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Preface

The present volume aims to offer a concise introduction to some of the many and various practices that might be described as “theological interpretation of the Pentateuch.” It presents a review of key issues and also models good interpretive practice. To this end, each chapter combines a discussion of theological themes and issues in the theological interpretation of its chosen pentateuchal book, followed by detailed exploration of one or two case studies, offering theological exegesis of a passage or two from the book.

All the contributors are either former research students or Durham colleagues of Professor Walter Moberly, and all are indebted, in a variety of ways, to his own careful and creative theological work in Old Testament interpretation. The volume is dedicated to Walter Moberly, therefore, as something of a small-scale *festschrift*. Our only regret in such a project is that he was unable to offer his unique brand of wisdom, advice, attention to detail, and generously constructive critique to these pieces.

We thank the contributors for their enthusiasm in cooperating on the project and for much engaging international email correspondence about the nature of theological interpretation. Several of us would like to acknowledge more specific debts: Joel Lohr thanks the Priscilla and Stanford Reid Trust for funding that allowed him to devote extra time to this project; Richard Briggs is indebted to research leave awarded by the council of St. John’s College, Durham University; and Nathan MacDonald and Rob Barrett gratefully acknowledge the support of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research. Finally, as editors, we are pleased to record our very real thanks to all the helpful staff at Baker Academic, and in particular to Jim Kinney for sharing our enthusiasm for such a book as this.

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Abbreviations

° With verse/chapter numbers = only some parts of the indicated passages
// Parallel to
ANE Ancient Near East/Eastern
BCE Before the Common Era
CE Common Era
D The Deuteronomist—a pentateuchal source
E The Elohist—a pentateuchal source
J The Yahwist (Jahwist)—a pentateuchal source
JEDP Pentateuchal sources combined; see each letter
LXX Septuagint
MT Masoretic Text
NASB New American Standard Bible
NIV New International Version (2011)
NJPS New Jewish Publication Society (translation of the Tanakh)
NRSV New Revised Standard Version
Abbreviations

NT  New Testament
OT  Old Testament
P   The Priestly source—a pentateuchal source
v./v. verse/verses
Introduction

Reading the Pentateuch as Christian Scripture

Richard S. Briggs and Joel N. Lohr

The Pentateuch is the five-book collection that stands together at the head of the sacred Scriptures of both Judaism and Christianity. At the beginning of his introductory article on the Pentateuch, Walter Moberly captures two key aspects of how these texts have been and are approached: “This material has captured the imagination—and challenged the understanding—of both Jews and Christians down the ages. . . . Yet for all their importance, the question of how to read these texts well is not straightforward.”1 First of all, these are cherished texts. Second, they are frequently difficult texts. It is tempting to many interpreters to see these two observations as being in tension. Many have sacrificed imaginative understanding (let alone constructive engagement) in the face of the complexities of trying to read the Pentateuch well. In our view, theologically interested interpretation will not want to make that choice. In fact, it may be that it is precisely among the difficulties posed by these texts that we see most clearly their enduring value and are provoked to read them well. Yet, of course, a great deal of interpretive dispute boils down to the key question of what it means to read well.

In this chapter we map out some of the key issues in these areas and provide the reader with a brief outline of the approach we take in this book. First, we discuss what makes our approach in this book “theological.” This is conducted with reference to several of the ways in which we have learned

differences of outlook found therein. There are many versions of this theory at the detailed level, and our goal is not to expound them all here. In outline, the Yahwist (or Jahwist) source (J) was dated to the ninth century BCE, giving a southern-kingdom perspective on the history of Israel in its life with YHWH. Then J was supplemented by a later, eighth-century, northern-kingdom account written by the Elohist (E), so-called because he most often spoke of God as Elohim. After this came the work of the Deuteronomist (D), which in most early versions of the theory was simply the book of Deuteronomy. This “book” (or scroll) was understood to be the product of scribes seeking reform in 622 BCE, in conjunction with King Josiah, whose story is told in 2 Kings 22–23. Subsequent to this, a third continuous account came into being and formed the fourth document, called the Priestly source (P). This text was thought to be incorporated into the other three in such a way that it framed the finished work as a whole. Thus P was dated to postexilic times and was understood to be the source that emphasized ritual and legal aspects of life with YHWH. It was Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918) who formulated the most well-known version of the theory by arguing that the shift from a relatively unstructured faith in YHWH (J) toward a reliance on law and ritual (P) was to be understood as a decline into “legalism,” and hence that the four sources were to be put in the order J-E-D-P. This ordering of the sources was Wellhausen’s great contribution, overturning the previously held view that P, which provided the overall structure of the finished Pentateuch, must therefore have been (relatively) early. Today it is clear that this value judgment tells us more about Wellhausen than about ancient Israel, and it is clearly related to what has been a common tendency for (mainly Protestant) Christians to read law and ritual texts as less significant than other texts. Nevertheless, this became the JEDP theory as it has been known and passed on to generations of students ever since.

More recently, however, the notion of continuous sources has fallen out of favor, although the idea of a Priestly source, P, remains something of a constant in pentateuchal criticism. Today it is more common to envisage separate (i.e., noncontinuous) blocks of tradition being edited together at a later stage to form a single continuous narrative. This move, proposed by Rolf Rendtorff and his students, now holds considerable sway, although perhaps more in Europe than in North America. It finds eloquent expression in the work of Konrad Schmid, especially his *Genesis and the Moses Story*, who suggests that the book of Genesis is basically an alternative story of origins that developed separately from the Moses traditions of Exodus–Deuteronomy, and that the two are brought together shortly after the composition of P, in the first half

23. Joel N. Lohr’s chapter on Leviticus, below, explores this point in greater depth.
from Walter Moberly what it might mean to read Scripture well. In particular, we could not resist subtitling this book as we have and titling this introductory chapter “Reading the Pentateuch as Christian Scripture.” Many works of biblical and theological study emerging from his watchful supervision at Durham have begun (and in some cases have ended) with a title such as “Reading X as Christian Scripture.”

Second, we move on to a consideration of how one might understand “theological interpretation” in relation to two other prominent ways of characterizing one’s approach: the historical and the literary. We aim to show that theological interpretation can be distinctive at the same time as being deeply interrelated to other angles of approach. Last, we discuss the format of the present volume. Here we highlight the unique contribution of each author and provide a rationale for our decision to use focused case studies—which engage with particular passages in each pentateuchal book—rather than attempt to survey the content of the Pentateuch in full.

Introducing the Pentateuch: A Theological Approach

George Steiner once memorably asked, “What worthwhile book after the Pentateuch has been written by a committee?” Such a question certainly challenges a project like this one, a book about the Pentateuch written, if not by a committee, at least by a group of people working together. Furthermore, there are many ways one could conceive of an introduction to the Pentateuch being organized. Correspondingly, many good introductions to the Pentateuch already exist. Why another? What makes this one different?

We have tried to bring together an introduction that is self-consciously theological in approach. Many of the ways in which we understand this task, which is sometimes called “theological interpretation,” are heavily indebted to the approach to biblical interpretation and theology practiced in the wide-ranging work of Walter Moberly, the honoree of this volume. At the end of this book is an appendix that reviews some of his work in the field of pentateuchal interpretation. Here at the beginning, however, it seems appropriate to sketch out some of the factors that have weighed upon us in bringing this volume together. The slight risk is that it might look as if we are commending the idea of needing to start with a theoretical discussion before the moment of actual engagement with the biblical text. That is not our intention. Rather, all the points that follow are broad convictions and practices that we have taken from Moberly’s work and influence. Put together, they offer a set of

2. For a recent example, see Douglas S. Earl, Reading Joshua as Christian Scripture, Journal of Theological Interpretation: Supplement Series 2 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2010).
ways—Karl Barth, as much as in the more familiar terrain of biblical studies within which many Old Testament interpreters more commonly operate.  

Third, the two points above are to be held together. Theological interpretation at the present time, as we have conceived of it, is not a retreat from the rigors of critical analysis to a premodern practice pure and simple. Neither is the deployment of critical canons of exegesis pure and simple. Rather, it is the interweaving of concerns both traditional and modern, which may be both theologically orthodox and robustly critical, but all the while alert to the fact (a social as well as theological fact) that these texts have remained sacred Scripture for many centuries. As such, it is clear that we are not the first to read them or wrestle with their interpretation; therefore the long history of reception, both within and outside the church and synagogue, offers important resources, insights, corrections, and contributions to any attempt to read Scripture today.

Fourth, in the light of this awareness of our historical and theological location in a great chain of interpreters (which stretches back to the texts themselves), we are acutely aware that Christians who read these texts from the Pentateuch, and the Christian Old Testament, are also reading texts that constitute Jewish Torah and Jewish Scripture for Jews. In some ways this is a specific case of the point made above, that one’s reading is framed by the concerns that bring one to read this literature in the first place. Jewish readings of the Torah overlap, as well as contrast strikingly, with Christian readings of the Pentateuch. Our work aims to be informed by both perspectives, even while as Christians we cannot but read Jewish Scripture (or Tanakh) as Old Testament. This point is helpfully explored by Moberly, perhaps precisely because of his deep interests in Jewish-Christian dialogue. The goal is to read this literature not at the cost of its status in contemporary Judaism or in a way that negates its value for present-day Jews. As Moberly states, “The Christian should no more denigrate the Torah-centered religion of the Old Testament, or the Judaism that grows out of it and stands in basic continuity with it, than that Torah-centered religion (i.e., Mosaic Yahwism) itself denigrated patriarchal religion [which it does not].” To put it simply, as Christians we live and read.

