Introduction to Genesis

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On reading and interpreting the Bible

The Bible comes to us as an interpreted text, from the "beginning." Laws, palatial or family annals, epics, psalms, prophetic texts, etc., were attached to palaces, temples, or schools, and were kept, interpreted and recast according to needs which kept changing. Copying alone involved a measure of interpretation. A most vivid example of this early interpretive activity is the book of Chronicles, which is a commentary on the books of Samuel and Kings. But there are many passages in the Bible where an interpretive activity can be detected regarding other traditions.[1]

The nature of Hebrew and Aramaic writing, sparse as it was in its use of vowel signs, invited interpretation. Furthermore, the text in antiquity presented itself without chapter or paragraphs marks (at least obvious marks), capitals or other signs of punctuation. Eventually, a complex system of vocalization, accentuation and cantillation developed in the first centuries of our era, and the development of this system also required a very sophisticated interpretive activity.

From the "beginning," either monarchic, priestly, or other interested parties needed to adjust the traditions they had at hand, especially when written, to the needs of an ever-changing situation. Political, technical, social, linguistic situations changed and demanded that whatever traditions had become enshrined in the memory of the people be re-understood. Two political and military events left an especially deep mark, namely the conquest and exile of northern Israelites in –721 by Assyrians, and the conquest and exile of Judaeans at the end of the 6th c. bce, especially in –587, to Babylon by Babylonians.

The role of the conquest of Juda (after that of Israel) and the exile to Babylonia in shaping the relationship of the Judaean community to the text cannot be overstated. In antiquity, such an event meant at one and the same time the loss of political independence, monarchy (the king being a religious figure, seen as a savior / protector), temple and significance of it, that is, a complex relationship to the cosmos. It meant the loss of control over the land, loss of freedom, and actually physical loss of the land for those who were exiled.

[1] See J. Kugel's introduction to his *The Bible as it was* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1997).

It normally meant also that your god or gods had been incapable of protecting you and were at the very least second to the conquerer's god(s). It could mean the end of your nation, religion, language, culture.

But the interpretations by exiled Judaeans of this catastrophe had been prepared by an understanding they had of the previous conquest of the northern kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians in –721. Prophets already, both in Israel and Juda, had proposed explanations for the threat and previous events, explaining that the divinity would eventually abandon the people if they did not change their ways and correct especially their social behavior. The Deuteronomist (book of Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, and in its essential features, the Samuel and Kings books) proposed a more rigid interpretation along the same line, namely that the land was conditional upon the obedience to the god-given laws, and that straying from the laws, esp. cultic laws but also social justice, would by punished by the divinity using conquerers as chastizers.

So, the explanations given in the post-exilic period pursue the prophetic and deuteronomistic notion. Apparently the god of Israel and Juda is a weak, defeated god? On the contrary, answer the exiles, this god is a universal figure, hidden behind many names, but unique, and with a unique plan, and using empires for his own purposes. Apparently the land was lost to conquerors? In fact, it was promised on certain conditions: the people were the first object of choice for the divinity, the land second. Babylonia itself was conquered by new invaders in mid-6th c. bce. This defeat of the conquering empire itself by another one (Mede, then Persian) reinforced the view of a hidden divinity's plan. In consequence, the answer to all these upheavals was a renewed zeal for the law, which became the defining characteristic of the Judaean people (soon called Jews, or belonging to "Judaism"). The textual traditions (the "law" or "torah" = law and teaching) in effect became a substitute for the lost form of pre-exilic polity, a sort of portable land. But an all-encompassing role for a textual tradition implied accurate transmission, copying, and reading. Sages, teachers, scribes, schools, therefore, who could ensure the accuracy of the transmission and understanding.

From giving such overwhelming importance to the written word, it was but a small step to the notion of the law as given for all time. By the end of the 5th c. bce, a process of canonization took place, a determination of the shape of the text as well as its limits. This process continued for some time. So, the interpreter of Scripture becomes a figure in its own right after the exile to Babylon and the return of the exiles at the end of the 6th c. bce and during the 5th c. bce. Interpreting takes on even more importance actually in the Hellenistic period, when many works were written about certain biblical figures or events, often in the form of apocalypses. These ancient interpreters had four main assumptions regarding the biblical text (I'm following J. Kugel, *The Bible As It Was*, introduction):

1. The Bible is cryptic. Sentences and words may refer to things other than what seems to be the case. So, for instance, the trees in the garden must mean something else than just simply trees.

2. Scripture is one great book of wisdom. It informs our behavior. Abraham, for instance, is a model of hospitality.

3. Scripture is perfect, and all its parts are necessary to the whole. No mistake or contradiction can be envisioned. Everything can be explained, the hard edges smoothed.

