Introduction to Genesis

The Book of Genesis received its English name from the Greek translation of the Hebrew word toledot, which is used thirteen times in Genesis and is translated as “story” (2.4), “record” (5.1), or “line” (10.1). In Hebrew, it is known, like many books in the Tanakh, by its first word, bereishit, which means “In the beginning.” Genesis is indeed a book about beginnings—the beginning of the natural world, the beginning of human culture, and the beginning of the people of Israel, whose story occupies most of this book and will dominate the rest of the Torah. In the ancient Near Eastern world in which Israel emerged, beginnings were deemed to be crucial, for the origins of things were thought to disclose their character and purpose. In Genesis, the origins of Israel—the people known later as the “Jews”—lie in a mysterious promise of God to a Mesopotamian whose name is Abram (changed in chapter 17 to “Abraham”). The essence of the promise is that He will make of him a great nation, bless him abundantly, and grant him the land of Canaan. Ostensibly absurd when it first comes, the promise faces one obstacle after another throughout the course of Genesis—principally, the barrenness of Abraham's primary wife (and of other matriarchs in the next two generations) and the murderous fraternal rivalry among his descendants. And yet, by the end of Genesis, all the obstacles notwithstanding, the twelve tribes that make up the people of Israel have indeed come into existence, an Israelite effectively rules a superpower (Egypt), and the promise of the land, though far from fulfillment (which comes about only in the book of Joshua), is anything but forgotten.

The book of Genesis is thus, in more senses than one, a primary source for Jewish theology. It presents its ideas on the relationship of God to nature, to the human race in general, and to the people of Israel in particular in ways that are, however, foreign to the expectations of most modern readers. It is therefore all too easy to miss the seriousness and profundity of its messages. For the vehicle through which Genesis conveys its worldview is neither the theological tract nor the rigorous philosophical proof nor the confession of faith. That vehicle is, rather, narrative. The theology must be inferred from stories, and the lived relationship with God takes precedence over abstract theology. Those who think of stories (including mythology) as fit only for children not only misunderstand the thought-world and the literary conventions of the ancient Near East; they also condemn themselves to miss the complexity and sophistication of the stories of Genesis. For these are narratives that have evoked interpretation upon interpretation from biblical times into our own day and have occupied the attention of some of the keenest thinkers in human history.