7. For examples, see the commendations in Moberly, Prophecy and Discernment, 36–37; see especially his discussions here and elsewhere of Nicholas Lash’s The Beginning and the End of “Religion” (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). As a result, works such as Moberly’s Prophecy and Discernment can be characterized as being “in biblical studies but not of it” (so Richard S. Briggs, “Christian Theological Interpretation of Scripture Built on the Foundation of the Apostles and the Prophets: The Contribution of R. W. L. Moberly’s Prophecy and Discernment,” Journal of Theological Interpretation 4 [2010]: 309–18, here 317).

8. Here we refer the reader to Joel S. Kaminsky and Joel N. Lohr, The Torah: A Beginner’s Guide (Oxford: OneWorld, 2011), a book written by a Jew and a Christian to explore precisely this dynamic and to learn from each other’s tradition.


10. Ibid., 163.
these Scriptures in some relationship to Judaism even while our interests and concerns are not identical. In this book we engage with Jewish interpretation more on an ad hoc basis than in any programmatic way. However, such an approach is also one way to affirm that we should learn from anywhere and everywhere wisdom may be found.

A fifth point concerns whether one can offer a succinct definition of “theological interpretation.” Many attempts have been made in recent years to do just this, including a helpful one by Moberly himself.\(^{11}\) His own working definition of the practice, offered in grateful dialogue with a range of differently worded proposals, is this: “Theological interpretation is reading the Bible with a concern for the enduring truth of its witness to the nature of God and humanity, with a view to enabling the transformation of humanity into the likeness of God.”\(^{12}\) Though many such attempts offer something of value, the risk is that any statement short enough to be memorable is probably going to be a simplification in one way or another. It is not our intention to wade into this literature of conceptual clarification, and neither is the purpose of this introduction to suggest that one must sort out the theoretical issues in advance of engaging with the text theologically.\(^{13}\) If pressed, one might suggest that the theoretical/hermeneutical issues are always under consideration right alongside the careful consideration of the text, rather than being either prolegomena or a methodological statement of the steps one must take in interpretation. Nevertheless, for the benefit of readers who do wish to think about this conceptual question, it does seem appropriate to clarify in what sense this book operates with a notion of “theological interpretation,” and perhaps more specifically, to elaborate a little on how the notion does or does not overlap with other ways of engaging with the text. In the next section, therefore, we give further attention to this particular area.

Finally, by way of clarifying the nature of this “introduction,” all the contributors are indebted to the model that Moberly has himself practiced, of requiring attention to the specifics of the particular biblical texts. The appendix on his work, at the end of this book, gives many examples of this with regard to the Pentateuch. We recognize the temptation for introductions to talk about the biblical text without ever getting around to actually reading it. At the same time, if our readings are to engage in a careful, critical, and constructive way with the text, asking some of the framework questions we have been discussing, and offering serious hermeneutical and theological reflection, then we cannot do more than read a fraction of the pentateuchal text in any detail.

We have chosen to follow a style much in debt to the practice of Moberly

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12. Ibid., 163 (originally in italics).
13. For a brief and elegant entrée into this area, see Stephen E. Fowl, *Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, Cascade Companions (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009).
himself. Instead of seeking to cover a host of texts or surveying the content of each biblical book in full, in this book each contributor allots about half their chapter to the detailed consideration of one or two texts from their book as a model of what theological engagement with the book in question might look like. Readers may find that there are “family resemblances” between the interpretive studies in the book without finding in them a simple unity of method or purpose that could clearly map out “the right way of doing theological interpretation.” In this too we have appreciated an elegant maxim offered by Moberly: “Too much ink has been spilt in arguing the merits of approaches to the Bible that, rightly or wrongly, have been advocated or perceived as the way. Since such debates are ultimately futile, I have no desire to add to them here.”14 Neither do we.

These six points, then, offer some sense of what a theological approach to the Pentateuch might entail. It would be nice to have a suitably symbolic seven points to make at the beginning of a book about the Old Testament, so let us add one more, in the shape of a more personal note. It has seemed appropriate to offer this collection of chapters in honor of Walter Moberly in the form of an “introduction.” Walter’s long-term work in Durham University has always retained a deep commitment to combining research and writing with the fundamental vocation of teaching. He is a committed, enthusiastic, and highly respected teacher, who has long suggested that one of the most demanding tasks in Old Testament studies today is to teach well at the introductory level: to lead students into the joys and complexities of the discipline while at the same time giving them an understanding of why the subject matters and how best to contribute to it. We have sought to model this volume in ways that reflect that commitment: this is not a random collection of essays but an attempt to produce a work that will inform and encourage those engaging with the Pentateuch to grapple with the many and varied tasks of theological interpretation. In the spirit of constructive theological work, this book is intended neither as the first word nor the last word, but as an attempt to offer a next word in our ongoing work with the biblical text.

Reading the Pentateuch as Scripture: A Question of Frameworks

On the Complex Nature of Interpretation

Doubtless the best way to learn how to interpret any biblical book, whether theologically or in any other way, is by doing it. Those who have pondered how to teach scriptural texts will surely resonate with the observation of Ellen Davis: “The only way I know to teach people to read the Bible is to read it

myself, afresh, in their presence.”  

Some readers, therefore, will be inclined to move on at this point to consider the individual chapters on the books of the Pentateuch. But others, as noted above, will want to probe a little further the question of what is at stake in interpreting the Pentateuch theologically. The following discussion is offered to that end.

As a rough and approximate model at this point, let us say that there are various angles of approach to most biblical texts, depending on how one characterizes the main focus, or “leading edge,” of interpretive inquiry. Thus one might read with pronounced literary, historical, sociopolitical, or theological leanings, and indeed many other presenting perspectives too, since such complex and richly resonant texts as we find in the Pentateuch rightly deserve full attention from a large number of perspectives. All these angles must also be pursued “critically”—in other words, with care, self-reflection, and the appropriate hermeneutical mixture of trust and suspicion, which together make for rigorous and yet open reading.

Theological interpretation, understood in the mix of these complex and interweaving interpretive practices, is perhaps then to be understood as one aspect of an integrated practice of reading the text, as carefully and reflectively as possible, but recognizing that among the many “leading edges” that can occupy the interpreter, one wishes to arrive at consideration of the theologically significant angles as a matter of some urgency. This way of characterizing the task may allow us to explain how it is that so much commentary in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries remained theologically alert and engaged all the while operating within (what now appear to be) somewhat underdeveloped interpretive frameworks. Frequently one would find that significant theological matters were often too easily assimilated to prior understandings (whether popular or ecclesiological) or were deferred to the point of not being considered at all (as in some kinds of commentary that seemed determined to bracket out all manner of personal, hermeneutical, or “existential” engagement with the text). Such commentary could still be theological, or at least contain theological elements, even while its concerns were primarily shaped by other matters.

In considering this topic, it is all too easy to reduce the options to polarized and mutually exclusive alternatives: historical-critical or theological, objective or confessional, public or private, and so on. Likely such an unweaving of the integrated practice of interpretation will always be reductive, and the inappropriate privileging of any one polarized alternative to the exclusion


of the other will in the end also impoverish the chosen angle of approach. Thus, for example, an exclusion of the theological dimensions of interpretive inquiry will impoverish a historically oriented reading of a text by limiting the conceptuality of what is at stake in the historical context. The same is true when one’s cultural horizons limit or reduce the scope for understanding the literary artistry of the ancient text. Problems of this type can be multiplied. As soon as one allows that many different angles of inquiry must critically interact in the handling of the text, the specter of one kind of approach having its prejudiced way with the text in a gloomy exercise of self-justification should be set aside. We must recognize that interpretation requires probing self-examination alongside probing textual examination in an open-ended process where key questions and insights are conceptualized and reconceptualized many times. Theological interpretation of the Pentateuch, then, is not a method nor the execution of a program (even an interpretive program), but is the self-conscious decision to bring questions of ongoing theological vitality to the fore, amid the many and various legitimate avenues of interpretive inquiry.

To demonstrate what is at stake in this way of characterizing the issues, we will consider the overlapping perspectives of two or three approaches to the Pentateuch, and in particular one or two examples from the book of Genesis. There are many angles of approach we could consider. A current series of guides to the interpretation of biblical books, Methods in Biblical Interpretation, typically takes a handful of approaches such as “rhetorical criticism,” “feminist criticism,” “postcolonial criticism,” or “genre criticism” and explores what each angle brings to the reading. The volume on Genesis planned for the series burst its banks and ended up being published separately, offering no fewer than ten approaches, including chapters on “cultural memory,” “rabbinic interpretation,” and “translation.” Clearly such a book on “methods for the Pentateuch” could be indefinitely long, and we cannot undertake such an overview here. So at the risk of oversimplification, let us make a practical distinction between approaches that are in some sense predominantly interested in (1) history, those dominated by (2) literary concerns, and those with more specifically (3) theological or canonically oriented interests. Many (though not all) reading strategies can be thought of in terms of how they navigate this range of interests. As long as we remember that this is not meant to be a threefold map of all the possibilities, we should not be led too far astray. In what follows we seek to show that historically oriented readings can range across a variety of sorts of theological engagement, not all of which would


really be best understood as “theological interpretation,” and the same can be said of literary readings. Conversely, although we do not discuss it directly, self-declared theological interpretations may be characterized by a variety of practices with regard to historical or literary interpretive judgments.