4. It is divinely inspired, by an omniscient god who is taken to be the narrator.

Regarding the modern reader's relationship to the biblical text: The text reads one as much as one reads it. It makes claims on the readers, through its "absolute claim to historical truth" (Auerbach, p. 14) and its claim to truth absolute. Its pared down stories (as compared to Homer's poems) clamor for interpretation (Auerbach). Places, times, physical circumstances, feelings, aspects of things and characters are left unsaid, as for instance in Gen 22: "serving-men, ass, wood, and knife, and nothing else, without an epithet;" (ibid. p. 9). Thoughts, events must be filled in. Furthermore, fate or destiny are not defined. Adam or Eve, Cain or Abel are not led by ancestry or nature, or at least not obviously. The force leading them is *sui generis*.

The Bible is not a beguiling, enticing, aesthetically pleasing text. It is not elegantly pieced together, and very little of it seeks to bewitch the senses.

Yet, mystics (kabbalah) and already the sages in the Talmud propose physical desire as a metaphor for reading this text. At first sight, they appear to suggest something like Roland Barthes' notion of "le plaisir du texte." But their metaphor rather is desire framed in its nuptial form. They see the Torah as the bride and the reader as the groom (nota bene: it would be interesting to switch the genders and see if the "erotics of the text" would be much changed and how). Reading is to enter into a sort of pre-nuptial contract in which misrepresentations may occur on the part of the groom / reader (see Babylonian Qiddushin 49a). If these misrepresentations of self by the groom / reader are to the advantage of the bride / Torah, however, the contract (or act of interpretation / hermeneutics) is valid and stands. This initial contract, however, is only the beginning of a series of unveilings and veilings.

This desire of the text or through the text appears to parallel the relationship to text implied in the Odyssey. Odysseus, after his many years abroad, is renewing his nuptial contract with Penelope, who weaves "text" (Latin textus = woven stuff) during the day and deconstructs it at night, unseen by her court of pretend-grooms (woefully wrong, pretentious critics?). But then, why the spareness, austerity and asperity of the biblical text? Above, the very considerable losses of land and independence experienced by Israelites and Judaeans have been mentioned (one should add the losses of people), which may have had a great influence even on the writing style. When someone dies and one wishes to speak about this loss, one feels immediately that usual rhetorical effects must be eschewed: qualifiers, fancy words, certain grammatical features are immediately under suspicion. One chooses a spare style, one aims at speaking true. The extreme example I gave in class of this problematics

was that of Jean Cayrol, a French death camp survivor. In his book *Pour un romanesque lazaréen*, after WW II, he wondered what sort of literature he could write. All things human had become problematic, especially expressions of feeling and morality. His books could not contain the usual sort of heroes, actions, expressions of feelings, moral acts, and the like. There would only be objects perhaps, as in Genesis 22: wood, a knife, a mountain, a few puzzling characters... The economy of rhetorical means is an answer to the total collapse of "normal" language which seemed to have been part and parcel of the catastrophe itself. I would therefore agree with Auerbach when he writes that "the concept of God held by the Jews is less a cause than a symptom of their manner of comprehending and representing things." (p. 8).

Literary and theological unity

(fancy way to say: unity of purpose, or authorial hand?)

The dating and evolution of the text are difficult issues, but these studies, which have been going on now for two centuries, and esp. since Wellhausen, do not disqualify a literary reading of Genesis, the basis of which is the notion that there is some coherence to the book.[2] What sort of coherence?

Genesis can be divided into two large units: the *Primeval story* (1-11) and the *Patriarchal cycle*, or tales (12-50). First, therefore, an account of the origins of the world (but not of god), of nature and human beings in nature, the genealogy of all known peoples of the time (what time? post-Persian), and the institutions of civilization (and their great fallability: the Babel story). The Patriarchal story, from ch. 11 on, with its origins at the end of 12, is a propaedeutics of Israelite history, narrowing the field of vision ever so much more, but firmly set in the universal context because of the first stories. Alter sees differences of style between the two parts of the book: more distancing of the characters in the first part, more repetitions, formal symmetries and parallelisms, much less dialogue.

The basis for the literary unit of the book may be seen at the story level, but also at another, more theological level. The text is the fruit of a reflexion and response to a long tradition tested in the melting pot of early Iron Age history, through the early kings and the catastrophic events of the Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian dominations.

The absence of genesis of the divine being at the beginning of Genesis is in great contrast with the Mesopotamian myths, and also with Ugaritic and Greek myths (to cite geographically closer traditions). The idea of creation ex nihilo, however, is not at all clearly expressed in the Hebrew text as we have it (it appears for the first time in 2 Mac, that is a text dating from the mid-second c. BCE). There seems to be a preexisting chaos which the unengendered divinity organizes, which is not so different from other myths of the area.

[2] See the introduction by Robert Alter to his translation, *Genesis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996).

