear literary shift to Joseph (Gen. 37), Jacob’s clan emerges the main actor in the covenant drama. The shift in narrative agency marks an important change in theological focus. The central chapters of Genesis that concern Abraham and the future of the covenant make no mention of the problem of sin. The driving

question is one of election: who is chosen? For Joseph and his brothers, however, the central narrative problem is different: how will the children of Abraham overcome the deadly, divisive, destructive consequences of sin? My fifth and final division of the text—the need for atonement—brings this question to the fore. By my reading, these concluding chapters of Genesis provide no stable response to the blood of Abel that cries out from the ground. They point forward to the Passover sacrifice, the Levitical principles of atonement, and Jesus's death on Golgotha.

In order to develop this reading of Genesis, I have relied on a wide variety of sources. When I was first orienting myself to the project of commenting on Genesis, a number of friends suggested Claus Westermann's massive, three-volume work as the definitive summation of modern scholarship on Genesis. I dutifully trudged to the library. But I soon discovered that Westermann's great scholarly achievement was impossible for me to use. The elaborate nesting layers of exegetical argument, the parries and thrusts of debate among biblical historians, the slow-motion slides from philological to archeological to anthropological modes of analysis, the long surveys of competing scholarly opinion, the abrupt eruptions of magisterial pronouncement—doubtless others more learned than I have profited from the vast accumulation of scholarly material, but I could only look upon the pages with awe and wonder. I turned to other sources in order to glean from the fields of modern scholarship. Gerhard von Rad's 1972 commentary was consistently accessible and sometimes helpful. James L. Kugel's lucid summaries of modern exegetical reasoning in *How to Read the Bible* were helpful reminders of the main lines of contemporary scholarship.¹

Kugel's wonderful collections and expositions of ancient interpretive arguments (mostly Jewish but sometimes early Christian) were more important to shaping my exegetical judgments than were his helpful accounts of modern scholarship. I kept his many recently published books close at hand.² The voices of ancient Jewish commentators were especially helpful for making my way through the later episodes in Genesis, where early Christian commentary is thin. The relative neglect is not surprising. Why dwell on the shadows and hints of the logic and economy of atonement in Genesis when later portions of the Old Testament provide such rich resources? Yet Jewish readings did more than fill in the gaps. Thinking through some of the recurring priorities of the ancient Jewish interpretation also helped me better understand St. Paul, whose interpretation and use of Genesis in his Letters to the Romans and Galatians has had decisive influence over the development of Western Christian theology. I found that the durable literal sense of Genesis can

1. James L. Kugel, *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture Then and Now* (New York: Free Press, 2007).

2. James L. Kugel, *In Potiphar's House* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990); idem, *The Ladder of Jacob: Ancient Interpretations of the Biblical Story of Jacob and His Children* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); and especially Kugel 1998.

shed light on the later and often obscure doctrinal controversies over faith and works, controversies for which Paul's letters provide the defining terms.

In addition to Kugel's clear presentations of ancient Jewish commentary, I regularly consulted Rashi, the great medieval Jewish figure whose commentaries on the Bible are among the most influential in the history of Judaism.³ Readers will see my occasional use of his exegesis, but his influence is greater than the citations indicate. The mere mention of Christ in my interpretations of Genesis surely shows how much I differ from Rashi and the tradition to which he contributed so much. Yet he has been my conscience throughout as I have tried to be faithful to the literal sense of Gen. 17:7: "And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant."

If Rashi has been my conscience, then the church fathers have been my inspiration. I have found Origen and St. Augustine to be the most reliable guides to a reading of Genesis that is both metaphysically ambitious and reliably christocentric. When I reread Origen's *On First Principles* with the prospect of this commentary in mind, he helped me understand the possibility of a permanent but plastic role for creation in the divine plan. In concert with reading the remaining fragments of Didymus the Blind's detailed and beautiful commentary, I found that Origen's homilies enabled me to understand the way in which the New Testament's recurring images of the war of the spirit against the flesh need not be read as a static, metaphysical conflict of eternity against time. Instead, these images contribute to a reading of the divine invasion of human history by way of the covenant with Abraham. Thus, it is Origen, filtered through the revisionist Neoscholasticism of Henri de Lubac and Hans Urs von Balthasar,⁴ who stands behind my attempt to read Gen. 1–2 in a mobile, forward-leaning fashion.

But I am a man of the West and a child of the Western church, and therefore Augustine looms larger. In his *City of God*, he takes the heavenly Jerusalem and projects it out into the future as the consummating end around which all human history is ordered, either in resistance to her triumph or with a loyalty that desires nothing but her peace. I have found some of Augustine's specific exegetical comments helpful, others not so. But encouraged by Robert W. Jenson's ambitious project of rethinking classical Christian assumptions about time and eternity, I have adopted the future-oriented, historical logic of Augustine's view of the divine plan without hesitation. This theological decision to read our entry into the seventh day as most fundamentally a matter of becoming fully and finally citizens of a city has allowed me to maximize the literal sense of Gen. 12–50. With

3. Rashi is an acronym for Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac (1040–1105). I have generally consulted the English translation of his Genesis commentary on the artscroll.com website. There is no critical edition.