**Historical Frameworks**

The rise of “historical consciousness” remains perhaps the key defining feature of modern-era readings of biblical and other texts. One does not have to search far to find statements such as this, in a recent account of Genesis 1: “I have proposed a reading of Genesis that I believe to be faithful to the context of the original audience and author.” As it happens, this comes from a study that is concerned to dispute certain unhelpfully restrictive readings of that chapter with regard to modern interpretive frameworks, but the assumption, widely shared, is that correct interpretation depends upon correct understanding of the originating context. Now if such a principle is granted, then the hunt is clearly on for original contexts within which Genesis (and likewise the whole Pentateuch) was written or received. The problem is that the best we can do here is to offer hypotheses that try to make the most compelling sense of the evidence. On the one hand, it makes considerable sense to say that the Pentateuch was finally brought together in the Persian period (i.e., around the fifth century BCE), but on the other hand, this observation must be coupled with the recognition that individual elements within it have a variety of original provenances or settings. Thus while “the original context” may be a helpful interpretive framework to consider, there are often going to be several such contexts, some of them more determinable than others. Also, our understanding of the ways in which the individual elements of the Pentateuch have been incorporated into the finished whole has been in considerable flux in recent years.

During the past two centuries pentateuchal criticism has been dominated by the classic JEDP theory. This theory, concerning the authorship of separate written documents subsequently combined together, attempted to give a comprehensive explanation for the differences in language and literary styles in the Pentateuch and to explain the various tensions, contradictions, and


of the fifth century BCE. Schmid adduces various reasons for thinking that Genesis was not originally written to lead into Exodus; and especially at the key juncture between Genesis 50 and Exodus 1 he finds cause to remove certain verses as later editorial additions designed to effect such a merging of traditions. Why did this happen? Schmid’s lengthy answer, offering multiple insights into many details of texts in and beyond the Pentateuch, revolves around the notion of a fundamental diversity of theological conceptualizations of the ways of God in Israel’s life and history: “The ancestors and the exodus not only mark two sequential stations for the beginnings of Israel’s history (as the Bible reports), they also stand for two different theological perspectives showing how Israel interpreted its bond with God.”

At the risk of oversimplifying a subtle thesis, one could say that Schmid sees the ancestor narratives (i.e., Gen. 12–50) as emphasizing Israel’s foundation upon the promises to, and covenants with, Abraham and others in Genesis, whereas the “Moses traditions” lean toward the significance of the law and the correct observance of the requirements for worship and priesthood. Schmid acknowledges that there are “mediating positions,” although he tends to present any such mediation as leaning one way or the other.

Arguably, though, such a tendency to operate with one or the other view as “basic” is a product of his interpretive model. It is precisely a presenting oddity of the finished Pentateuch that one finds these contrasting perspectives merged together. Although it is a solution of sorts to parcel them out to different historical traditions, it effectively removes the problem rather than resolving it: it displaces the problem and reduces things to a question of the development of the history of religious traditions, rather than leaving it as a fundamental theological question about the pentateuchal text. In the words of Moberly, discussing the relationship of Genesis to the rest of the Pentateuch and in particular the “classic problem” of how the life and faith of the ancestors relates to the Torah:

Remarkably, this classic problem almost entirely receded from focus in 19th- and 20th-cent. pentateuchal criticism as scholars reconceptualised the theological


26. This crux is also key to many of the essays in Thomas B. Dozeman and Konrad Schmid, eds., A Farewell to the Yahwist? The Composition of the Pentateuch in Recent European Interpretation, SBL Symposium Series 34 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006); not all of these essayists are persuaded by Schmid’s thesis.

27. Schmid, Genesis, 333.

28. Ibid., 328–33.
issue as a problem of religious history to be tackled by historical-critical methods. . . . Scholars ceased to ask about the status of pre-Mosaic religion in relation to Mosaic norms. . . .

This change in focus illustrates the implications of differences of approach to interpreting the Pentateuch. The questions one asks and the answers that appear plausible are inseparable from the wider frame of reference and assumptions within which one works.²⁹

In other words, the properly theological question regarding the subject matter of the text ends up being approached by historical and literary methods “without remainder”: the problem is deemed explained if the growth of the texts is accounted for.

This is not the place for a full evaluation of Schmid’s work.³⁰ Yet it is pertinent to ask how one might characterize his approach in the light of Moberly’s observations above. Clearly, in one sense Schmid is very much engaged with theological issues, though his study does not exemplify “theological interpretation” in the sense that we have been describing it. He is more interested in providing an account of the development of the texts as we now have them, rather than engaging with the resultant theological conceptualization once the texts have reached their final form. There is considerable difference, for example, in understanding promise and obedience as developing from divergent traditions rather than as being simultaneous theological claims about life with YHWH. In a brief discussion Schmid does say that the combining of Genesis with Exodus places the “salvation-history” of the final canonical text “under the sign of the promise,” and thus he suggests that the Genesis perspective is in some way the overarching one.³¹ Schmid is hopeful, however, that in the future the final “mixed” texts of the Pentateuch will receive the theological attention they deserve. It is open to debate whether that attention will be theologically richer thanks to a theory of how the finished text developed.³²

In short, the historically oriented aspects of pentateuchal criticism exemplified by Schmid’s book could be construed, in different places and with respect to different interpretive issues, as either hospitable or problematic to the concerns of theological interpretation. This should certainly warn against too dogmatic a pronouncement concerning the historical nature or otherwise of theological interpretation. Instead, we find what we have anticipated: historical concerns interweave with theological interests in many and unpredictable ways. The two are different but not separable. It would be helpful if theologically interested interpreters in general avoided exaggerated claims about “historical criticism”

³⁰. For sample critiques, one might consult the essays by Van Seters and Carr in Farewell to the Yahwist?
³². Ibid., 281.
and its supposed (or real) shortcomings. Equally, of course, historical critics should avoid suggesting that one can proceed as if theological questions make no difference to one’s interpretive approach.

**Literary Readings**

Literary readings, sometimes known in biblical studies as examples of “new literary criticism” (to distinguish them from older concerns about literary sources and so forth), are typically characterized by attention to such matters as narrative, plot, characterization, point of view, and tropes such as irony. In so doing, they tend to be concerned with “final form” readings of the biblical text (that is, readings of the text as we now have it, not as it may have been in earlier hypothesized forms). Such approaches naturally invite consideration of the reader’s role in interpretation. Genesis in particular has been fertile ground for this. Its long narrative form and strong characterization have allowed all manner of literary analyses to flourish.

One should not underestimate the significance of one of the first such readings of any biblical narrative, Erich Auerbach’s famous consideration of Abraham and Isaac (Gen. 22) in his *Mimesis.* In Auerbach’s striking phrase, the tale is “fraught with background,” by which he means that it is sparsely underwritten, thus requiring any reader who wishes to understand it to enter into the process of exploring its “lacunae” (gaps, obscurities), imagining how the psychological and personal aspects of the tale must be understood. In this way the reader is drawn into the world of the text.

In what sense, then, might such approaches be understood theologically? Several kinds of cases might be considered, revealing a range of possible answers. A reading such as that offered by Laurence Turner shows how the book of Genesis can be analyzed in terms of plot, in particular by comparing how the story develops with what he terms “announcements of plot” (such as 1:28; 12:1–3; 25:23; and others). Turner concludes that “the Announcements are misleading indicators of how the plot of Genesis will develop. Too many other factors impinge upon the narrative for these to be taken as predetermining plot.” Although Turner wants to affirm that “Genesis is a sophisticated piece of literature,” his literary perspective forecloses on some significant theological dimensions of interpretation. Most significantly, he decides that he will not import theological perspectives external to the text into his reading. Hence “YHWH” becomes another character in a narrative rather than the God worshiped in Israel.

35. Ibid., 182.
Regardless of the merits of such an approach in terms of literary-critical methodology, this is a prime example of foreclosing on some relevant aspects of the interpretation of scriptural texts. The problem is that such an approach does not permit the integrated work of multifaceted interpretation to draw upon theological perspectives that might otherwise contribute to a wise reading. This is not to say that one must interpret Genesis in such a way that one’s prior theology is affirmed, but it does suggest that there is more to bring to the question of whether Yhwh is fair in Genesis, say, than simply concluding that the narrative of Genesis does not allow us to answer this question. For one thing, the storyteller does seem to assume that Yhwh is a character already known to the reader, and one might argue, as Moberly has in another context, that from the very first chapter of Genesis the story assumes that this Yhwh, known to the reader, is good and can be trusted.36 The point is that one’s very reading of the narrative might be productively shaped by critical reflection on all sorts of other perspectives regarding the sense in which fairness can be attributed to Yhwh.37 A thoroughgoing execution of this problematic kind of literary approach to Genesis may be found in W. Lee Humphrey’s reading of God as simply a character in the narrative.38 The great merit of such approaches is that they pay careful attention to the details of the text. But even in Humphrey’s direct consideration of the character of God (which turns out to be “complex and at points conflicted”),39 the possibility of substantive theological conclusions is more or less entirely ruled out by the literary methods chosen. In one sense, then, his reading is “theological.” In another, it is not the kind of “theological interpretation” we are seeking to describe.

