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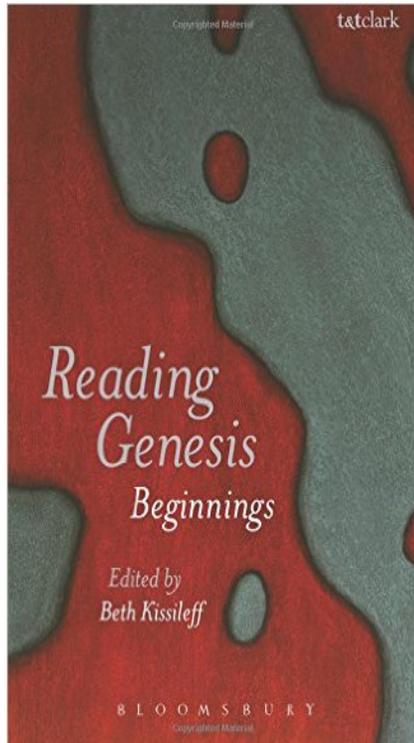
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Reading Genesis

Beginnings



Editor(s): Beth Kissileff

New York, NY: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, February 2016. 304 pages. \$29.95. Paperback. ISBN 9780567251268.

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Review

In *Reading Genesis: Beginnings*, Beth Kissilef has brought together twenty-two essays written from very diverse fields, by scholars she either knew personally or whom she contacted directly for the purpose. The contributions draw on insights from psychology, law, political science, literature, art, and other scholarly disciplines, creating an original constellation of modern readings and receptions of one of the central texts of the Bible. This collection lives as much from each single perspective as it does from their juxtapositions. It introduces readers to the vibrancy and urgency of the reception of Genesis for contemporary culture, offering a welcome addition to biblical studies. It demonstrates how the interpretation of this important biblical book continues to transcend the boundaries of religious studies, influencing the personal lives and (spiritual) experiences of many members of Western society.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the book is the diversity of its contributions. Essayists include lawyer Alan M. Dershowitz, author Ruth Westheimer, painter and sculptor Toni Kahn, novelists Rebecca Newberger Goldstein and Dara Horn, critics Ilan Stavans and Sander Gilman, psychologist Seth Greenberg, historian Russell Jacoby, poets Alicia Suskin Ostriker and Jacqueline Osherow, chef and food writer Joan Nathan, and the editor's father Harry Reisman Kissileff, who is a physiologist and author. Beth Kissilef points out in her introduction that her intention for the volume grew out of her interest in Jewish exegesis and (psychoanalytical) literary studies (1). Each contributor offers a personal perspective on the topic.

Thus, the editor's father examines the motivation of consumption with the aim to illuminate what might have drawn Eve to the fruit; Stavans investigates the story of the Tower of Babel; Westheimer contributes an essay on taking leave, yearning, and the wife of Lot; Dershowitz offers a piece on justice related to Genesis 18; Geoffrey P. Miller examines our notion of contract and explains why Isaac in Genesis 27 cannot rescind the blessing he has proffered to the Jacob cloaked in Esau's garments.

Overall, the collection offers a balanced selection of important themes that may be taken as points of entry into the fifty chapters of Genesis. Most importantly, it does not fall into the trap of focusing on only the first chapters (though, as is to be expected, the most famous and widely-known stories, such as the binding of Isaac, have an important place in the collection, and Genesis 2–3 are the focus of the first four contributions). It would have been helpful had the editor commented on her choice to focus predominantly on Jewish contributors. In fact, the question concerning what defines the uniquely Jewish approach to this topic, and how it differs from various Christian views, for instance, is not beyond the theme of the volume, especially given its emphasis on diverse approaches.

This very readable work—that does not shy away from polemics (cf. 72) or blasphemy (cf. 63)—is not only entertaining; it also succeeds in paving the way into reading Genesis for both the scholar and the non-specialist. The book concludes with an informative list of contributors, a useful index of biblical passages and characters, as well as an "index of names and concepts" (271–288).

In demonstrating the ubiquity and widespread influence of Genesis in contemporary culture, this book merits a broad readership and a wide academic reception, especially since the topic is not only treated from the perspective of professionals, but also approached from new and uncommon points of view. Therefore, it succeeds in making some of the many different Genesis interpretations familiar to the general public. Instead of calling for academic outreach as a unilateral endeavor, such collections remind us of the pressing need for broader dialogue on matters seemingly impervious to lay perspectives. This holds especially true for theological questions, which have a direct relevance to the lives of many people outside of academia, as well as in unexpected areas within academia itself.

This original volume succeeds in introducing the reader to the pitfalls and neuralgic points of Genesis studies. It not only invites people from diverse fields and backgrounds to read the first book of the Bible, but also encourages people to ask how the many conundrums presented by the text will be resolved by future readers. One can only wish that many people read this interesting and entertaining book to test their preconceptions and broaden their general knowledge of Genesis and its rich and thriving reception history.

About the Reviewer(s):

Philipp Reisner is Visiting Lecturer in American Studies at Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf, Germany.

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About the Author(s)/Editor(s)/Translator(s):

Beth Kissileff is the author of the forthcoming novel, *Questioning Return*. She is at work on a second novel and a scholarly study of Biblical misunderstandings between humans and God. She has received fellowships from the Corporation of Yaddo and the National Endowment for the Humanities and has taught at Carleton College, the University of Minnesota, Smith College and Mount Holyoke College.

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