4. Henri de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York: Herder & Herder, 1998); and Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. Edward T. Oakes (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1992).

Augustine's historicizing vision as my guide, I have been able to see how the true spiritual sense of 17:11 ("you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you") intensifies rather than relaxes the literal sense and its emphasis on the permanent role of human flesh in the divine plan. To be marked with the sign of the cross recapitulates a divine stroke that cuts to the marrow of bodily existence.

Two interpreters helped me see the moral and political implications of many of the episodes and themes in Genesis. St. John Chrysostom's homilies are not universally edifying, but often I found myself suddenly seeing once remote biblical scenes with new, penetrating psychological immediacy. Leon Kass's *The Beginning of Wisdom* (2003) also offers a rich array of moral and political insights that are closely tied to textual details. I rarely put down Kass's commentary without feeling myself ready to return to my exegetical labors refreshed. His interpretations are not always convincing. He views the main narrative tension from Gen. 12 onward as the backward-looking problem of preserving a tradition rather than the forward-looking problem of inheriting God's promises. Yet his reading is reliably stimulating.

Before concluding this summary of themes and divisions and sources, I want to identify my polemical interest and argumentative agenda. I have pointed things to say about modern historical-critical study of the Bible. No doubt thin-skinned biblical scholars will image me preoccupied with an antimodern campaign against critical scholarship. In the main, I find modern historical-critical scholarship sometimes helpful, sometimes maddeningly myopic, and sometimes irrelevant to the sorts of questions I find myself asking about Genesis. So, in this commentary I do not reject historical-critical exegesis. I am happy to consult it when helpful. I am only irritated by its unsustainable claims to an exclusive interpretive authority. As a tradition of scholarship, historical-critical cannot provide us with all the resources necessary to interpret the Bible as the living source for Christian faith.

I am especially concerned to set aside distracting and epiphenomenal concerns about modern critical scholarship, pro or con, because this commentary has an enemy that I think much more important: the gnostic temptation. Who hasn't felt its appeal? It is a painful fact that the diversity of nations and cultures has not led to a brilliant pageant of difference, but instead to our bloody world of conflict. Moreover, our own cultural inheritance is fraught with painful moral demands and offensive social mores. The labels of accusation are familiar: racism, ethnocentrism, heterosexism, patriarchy, and most of all the general horror over the way in which we allow the past to claim authority over us. What sensitive observer would not conclude that our historical particularity seems a curse, not a blessing? Our bodies seem no less troublesome. We feel ourselves battered by our fickle desires. We age and decay. Visit a graveyard and ask yourself, Are our bodies anything other than crumbling prisons?

Who, then, wouldn't want to find a way to transcend the cruel restrictions of history and throw off the rusting chains of the body? It was the dream of the Greeks, who contemplated unchangeable forms. It is the hope of modern philosophers, who try to replace hard-won virtue with method and to set aside the vagaries of judgment by appeals to logical and experimental certainties. It is the desire of any spiritual seeker who wants to transcend the differences that separate religions and cultures in order to dwell in their deeper, greater truth. It is the project of the modern educator, who wants critical reason to supervene over and sift through the demands of an inherited culture. It motivates plastic surgery to stave off the wrinkling ravages of time, and it endorses euthanasia in the hope that an act of the human will can somehow control and triumph over death itself.

Beginning with Irenaeus, many have observed that the account of creation in Genesis cuts against the gnostic temptation. The world that God has created is good, and therefore it can't be the problem we need to overcome. The observation is certainly true as far as it goes, but it doesn't go far enough, because the goodness of creation has never been regarded by Jews and Christians as the full and final goodness that God wills for his creatures. God tenses creation with the desire for the seventh day of divine rest, and this greater-than-creation goal seems always to tempt us to turn our spiritual lives into an upward reach that seeks to escape the bonds of finitude. God promises *more*—and we too easily interpret more as *other*, as the sweet nectar of the eternal that will palliate our vulnerability to decay and death, as the balm of indubitable, universal, and necessary truth that will cure our wounded, unpredictable, unreliable wills. My overriding goal in this commentary is to block this slide from *more* to *other*.

For Jews, the *more* is the Torah, and for Christians, the *more* is Christ crucified and risen. The difference is incalculable, all the more so because it contests over the inheritance of promises that both Jews and Christians trace back to Abraham. Jews and Christians are not ships passing in the night. They collide in daylight. The history that has grown out of this collision is painful to contemplate. Nonetheless, Jews and Christians share a common theological judgment, one vividly present in Genesis. God does not give to Abraham anything remotely resembling what we hope for in our perennial and persistent gnostic dreams. True enough, the blessing that God promises is rest in fellowship with him. But God does not remain on a remote heavenly throne while we mutilate our humanity to get to him in vain efforts of spiritual ascent. God comes to us. He gives us a new future in the flesh, not a new metaphysical location. I hope that I do not tax the patience of readers by repeating this truth again and again.

All biblical citations come from the Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted. Occasionally, I advert to the Authorized Version (also known as the King James Version) in order to accentuate verbal resonances.