One of the most striking ways of putting this comes from George Steiner, a literary critic who has spent a great deal of time in thinking through questions of how texts do or do not change our world. He was asked to review Robert Alter and Frank Kermode’s Literary Guide to the Bible, which is full of the kinds of readings we have just been considering, combined with a tendency to bring Scripture down to the level of the common and the everyday. Steiner was unimpressed and unleashed a poetic tour de force of critical reflection:

The question is: Does this Literary Guide help us to come to sensible grips with the singularity and the overwhelming provocations of the Bible—a singularity

37. This particular example is handled all too briefly by Turner, Announcements, 113.
39. Ibid., 256.
and a summons altogether independent of the reach of current literary-critical fashions? Does it help us to understand in what ways the Bible and the demands of answerability it puts upon us are like no others? Of this tome—and I repeat that it contains much that is enlightening, convincing, and finely argued—a terrible blandness is born. . . . Holy Scripture as it is cocooned in the academic poise and urbanity of these commentaries . . . emerges as might a fair number of other great books of high antiquity and stylistic variousness. We hear of “omelettes,” of “pressure cookers,” not of the terror, of the *mysterium tremendum*, that inhabits man’s endeavors to speak to and speak of God.40

Again, to reiterate, literary readings can offer tremendous help to theological concerns when they are pursued as keys to reading the text carefully, but not when their methodological commitments cause the interpreter to ignore or foreclose on allowing exploration of key theological notions (such as the character of God, to take the obvious example we have been discussing). Thus to characterize a reading of the Pentateuch as “literary” in itself leaves open the question of how theological it is.

*Theological Interpretation*

Hopefully we have by now said enough to begin to indicate how the historical and literary concerns of interpretation—to use just two examples—should not be played off against theological interests. With regard to theological interpretation, what matters is that the interpreter engages with issues of theological substance, drawing both from a broad range of theological concerns that the reader might bring to the text, as well as paying careful attention to the theological subject matter of the text itself. The manner by which one arrives at such issues is perhaps of secondary significance, and in the chapters that follow various different ways of proceeding are explored and modeled.

Each contributor to the present volume seeks to introduce one book of the Pentateuch with eyes clearly set upon the kind of theological interpretation we have been discussing in this introduction. This is done in two main ways. In the first half of each chapter, the author will introduce the book by way of prominent themes and issues, as well as by looking at some of the hermeneutical questions arising from the book. In the second half of the chapter, each author will engage in an exercise in theological interpretation, examining a particular focal passage (or passages) from that book in detail. We hope that our reasons for structuring things in this way will be self-evident, so that such an approach allows the reader to see exactly how historical, literary, and other concerns play differing roles in each discussion and in each passage. Further,

such examples permit the reader to see careful theological interpretation being exercised in practice. Some of the different ways in which this task is approached are as follows:

- For Genesis, Richard Briggs explores the Babel story in Genesis 11:1–9, paying particular attention to literary questions about the text, but noting that historical questions contribute to the reader’s thinking about the role of the text in its canonical context, which he explores through the twin themes of blessing and limitation.
- Jo Bailey Wells looks at Exodus 19:1–8, engaging with its literary shape and texture, and showing that Israel’s covenantal status as a “kingdom of priests” entails that Israel is invested with the character of Yhwh for the world.
- For Leviticus, Joel Lohr examines what some call the center of the book, the Yom Kippur (or Day of Atonement) passage of Leviticus 16, asking how modern (and particularly Protestant) biases against ritual and priesthood make reading this literature difficult, even if, as he suggests, the New Testament cannot be understood apart from it.
- Nathan MacDonald examines Numbers 20–21 and shows how a careful engagement with recent pentateuchal criticism can shed light on the theological dynamics between Numbers 20–21 and the rest of the book; he also shows how the book of Numbers bridges the Priestly corpus (Genesis–Leviticus) with Deuteronomy, theologically as well as literarily.
- Rob Barrett considers two different texts in Deuteronomy (Deut. 8 and 15:1–11) and argues that the two passages illustrate the book’s vision of covenantal issues of loyalty to Yhwh, the dynamics of blessing and curse, and the nature of the law; in particular, he shows how the claims of Deuteronomy still speak powerfully on matters of economic significance today.

The decision to engage with one or two passages in each book is intended to illuminate what is at stake in theological interpretation in practice, as well as to exemplify (in a range of different ways) the approach that Walter Moberly has often taken in reading biblical books and indeed the larger Old Testament as a whole. And like Moberly, we do so by drawing from multiple interpretive perspectives in order to illuminate the text for the work of Christian theology. Theological interpretation is not just one thing; it includes a coherent set of practices that overlap with many other critical modes of engagement with the biblical text. The chapters that follow seek to lead the reader in understanding the promise and possibilities of consciously theological interpretation. Our hope is that they will in turn provoke further readings of these pentateuchal texts as Christian Scripture.
Further Reading

The Works of Walter Moberly

Walter Moberly is the author of the following books:


In addition he has written many significant articles in the area of theological interpretation. See the appendix to this book for a survey of those writings that focus in some way on the interpretation of the Pentateuch and its individual texts.

Introductions to the Pentateuch

If it is true, as suggested above, that there are many ways of introducing the Pentateuch, then it is also true that a range of books will provide helpfully complementary understandings of the task of reading the Pentateuch well. The following are all strong guides to some of the multiple historical, literary, and theological tasks involved, though some focus more on one aspect than others.


**Translations**

In addition to standard Bible translations, it is also worth knowing about fresh translations of the Pentateuch, including the following:


On any account of Christian (and Jewish) Scripture, the book of Genesis stands out. Whether one approaches the book from the perspectives of popular culture, of science, of ethics, of history, or from any theological angle, the book of Genesis is a text that invites, and has long received, serious attention. It remains a fixture of general public awareness of the Bible long after most of the rest of the Old Testament (and much of the New) has receded from cultural prominence. Its stories retain their power through media ranging from the literary, such as in Steinbeck’s famous East of Eden,1 to the musical, most famously in the long-running Joseph and His Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat. Its simple and elegant account of creation retains its startling value against any and all other accounts of origins, provoking controversy as much today as it doubtless did when it was written. Its notion of humans in the image of God continues to invite all manner of ethical, psychological, and philosophical reflection. And then in the wide-ranging fields of biblical studies, Genesis has long been the proving ground of many theories attempting to explain the origins and development of the Old Testament as a literary collection of texts.

I am delighted to be able to dedicate this chapter to Walter Moberly in grateful thanks for his wisdom and friendship over our several years as colleagues in Durham. In particular, the present chapter is indebted to his many writings on the book of Genesis.

The book’s impact is related to its extraordinary scope, ambition, and placement as the opening text of sacred Scripture. The very familiarity of Genesis can obscure some of its most striking features. It paints on a canvas designed to encompass all of human history, from the beginning to a specific point on the cusp of the narrative of Israel, stopping short of Moses and Israel’s exodus from Egypt. It opens with its narratives of “Adam” (“man”) and “Eve” (“mother of living”), of Cain (“I have gotten”) and Abel (“breath”), of Enosh (“human”) and the sons of God who “take” daughters of men as wives (6:2). Barely six chapters later, a cataclysmic flood appears to reset the narrative and return us to a new beginning, with Noah heading up a new “first family,” as one might say. All of these, along with many other aspects of the opening chapters of the book, play no further role in the Old Testament; they are not even mentioned. And then it becomes specific and focuses on one man, Abram (exalted father), and the trials and successes of him and his family and the generations that follow after him. The book becomes an extended tale of an extended family, focusing on themes of blessing (12:1–3), covenant (chs. 15 and 17), and the pursuit of a land that is barely in view by the end of its closing chapter. Indeed, its lengthy final narrative of Joseph and his brothers relocates the setting to Egypt and seems to put the major hopes of the Israelites in a fairly precarious state, raising instead the issues of how the people of God are to understand and act within the circumstance of finding themselves a long way from home, and equally far from the fulfillment of the promise. Some of these features of the book are key to understanding it well. At the same time, like any great narrative, it will always remain more probing and productive of fresh insight than any analysis of its constituent parts or themes.