The great difference, however, is that the world of genesis is created entirely good, as the text insistently repeats. In Mesopotamian (and Hesodian forms of ancient Greek myths) myths, evil is part and parcel of the world of gods and nature: chaos and catastrophic strife preexist. Humans asking themselves about the concrete occurrences of evil need only reflect upon it as part of the cosmos. They may therefore cultivate the gods, propitiate them, cajole or even threaten them, in the hope of deflecting evil, though there is little possibility of doing so, in the last resort. Rituals would repeat the story of creation and its theomachy every year.

If the world is created good, however, evil becomes a problem suspended in the human air. The occurrences of it become personal events, accidents which are mostly due to the constraints of the situation (miscommunication in the case of Eve and Adam, for instance?), but with a remainder, however small, of "evil" intention, or competition with the divinity. There is a fundamental unity in Genesis which is also due to the pursuit of this question, the origin of evil, or a tracking of proteiform evil, in a world posited as fundamentally good. The dynamic of punishment of evil (justice: elohim aspect, traditional commentaries say) and salvation appear almost at the beginning of the text (divine gift of clothing as a "repentir" of god? various divine regrets, as J. Miles follows them. Eventually a fully developed idea of mercy, with *rahamim, hesed,* and the most puzzling *tsedaqah*). Evil is not located in a genealogical line, however, or at least not as much as in Greek tragedies. It appears as the doing of various individuals, but disconnected from the ancestors??? [we are still far here from future developments: evil to be explained in contradistinction to the election of Israel, which is clearly a sinner]

Is Genesis 1–11 a myth?

What makes human groups reach for a mythical account as drama? The story of Genesis, about creation of the earth, the first human beings, their place in the world, is not told as allegory but as a story often called a myth. An allegory would be explainable, it could be "unpacked". But a myth can be opened and explored, without bringing it to a closure. There is a residue of meaning. This drama provides answers to some important questions: What is the world? Its origin? The role of human beings in it? The drama in it consists of the move from something like an innocence at the beginning, through an inadequation or a fall, to some form of recovery. But is it a myth such as we apprehend the Mesopotamian or Greek accounts of creation to be (*Enuma Elish* and Hesiod's *Theogony*)? In calling it a myth, at issue are views of historical destiny, community, and more widely truth of human existence. "The Scripture stories do not, like Homer's, court our favor, they do not flatter us that they may please us and enchant us—they seek to subject us, and if we refuse to be subjected we are rebels."[3]

[3]Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis* (Transl. W.R. Trask. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 15.

There are several arguments against calling it a myth. First of all, the characteristics of myths are fundamentally different. The first one is that their time frame is separate from historical time. Secondly, myths project an idea of order as fundamentally unstable, a temporary victory over something more basic, permanent chaos. Finally, part of this order is the control by gods of human destinies. Divine authority may be fickle, feisty, and very human-like, but it aims at making humans do divine will.

The characteristics of Genesis story are that the godhead is singular, though the form of the name used in Gen 1 is masculine plural (elohim). There is no paredra for the godhead. Elohim doesn't have a goddess sitting by him. There is no genesis of the godhead, no birth of the parts of the universe personalized in myths as gods and goddesses (in our story, Heavens, Earth, Abyss or Chaos, Day, Night, Sun and Moon are not gods and not engendered. They are made). There is no cosmic struggle (theomachy) between the generations of the gods as in Enuma Elish or the Theogony. Just a hint of it perhaps in the chaotic aspect of the beginning. Chaos exists but seems minimal: the notion of order is fundamental to Gn 1.1 to 2.4a. There is no Prometheus-like story in which a heroic human outsmarts the gods, unless one thinks of the serpent as this smart figure? The story is not presented as a Muse-inspired song, although many think of the first chapter as poetic, because of the repetitions ("And God said…" ten times; "it was good" seven times; "he blessed," three times…).

Considerable differences come to light when comparing *Atrahasis*. In this Babylonian text, the world is also without humans at its origins, but with a council of gods, with a revolt by junior divinities. Perhaps we have an echo of this council and revolt with the occasional "us" of Gen 1-3 and the notion of rebellion. The idea that man was created to toil for the benefit of the leading gods, instead of the younger gods, is completely absent from Genesis. The creation of man by mixing clay and blood of a slaughtered god is not in the Bible at all, but blood is in humans by virtue of their being taken from the humus. Finally, most of the methods used by the gods to squelch the unbearable population increase—famine, plague, eventually flood— are removed. Flood is kept but sees its finality completely transformed in Genesis.

Finally, the story is not proposed as closed onto itself, but it opens to the history of the universe and its peoples, quickly narrowing down to the history of Abraham's family, and eventually the story of Jacob (another name for Israel). The story of Israel continues in the book of Exodus, then through the story of the settlement in the promised land, and finally the story of the kings which end tragically in a most historical episode of Israel's history, the exile to Assyria (721 bce) and to Babylon (586 bce). The story is rewritten, edited, and arranged in view of this last event, by people who have lost their political independence and are reflecting upon that loss.