Hermeneutical theory offers us the insight that there is a difference to be pondered here between the tasks of understanding Genesis and of explaining Genesis.2 Explanations typically seek to offer an account of the text in such a way that all of it is fitted into the explanatory framework, which can then sometimes replace the text itself with its own paraphrase or theoretical way of looking at it. Thus, for example, one could suggest that the Joseph story was written to respond to life in exile as it was later experienced in the sixth century BCE, and then go on to interpret all the details of the story to fit this hypothesis. In contrast, understandings offer ways of looking at the text that draw out some aspects of its purpose and coherence from some readers’ perspectives, without necessarily prejudging other ways of interpreting that would draw out other aspects. Hence, to understand the Joseph story in the way just noted need not mean that one

2. The difference is theorized in various (incompatible!) ways, but most helpful to my mind is Paul Ricoeur, Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 71–88, who urges that interpretation (of written texts) is the dialectic of both understanding and explanation.
has the correct account of the historical origin of the written narrative. In turn, understandings can often generate further insights into new possible explanations—leading in turn to ways of reading that will also render coherent the text before us. If one pursues explanations alone, key though they are to accurate handling of the textual data, it can tend to offer the spectacle of a “survival of the fittest” as old theories fall by the wayside. In my judgment, theological interest in the scriptural text invites us to focus at least as much on understandings as on explanations, enabling one to move on from an account of how the text came to be before us, toward asking how one might read it well today. In this chapter we will seek the path of theological understanding of (some aspects of) the book of Genesis: inevitably partial and open to development, but nevertheless focused on highlighting aspects of its theological coherence and challenge for today’s readers. In the words of Mark Brett, “The laconic style of Genesis, and its opacities and ambiguities, suggest that we can engage with it only partially: we can never exhaust . . . its meaning.”

Outline of Genesis

The book begins with creation. In particular, it offers a story-poem of a seven-day creation of “the heavens and the earth” (1:1), carefully structured to bring out the order and fittingness of the ecosystem described. The unfortunate chapter break after the creation of humanity on the sixth day obscures the more likely intention of marking the climax of creation as the Sabbath, the day of rest, the seventh and final day of the story (whereas, as the chapters now stand, it is easy to read Genesis 1 as suggesting that humans were the high point). Creation points to God, and God deems it very good. Indeed, so strong is this overall impression that it persists even if one observes that Genesis 1:3–5 leaves the strong sense that the darkness is not good, perhaps as an indicator of the “chaos” against which creation is set.

There follows immediately a phrase that will recur throughout the book: “These are the generations (toledot) of . . .” (2:4). The plural noun toledot derives from the verb yld, “to give birth to or bear,” or, more traditionally, “to beget,” although many modern translations offer a range of words across the book such as “generations,” “descendants,” or “story.” Its elevenfold repetition through the book seems to create a sense of literary episodes occurring in a

carefully structured narrative. The phrase is more or less absent elsewhere.

It is common for analyses of Genesis to rely in some way or other on these “generational markers.” However, despite the obvious appeal of this move on a formal or structural level, it is not straightforwardly apparent how the phrase meaningfully orders the account as a whole. Certainly it serves to underline a coherence between chapters 1 and 11 and 12 and 50, though it has been debated as to whether this is to highlight a continuity between them or rather to draw them into the same frame of reference, for the purpose of emphasizing contrasting perspectives. One function of the “generations of” formula is perhaps to emphasize the focus on the particular people through whom the narrative unfolds, gradually narrowing the notion of a chosen people as the book progresses.

In terms of what takes up the bulk of the narrative, a simpler set of divisions might capture the basic movement of the finished book, whereby chapters 1–11 constitute a so-called primeval narrative, set outside the parameters of Israel as a focus; and then chapters 12–50 offer “ancestral narratives,” focusing on three major figures in one family line: Abraham (chs. 12–25), Jacob (27–35), and Joseph (37–50). Walter Brueggemann structures his commentary around this fourfold division and thematizes it as concerning the core notion of “the call of God.” That call is “sovereign” in the opening chapters; “embraced” by Abraham; “conflicted” in the life and experience of Jacob; and then “hidden” in the Joseph narrative in that, as is often observed, the God who has spoken and interacted with all the major characters thus far is not represented as speaking directly with Joseph. Although one need not want to characterize the four sections in precisely this way, this is a helpful example of a reading that tries to discern some key theological aspects of the text. Of all the characters in the book, Abraham represents the original model of obedience to God’s word alongside receipt of God’s promise; while in certain senses Jacob is Israel personified. For Jacob, one should note especially a narrative like 32:22–32, wherein he “wrestles with God” but will not let his adversary go without being blessed by him (v. 26). During this contest he is specifically given the name “Israel” (v. 28). It has always been something of a puzzle why


6. The only other OT occurrences are Num. 3:1; Ruth 4:18; and (with “their”) 1 Chron. 1:29.

7. See the helpful discussion of Josef Schreiner, “תולדות [toledot],” TDOT 15: 582–88; he works with the standard scholarly assumption that all occurrences of the word are from P.

8. For an exploration of this idea, see Nathan MacDonald, “Did God Choose the Patriarchs? Reading for Election in the Book of Genesis,” in Genesis and Christian Theology, ed. Nathan MacDonald, Mark W. Elliott, and Grant Macaskill (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, forthcoming). MacDonald notes that such a view of the book is more commonly held by Jewish interpreters than Christian ones.

the book ends with such a long, continuous narrative about Joseph, who is only rarely mentioned outside Genesis. However, here it might be observed that the final “generations” marker in the text is at 37:2, and in fact describes this section of the book as “the toledot of Jacob” (which the NRSV deals with by translating as “the story of the family of Jacob”). Perhaps this gives a clearer idea of the way this story is understood to fit into the larger scheme of Genesis, as a story with a “corporate focus.” We shall return to the theme of family below.

Two final notes on this discussion. First, some stories disrupt any attempt to offer an overly simplistic map of the narrative as a whole (such as the story of Tamar and Judah in ch. 38). Second, and more generally, it is odd that so much biblical commentary is concerned to provide analytical charts of how a book is “structured.” The narrative of Genesis does not have a single structure within it, if only because narrative in general does not work that way. On another occasion such an assertion might invite some theoretical justification before the massed ranks of those who like to “chart” or “outline” their biblical books (a practice that probably makes sense mainly on structuralist assumptions). Yet here we shall note only the relatively straightforward point made by Peter Leithart, that “multiple structure is virtually inescapable, especially in narratives and poetry,” and that there are in general a wide variety of possible structures depending on the point being brought into focus.

Genesis in the Canon

Genesis comes first. Its canonical location is both so striking and yet so obvious that one almost forgets to reflect on the significance of its placement. But since the work of Brevard Childs and others, part of the changing frame of reference in Old Testament studies involves adding a “canonical perspective” to all the other ways in which the text invites the reader’s engagement. Such a focus presumes upon the point that the production of the book of Genesis was long and drawn out before finally being brought together at some point in Israel’s history. Sometimes this has taken the form of arguments about the integration of different narrative “cycles” into the finished whole. The model

10. So Terence E. Fretheim, “The Book of Genesis,” in NIB 1:319–674, esp. 592, also 598. Yet this possibility is not particularly supported by a comparison of the other “generations” headings: it is striking that none of the headings mention Abra(ha)m, for example.

11. See the elegant discussion by Peter J. Leithart, Deep Exegesis: The Mystery of Reading Scripture (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2009), 141–71, here 143.

for this process has sometimes focused on the integration of literary sources (as in the JEDP hypothesis), and at other times on the oral traditions by which stories have been passed down in Israel from generation to generation (before being drawn into literary units), the focus of Hermann Gunkel’s significant work on Genesis. On either account, the book we have at the beginning of the canon is the achievement of some redactor(s), and in addition there is clear evidence of editorial adjustment occurring over a period of time, such as in the asides to the readers like Genesis 12:6, “At that time the Canaanites were in the land.” Although this is not the place for a discussion of all these issues, the overall conclusion is clear, as stated by Childs in his introduction to Genesis: “It has become increasingly obvious that a complex literary history preceded the present structure.”

Once granted, such a perspective opens up the possibility of reflecting on why the book has been given the shape and position in the canon that it now occupies. With regard to shape, Childs follows the above observation with “Yet it is also clear that the present order has often assigned a different role to a passage from that which it originally performed.”

With regard to canonical location, the case of Genesis is simplified by the basic observation that it has always and only come first. But as with the analysis of the composition of Genesis, so also with the composition of the whole Old Testament: that Genesis comes first is not the same as saying that it was written first. In fact, as noted above, many of its most famous stories and figures appear either not at all or relatively little in the rest of the Old Testament. One of the simplest ways to account for this historically is to suppose that there was no “book of Genesis” quite as we now have it, standing at the head of any collection of holy scriptures that might have been around in preexilic Israel. Scholars who have dated the book (in its final written form) to the Persian period, perhaps in the fifth century BCE, are offering an account that makes good sense of the fact that these stories are not appealed to elsewhere in the canon. This is particularly true of Genesis 1–11; yet with the notable exception of Psalm 105, relatively few Old Testament texts mention many of the other characters from elsewhere in Genesis either. And where they do, it is not to point to any sort of narrative or structuring of the accounts of their exploits (which in some ways Ps. 105 does do) so much as to draw on what could well be independent “story units” referring, with little narrative context, to Abraham or Jacob. Such references point to the circulation of

13. On JEDP, see the brief account in the introduction to the present volume. Gunkel’s work is found in the introduction to his major 1901 commentary on Genesis translated as Hermann Gunkel, Genesis, trans. Mark E. Biddle, Mercer Library of Biblical Studies (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997).
15. Ibid.
16. Examples include Isa. 51:2 (for Abraham) and Hosea 12:2–4 (for Jacob).
stories that later become part of the canonical Genesis, but not to an early completed book of Genesis. All this shows that canonical readings are deeply implicated in various sorts of historical investigation, and in the process they open up productive theological lines of inquiry. A canonical approach suggests that instead of just “being first,” and being a book of “beginnings” somewhat by default, the book of Genesis is deliberately first, placed there for (perhaps) some theological reasons.

How then might one reflect on the book’s present canonical location? We may consider several examples of how some theological issues are thrown into sharper relief when seen this way. Creation itself is an obvious example. Whatever one concludes with regard to the historical rise of a belief in creation in Israel, which is usually dated relatively late in its development, and which takes different forms at different times, the net effect of beginning Scripture with Genesis 1 is to realign the overall perspective in strongly creation-focused terms. In the midst of many other things that a careful reader of the Old Testament will want to say about creation, the inherently peaceful and ordered account of Genesis 1 is given an undeniable prominence by its canonical location.17 Second, Genesis is somewhat unusual in the Old Testament for its largely familial frame of reference. Does this suggest an emphasis on the significance of theological reflection on family life? We shall consider this particular topic later.

Other points of theological reflection are also given canonical emphasis. Is the book, and especially chapters 1–11, designed to provoke the reader of Scripture to retain a wider (global?) frame of reference as the setting of the story of Israel? For much of Israel’s history, it may have been conceptually straightforward to think of YHWH as the God of Israel, and indeed of the land of Israel, but around the time of the exile, one can see how Israel’s sense of its own position among the nations of the world would have been a pressing question. It is striking to reflect that Israel’s Scriptures did not begin with any claim that it was the first nation, or the original location of God’s walking the earth, or the location of the creation of the first people. Other examples of canonical emphasis could be given: consider the way that having Genesis first foregrounds questions of blessing, covenant, land, pilgrimage, and so forth.

Another level at which a canonical analysis is relevant concerns the ways in which Genesis is deliberately taken up in the New Testament. Christian and Jewish perspectives clearly pull in somewhat different directions at this point.18 Here, in contrast to its historically late position in the Old Testament (relatively speaking), Genesis does stand at the head of Scripture when the


18. One might suggest that they part company entirely, but it is preferable to say that what remains “canonical” in Christian terms is treated as part of the (still-illuminating) later reception of the texts in Jewish terms.
New Testament writers think their way theologically through the issues at hand. Genesis 1 finds resonance in various discussions of creation in the New Testament, notably John 1. The phrase “image of God” is taken up and applied to Jesus (Col. 1:15). Paul draws considerable theological mileage out of a comparison between Adam as the first man and Christ as a second Adam (Rom. 5:12–21; 1 Cor. 15). First Timothy 2 makes notorious use of Adam and Eve in its discussion of men and women. First John 3 reflects upon the Cain and Abel story. Both Jesus and the letters of Peter try to impress upon their hearers the urgency of the present moment by appeal to the “days of Noah” and the story of the flood (Matt. 24:36–44//Luke 17:26–27; 1 Pet. 3:18–22; 2 Pet. 2 and 3). There are also several other references and allusions to aspects of Genesis 1–11 in the New Testament, such as Jesus’ reference to Genesis 2:24 in his discussion of divorce (Matt. 19:5//Mark 10:7), or the sending out of the seventy (or seventy-two) in Luke 10, which perhaps envisages a geographical mission to match the spread of the table of nations from Genesis 10. With regard to the later ancestral narratives, space does not permit an account of the major significance of Abraham in the New Testament. While no other characters are discussed at anything like that length, there is significant reflection upon the characters of Sarah, Hagar, Lot, Jacob, Esau, Isaac, and even, in Hebrews 5–7, Melchizedek. In addition to all of these references, we also find two narrative recounts of much of the overall story of Genesis, in Acts 7:2–16 and Hebrews 11:2–22, each bringing out different elements for their own purposes.

So embedded is this network of references and resonances throughout Scripture that it is impossible to imagine the Bible today without the theological contribution made by its first book.

What Keeps Genesis in Focus? Genesis and Its Readers

Several factors have kept Genesis as the focus of scholarly attention through the history of its interpretation. First, some of these factors are concerns driven by the world in which the book’s interpreters live. So, for instance, the Genesis accounts of creation pitch it squarely into the arena now occupied by perennial science-versus-faith debates, which provoke ever-renewed attention to matters of chronology and geology as they are illuminated (or otherwise!) in the text. With regard to the later ancestral narratives, space does not permit an account of the major significance of Abraham in the New Testament. While no other characters are discussed at anything like that length, there is significant reflection upon the characters of Sarah, Hagar, Lot, Jacob, Esau, Isaac, and even, in Hebrews 5–7, Melchizedek. In addition to all of these references, we also find two narrative recounts of much of the overall story of Genesis, in Acts 7:2–16 and Hebrews 11:2–22, each bringing out different elements for their own purposes.

So embedded is this network of references and resonances throughout Scripture that it is impossible to imagine the Bible today without the theological contribution made by its first book.

19. The contested nature of some NT appeals to the OT should not obscure the nevertheless impressive quantity of such allusions. For overviews of the various issues on a case-by-case basis, see G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, eds., Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007).

foregrounded in the flood narrative—as matters of more or less direct concern to those in today’s world. This is true even for those who harbor no direct interests or opinions on matters of Judeo-Christian identity and tradition, but who nevertheless live every day with exactly these sorts of wider issues impinging on their consciousness. In this sense, Genesis 1–11 at least remains a text of relevance to all, alongside other accounts of creation and its ongo-
ing significance that survive from anywhere else. One could broaden this second area with reference to many particular matters of ethical significance that continue to elicit dialogue with specific texts from the whole of Genesis. One thinks, for example, of the ongoing attention paid to the Sodom story (Gen. 19) in attempts to understand the evaluation of sexual activity in same-
sex settings. Whatever one concludes about this text or its relevance at the end of such a study, the fact is that scholarship persists with such endeavors.21

A third factor securing the continued focus of attention on Genesis is its relevance to interfaith discussions. Insofar as the Qur’an interrelates with Judeo-Christian Scripture, it is the book of Genesis that is especially in view. On the simplest level, Abraham is a figure of huge significance to Jews, Christians, and Muslims. A probing study of the way in which this significance is drawn out in the three differing faith traditions is offered by Jon Levenson, who ably shows that each tradition (perhaps unsurprisingly) focuses on the aspects of the Abraham story that best fit its own framework for understanding life and faith before God in more general terms. Thus Christians, following Paul (and perhaps often Luther), tend to emphasize that the promise precedes the righteous requirements of obedience found in the Torah, with the result that faith in the promise and the life required in response are sometimes contrasted rather than held together. Jewish scholars, however, have often focused on pre-
cursors of just such righteous requirements as they are found in the Abraham story (e.g., as in Gen. 18:17–19). Levenson concludes, “Efforts to refashion Abraham in the image of the religions that claim him have been the norm.”22

Genesis thus remains a text at the very center of the ongoing interfaith study project known as “Scriptural Reasoning,” where Christian, Jewish, and Islamic scholars gather around scriptural texts together.23 This is only likely to become an increasing emphasis amid the developing religious and political realities of the twenty-first-century world.


23. A useful orientation to this project is given in David E. Ford and C. C. Pecknold, eds., The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006).
However, there are other reasons why Genesis remains a focus of scholarly attention—reasons driven by patient attention to the text itself, rather than by other commitments in the interpreter’s frame of reference today. Among the many such issues, it is to those of a more overtly theological nature that we now turn.

Some Theological Interests of Genesis

The book of Genesis has been unusually well served for theologically oriented commentary, not just through the centuries but also notably in the heyday of the modern period. Twentieth-century commentaries by Westermann, von Rad, Sarna, Brueggemann, and Fretheim could all, in their different ways, be called theologically interested. What is it that has facilitated such engagement? Is it partly due to the fact that in Genesis, God is a direct actor in so much of the narrative? While this does in turn raise many probing questions about how best to understand the text when it talks of God’s action and speech (and indeed God’s speech as action), it does mean that commentary on Genesis, at least when it has wanted to stay within the contours of the world imagined by the text, has tended to contain a pronounced theological element.

Recently this has taken the form of a full-scale theological reflection on the book in Russell Reno’s “Theological Commentary,” which models a practice of thinking through the text of Genesis in a manner that self-consciously explores how Genesis both illuminates and is illuminated by Christian tradition. Reno’s discussion ranges over points where the two are in notable harmony (e.g., with respect to the significance accorded to the Sabbath), as well as points of tension or disharmony—one thinks of his spirited discussion of “creation ex nihilo” as a framework for rightly reading Genesis 1. Reno’s work is interesting because it explicitly seeks to harness Genesis to the church’s theological task. Perhaps it is more of a work of theology in dialogue with aspects of the text of Genesis rather than a commentary per se, and arguably it is none the worse for that.

However, if the goal is theological interpretation of the text rather than just theology in dialogue with the text, it is important to understand the integrated

25. Russell R. Reno, Genesis, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2010).
26. Ibid., 60–64.
27. Ibid., 39–46. Levenson, Creation, perhaps still offers the best way of thinking about how Gen. 1 might be read as a creation ex nihilo text, by rethinking what “nothing” might mean (cf. n. 4 above).
nature of this task as it pertains to theological and exegetical study. Theological interest, in short, need not be understood as bypassing critical engagement with the text. In his introduction to the theology of the book, Walter Moberly suggests that the various dimensions of the interpretive task be woven together in what he labels “a” (rather than “the”) canonical approach: “The most fruitful approach for theology, I suggest, is to try to recapture the traditional premodern issue, which relates to the role of Genesis as it has been preserved within the Pentateuch, in a way that also takes seriously the religio-historical insights of characteristic modern scholarship, which relates to the possible origins, development, and ancient function of the Genesis text.”

Such an observation still leaves open many different angles of approach, as we shall see in a brief discussion of some themes of theological interest in reading Genesis. We shall first consider two of the many topics brought before us in the text of Genesis: family and blessing. Much also depends, though, on the frameworks within which one is reading the book. So we then consider two such broader concerns where the presenting issue is in some ways brought into focus by reading the book in a broader context: first with regard to a comparison between God and the life of faith in Genesis as against the rest of the Old Testament; and second with regard to the unusual nature of Genesis 1–11, which we shall consider as a prologue, or introduction, to the whole of Scripture.

**Genesis and the Family**

We have already recognized the unusual prominence given to the family in the book. In his major commentary Claus Westermann drew out interesting aspects of this in his overview of the “patriarchal narratives,” which make up chapters 12–50. He suggested that the three main textual units we identified earlier (relating broadly to Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph) represent three stages, deliberately composed together in this way, that draw out different aspects of “what was permanent and typical of the family”: the focus in the Abrahamic narratives is on the parent-child relationship, with a theme of life and death (and in particular, barrenness); then in the Jacob-Esau section is the turn to consider the many conflicting aspects of the brother-brother relationship; and finally in the Joseph narrative is the additional dimension of one brother’s relating to many others, alongside concerns with kingship and state. Linked to the familial setting of the narratives are many of the distinctive themes of Genesis in the Old Testament: that the father figure in the family serves in

29. Gender sensitivity—and the fact that these narratives so closely follow not only the fathers but also the mothers of Israel—has led to this term “ancestral narratives” in recent discussion.
working guidelines for how one might envisage the practices of theological interpretation at the present time.

First, it is important to take the text with full imaginative seriousness. The emphasis is to fall equally on the *imagination* and the *seriousness*. This means working with the text’s details, its oddities, and its unwillingness to fit into paradigms we ourselves might find rather more straightforward or congenial. But in seeking to enter imaginatively into the world of the text, and in particular in being willing to follow where the text leads, the interpreter is working on the assumption that there should be “no exception whatever to the principle that any reading must be sustained or overturned by generally recognized canons of exegesis.”

Second, however, the question of what it means to read well requires more than just the deployment of exegetical methods, no matter how well attuned any such methods may be. The situation of the interpreter of the biblical text is also a key element, and this immediately raises the question of the purposes for which any reading of the Bible is carried out. In a key quotation at the beginning of his striking work *The Old Testament of the Old Testament*, Moberly suggests that “the crucial question, which is prior to questions of method and sets the context for them, is that of purpose and goal. To put it simply, *how we use the Bible depends on why we use the Bible*. In practice, many of the disagreements about how are, in effect, disagreements about why, and failure to recognize this leads to endless confusion.”

If this is so, and we think it is, then our interests as interpreters of Christian Scripture will be shaped in certain significant ways by Christian theological concerns. What is envisaged here is a dialogue between the theological thinking brought to the text and the pressure exerted by the text itself, pressure that in turn will shape and reshape that theology. Despite frequent criticisms to the contrary, this does not mean that theological interpretation is the taming of the text to deliver precisely those theological conclusions that the interpreter already held most dear before reading the text. The goal, rather, is a kind of theologically creative work that is shaped in key ways by Scripture. As is often the case, examples of this practice perhaps do a better job of defining what it is than any attempt to map out particular criteria in advance. Walter Moberly’s students have long been encouraged to seek such examples in the works of theologians such as Nicholas Lash, Rowan Williams, or—in certain

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the priestly role, being the one to bless or withhold blessing; and that worship and sacrifice can take place wherever and however the head of the family chooses. As von Rad expressed it, the family is the common factor of all these narratives, and the family in Genesis is understood as “the total sphere of all human communal life; it is the framework of all human activity, politics and economics as well as religion.” Though von Rad’s interests lay elsewhere, in tracing the tradition-history of these family reflections, he did thereby powerfully describe how these family narratives had been molded and shaped through their transmission. Thus in Genesis they formed a literary work that looked back precisely in order to provoke the readers’ thoughts about their own lives with God. Such texts then “become the witness of a past, and at the same time completely contemporary, act of God.”

As it happens, the Genesis witness to a God at work in human families takes on unexpected resonance in today’s world, not least in part due to the ways in which Christian readers shape their preunderstanding of the text with strong convictions about family life, or “family values,” as the politically loaded term has it. In his article “Genesis and Family Values,” David Petersen took precisely this theme in his reading of Genesis as a kind of “family novel.” The first book of Holy Scripture, he notes, does not look like much of a mandate for what often passes as “family values” today, and yet it still speaks profoundly to many of the same concerns that do motivate current reflection on the family. Petersen draws out three points in particular: first, Genesis values humanity as a family, in an expansive (nonnuclear) view (referring in particular to 12:1–3); second, Genesis emphasizes the continuity of the family over time; and third, throughout there is a noteworthy focus on conflict and resolution. This last point is clearly one with tremendous resonance today. Petersen comments, pointedly, that for all the moral problems readers today have with Old Testament texts, the book of Genesis steadfastly testifies to family conflict resolution without physical violence in a world where such resolution is repeatedly much needed.

It is also often noted that the narrative development through Genesis does not smoothly follow the expected line of family progression, from father to firstborn son at the turn of each generation. Rather, the expected recipient of any such blessing is often not the one who turns out to be favored, and frequently Genesis tells the story of the “unfavored” figure first before turning to its next focal figure: Ishmael before Isaac, Esau before Jacob, in a pattern found in chapters 1–11 as well (e.g., the story of the wicked people of the earth in ch. 6 before the story of righteous Noah and his family). This device even

32. Ibid., 35.
33. David L. Petersen, “Genesis and Family Values,” Journal of Biblical Literature 124 (2005): 5–23. This was his 2004 SBL presidential address, perhaps rightly underlining the significance of this topic for contemporary theological reflection.
extends to the book’s genealogical interludes. The notion that family life contains frequent reversals, surprises, or shifts in the balance of relationships, which is tied inextricably with reflection on God’s freedom to elect whomever God pleases, may also contribute to reflection on the kinds of issues in family life that Petersen’s study considers.

There is no space to reflect comparably on the ways in which Genesis responds to the book’s genealogical interludes. The notion that family life contains frequent reversals, surprises, or shifts in the balance of relationships, which is tied inextricably with reflection on God’s freedom to elect whomever God pleases, may also contribute to reflection on the kinds of issues in family life that Petersen’s study considers.

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the calling of Abraham (and then Israel) is seen to be a key instrument in the unfolding plan of a God whose overall desire is always to bless everyone. Jewish scholars in particular, though also several Christian ones, have responded that such a reading sees God’s election of Israel in *instrumental* terms, as a means to an end, and rather neglects the blessing in itself, which was uniquely Israel’s, as God’s elect people.\(^{38}\) The “missiological” (or at least Christian) readings that want to see 12:1–3 leading directly on to its Christian fulfillment can sometimes be concerned with tracing how that promise to Abraham is in frequent jeopardy through the book and remains largely unfulfilled by the end. This offers a helpful way of following the narrative through its different twists and turns, in the familial saga that then plays out, either leading toward or pulling away from the resolution of the “plot” set in motion by the promise to Abraham. Ironically, one of the elements that can become lost in such perspectives is the present reality of blessing as it is experienced (in Genesis, yet also more generally).\(^{39}\)

Blessing is a major theme in Genesis. Not only is Abraham blessed in 12:2 in terms of becoming “a great nation,” such that in him “all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (12:2–3),\(^{40}\) but there also are many other instances of specific divine and familial blessing in the narratives. Notable points of focus on blessing include the wrestling encounter where Jacob is named Israel (32:26, 29), and climactically in two full chapters where Jacob is engaged in blessing his sons (chs. 48–49, noting esp. 49:28).

Yet blessing remains one of those words more easily understood than defined.\(^{41}\) To bless is to convey some kind of benefit, but the focus is perhaps less on the benefit and more on the life or relationship thus benefited. Indeed, blessing can sometimes be the enriching of a life by the very act of stating or emphasizing a relationship. In their dynamic celebration of “theology as praise,” Hardy and Ford write movingly of what it means to bless God: “Blessing is the comprehensive praise and thanks that returns all reality to God, and so lets all be taken up into the spiral of mutual appreciation and delight which is the fulfilment of creation. For the rabbis of Jesus’ time, to use anything of creation without blessing God was to rob God. Only the person receiving with thanks really received from God.”\(^{42}\) Several aspects of blessing are in the foreground here: mutuality

\(^{38}\) For a full discussion and review of the options, see Moberly, *Theology of the Book of Genesis*, 141–61.


\(^{40}\) Or “bless themselves.” All commentaries rehearse this translation crux, which need not detain us here.

\(^{41}\) The next four paragraphs draw on my “Speech-Act Theory,” in *Words and the Word: Explorations in Biblical Interpretation and Literary Theory*, ed. David G. Firth and Jamie A. Grant (Nottingham, UK: Apollos, 2008), 75–110, here esp. 82–85.

and receptivity among them. To receive a blessing may involve material things or offspring, but even these would be a blessing only if accompanied by the transformation of spirit and attitude that allows them to be received with thanks. In general, we may say that whether something or some event is a blessing depends significantly (though not exclusively) on how it is perceived. This is even true of those archetypal elements of Old Testament blessing: land and offspring.

This notion of blessing helps to make sense of the story of Isaac’s blessing of his sons in Genesis 27. Isaac offers to bless Esau (v. 4), but Rebekah contrives to have Jacob appear before him under the pretense of being Esau in order to acquire this paternal blessing for himself. Isaac, thereby fooled, duly gives his blessing to Jacob, including the declarative “Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers” (v. 29). At that point Esau enters, and Jacob’s deception is uncovered. “Bless me, me also, father!” cries Esau (v. 34). But in a move that easily puzzles many interpreters, Isaac replies, “Your brother came deceitfully, and he has taken away your blessing” (v. 35). Many modern readers then quickly side with Esau: given that this seems so unfair of Jacob, why can his father not simply reverse or restore the blessing to its intended recipient? Failing that, can he at least have another blessing in any case? It is this last, less satisfactory, option that Isaac feels able to bestow.

The reason for this “resolution” is to be found in the performative nature of blessing rather than in any supposedly primitive view of “word-magic.”43 Blessing is more like an aspect of a relationship than the awarding of a medal. In the Olympics, awards can be given and taken away, as Job might have said. But in Genesis 27, no convention was apparently in place for the withdrawal of the blessing; one reason for this is that with Jacob’s having fled the scene, it is not actually possible for him to be recalled to account in order to be told that he has acted deceitfully. As Thiselton observes, “To give the same blessing to Esau would be like saying ‘I do’ to a second bride,” an example that happens to make it very clear that such an impossibility is socially constructed rather than logically impossible, given the existence of polygamous practice in Genesis, as indeed seen in Esau’s subsequent action in Genesis 28:9!44

Jacob, however, has escaped with an ill-gotten blessing: rather like stolen cash, it is not useless but is difficult to deploy as part of a life of praise and thanksgiving to God, with all the self-involving implications that has for him. One implication that the narrator surely intends for us to notice is that when Jacob finds himself in the east, at his uncle Laban’s house, he works seven years to wed the attractive Rachel, only to wake the next morning and find that he has wed Leah instead (29:25). But just as the performative act of blessing cannot be undone, neither can the performative act of entering into

44. Ibid., 294.
a marriage covenant, at least not then, or even today on the morning after the vows. Commentators have tended to find this less puzzling than the incident in chapter 27. This is surely because the conventions of saying “I do” (or its ancient equivalent) are better understood than the conventions of blessing.

In due course in the Old Testament, blessing becomes the priestly prerogative, most famously in the Aaronic blessing of Numbers 6:24–26. The familial focus of Genesis, as we saw above, means that it is the head of the house who tends to bless in Genesis. Arguably one of the valuable features of these narratives for today’s world is the significance they attach to blessing, or perhaps to the priestly dimension of human existence as shown in the interactions between these characters.

**Genesis and Torah: “The Old Testament of the Old Testament”**

On a straightforward surface-level reading of Genesis in the context of the ongoing scriptural narrative that proceeds on through Exodus, the Pentateuch, and beyond, one cannot help but notice that the kinds of practices and faith commitments embodied by the lead characters of Genesis are notably different from those found elsewhere in the Old Testament (or indeed in the New Testament). Of course, the framework of life with Yhwh is not set forth in terms of the torah or the requirement of torah obedience, since the story has not reached that point yet. But even more so, the ancestors build local altars and worship at sacred trees (and go on their relaxed way); they meet God in person for afternoon tea or indeed wrestle with him; and apparently there are even some household gods among the family baggage at times, although the texts want to make it clear that these are not directly the possession of the patriarchal figure himself. Such characteristics of the text have inspired the rather engaging label “ecumenical bonhomie” to describe this apparently relaxed notion of the life of faith as it is found in Genesis. One cannot imagine such an attitude accompanying later descriptions of major figures trying to pass off their wives as their sisters, for example.

Walter Moberly has offered one compelling way of accounting for this phenomenon, characterizing Genesis as “the Old Testament of the Old Testament.” In essence, Genesis is to the rest of the Old Testament as the Old Testament is to the New Testament.

45. Though note that one of the points of Levenson, “Conversion of Abraham,” is that torah obedience is there for those with eyes to see it.

46. See, e.g., the mysterious terafim mentioned in Gen. 31:19, 34, 35.

47. This oft-cited phrase was coined by Gordon J. Wenham in his article “The Religion of the Patriarchs,” in Essays on the Patriarchal Narratives, ed. Alan R. Millard and Donald J. Wiseman (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity, 1980), 157–88, here 184.

Testament is to the New Testament in later Christian thinking. Thus one finds a mix of discontinuity and continuity, between the “old” text and the later one. The first text remains part of the one sacred narrative of God’s people but is not straightforwardly determinative of contemporary faith and practice. Moberly offers an account of how the classic pentateuchal issues of the name of God, in key texts such as Exodus 3 and 6, as well as several other features of the book of Genesis, can all be understood within the framework of Genesis being an earlier period in the divine economy. It is a stimulating account of both Genesis and of the theological construction of Scripture (both Jewish and Christian). The result is to let Genesis speak in its own voice yet also as a coherent part of the whole of Scripture.

**Genesis 1–11 as an Introduction to Scripture**

So far our discussion of theological elements of Genesis has proceeded mainly with reference to aspects of the ancestral narratives. Yet it would not be difficult to fill a whole book with a discussion entirely focused on chapters 1–11. However, as we have seen, the main themes and concerns of these chapters, including, most obviously, creation itself, are not straightforwardly present in the rest of the book (or the rest of the Old Testament) in anything like the same way. Here I suggest that this may be deliberate, and that one helpful way to make sense of this strangeness of Genesis 1–11 is as a “prologue” or introduction to canonical Scripture.

Andreas Schüle has offered a fine study of Genesis 1–11 titled “the prologue of the Hebrew Bible.” His frame of reference is that Genesis 1–11 is inextricably tied to the Scripture that follows it and exhibits what can be called a “canonical consciousness.” In historical terms, he sees the work of the final Priestly redactor (P) crafting chapters 1–11 as an introduction to the forthcoming story, meaning the rest of the Hebrew Bible. The role of P in bringing together the final Pentateuch does lend a certain historical plausibility to this proposal. It offers a resolution to the most basic conundrum about Genesis 1–11: that its main points of reference do not recur through the rest of the Old Testament. Further, it is no surprise that the “introduction” should be written last, as any essay writer can attest. More particularly, it fits historically to suggest that the context shaping Genesis 1–11 is Babylon. Schüle explores Genesis 1–11 in a theological vein, alert to the dialogues it sets up with the rest of Jewish Scripture. He works with a notion of P’s drawing together prior traditions, which results in his talking of “theologies” of the text, those of

49. Andreas Schüle, *Der Prolog der hebräischen Bibel: Der literar- und theologiegeschichtliche Diskurs der Urgeschichte* (Genesis 1–11), Abhandlungen zur Theologie des Alten und Neuen Testaments 86 (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag Zurich, 2006).

50. We return to this point below in studying the Babel story in Gen. 11.
the P and the non-P material, and he does suggest that there are limits to the topics on which the resulting canonical “introduction” is willing to enter into dialogue (such as eschatology and nationalism, for example, two key scriptural themes that are more or less absent from Gen. 1–11).51

I suggest that Schüle’s essentially historical and literary-critical “canonical” thesis might be adapted into a general hermeneutical claim about Genesis’s role in the two-Testament Christian Bible as a whole. The hermeneutical function served by Genesis 1–11 for the Christian reader is also that of “prologue,” but it need not be because the author of any part of the text (e.g., P) thought in those terms. Rather, it is a result of the final location of these chapters at the entrance to the Christian Bible. The result of this placement is that one reads the stories of chapters 1–11 with (at least) a double reference: they describe characters moving in the narrative world of Genesis, in the strange time before Abraham and the beginnings of Israel, yet they also refer forward, as it were, to highlight themes and questions that the reader knows well from later developments. Schüle’s argument is in effect a particular version of this idea: the original readers of P would have had these later developments in mind as they read Genesis 1–11. Arguably, though, the hermeneutical effect is the same with regard to today’s reader who brings her or his own experience to the text, along with the experiences of readers down through the centuries.

The questions engaged by chapters 1–11 range over such topics as what it means to be made in the image of God; what sin is, or why we sin or hate or murder; how God will respond to this; and what one needs to do or be to escape such judgment. It is worth suggesting that on the whole it is precisely part of the function of Genesis 1–11 to raise these questions and provoke the reader to reflect on them, rather than to answer them. Forewarned, or at least foreprovoked, the reader then comes to the rest of the Bible with certain key questions in place as hermeneutical guides for the subsequent reading. In some cases, such as with “the image of God,” it will not be until the New Testament that the Christian reader is encouraged to move toward a more direct resolution of the question of what this actually means.52

**Conclusion**

We have considered a range of theological interests that are relevant to any reading of the book of Genesis as the first book of Scripture. Some of these interests are straightforward themes found in the text. Others arise as we