



Genesis as Living Word

If this is another biblical issue of *Word & World* it must be time for the next installment of my running editorial pondering the level of mutual hostility that emerges in the methodological battles among biblical scholars. Of course, if the word of God is at stake, then the passion level may not be so hard to understand; still, I can't help but think it is often misplaced.

Three of my Old Testament teachers wrote Genesis commentaries. The first, Herbert C. Leupold, found that "higher literary criticism" had "wrought incalculable confusion and still is the bane of fruitful investigations in this field" (*Exposition of Genesis*, 1942, p. 13). Daily we seminarians fought with him about methods and daily we learned from him great insights into biblical texts. The second, Gerhard von Rad, wrote about "the misplaced scientific method" that refused to recognize the "spirituality" (*Geistigkeit*) in the Genesis narratives (*Genesis*, 1961, p. 11). We graduate students readily agreed because we were learning from him how to use scientific method in the service of hearing the theological claims of the texts. The third, Claus Westermann, wrote that through all the hard years of rigorous academic labor on the book, Genesis "has been a living word to me" (*Genesis I-11*, 1984, p. x). Those of us who knew him knew this was true because we had heard him preach and experienced his pastoral concern. Now, friends and colleagues write new Genesis commentaries, employing new literary or post-critical methods to seek theological insight from the texts. And if not they, then certainly some other advocates of the newer methods speak (curiously, I think) with considerable venom against their own teachers. One sometimes wonders how, coming from such "impossible" backgrounds, they ever got interested in the Bible at all.

What all this suggests to me is that getting Genesis "right" (or any biblical book, for that matter) is probably not a matter of finding the "right" method. I don't say this lightly, for I acknowledge the validity and importance of methodological questions. (I did go to school in Heidelberg!) There is no doubt that some methods are better than others, especially for particular purposes. Yet, it is apparent that methods alone will not protect us from error or initiate us into the divine mysteries. Perhaps we expect too much of them and thus fight too much over them. Certainly we talk too much about methods and too little about texts. Is an insistence that the right method will—depending on our interest—either enable us to hear the true original message in the text or enable us to hear the true present word of God through the text not an insistence on our own control over the text? We act as though it is up to us to get it right, to fine tune the method so the message

can be heard. This is especially problematic when applied to the theological dimensions of the text, to hearing it as authority. Maybe Luther was right after all, that we cannot by our own

reason or strength master these things. Maybe the Spirit has spoken and will speak through teachers and readings and methods that vary considerably. Maybe the power is in the word itself rather than the method.

If that is true, then the purpose of any method will be to get out of the way of the text, to enable us to hear it anew. Many of us know from our own experience that asking historical questions has done that for us and still does it for many students. Many of us have seen the same thing happen with literary methods and with the concern for the reader's response. We have, of course, also seen historical methods run roughshod over the text, just as we have seen literary methods turn the biblical witness into nothing but general human truth, and reader's responses to show us much more about readers than about texts. So, methods won't save us. They are mere tools. Our task is to use them appropriately, creatively, and well, to recognize that different cuts at the text may need different tools, and finally to admire the text, not our work on it or our control over it. *Word & World* wants to keep after such things, both in this issue and in its subsequent attempts to understand and to present the scriptures. We keep at it not finally to get it right, but to keep us and our readers focused on the scriptures, which we believe to be the bearer of the divine word, the cradle of Christ.

Following *Patricia Beattie Jung's* *Word & World* lecture (see following editorial), the material on Genesis begins with *Gordon Wenham's* retelling of the narrative as a simple but revolutionary story, one that tells us surprising things about God and human beings and that offers important insights for gracious living. *Sean McEvenue* wants to read biblical texts with both academic integrity and theological interest. He argues that a critical use of literary methodology will be more theologically productive than a critical historical methodology.

"Creation and fall" has become a common word pair in Christian theology. But does it legitimately trace its heritage to Genesis? Was there a fall in Genesis 3, and, if so, was it down or up? *Terence Fretheim's* reading of this text draws it productively into the contemporary theological conversation.

Wendell Frerichs marks the birth of Isaac as the central text in the history of God's promise to bless and multiply his people. Frerichs sees God's continued faithfulness to that promise, in the ongoing birth of Jewish descendents of the ancient ancestors, as an essential ingredient of biblical faith.

Joan Ross-Burstall proposes a reading of the Leah and Rachel story that is based in the flow and structure of the lament psalms. When the narrative uses psalmic structures, she argues, it imports more than words; contexts and theological connotations come as well.

James C. Bangsund draws an important lesson from his doctoral dissertation on the consolation of the firstborn in Genesis: both Israel and the nations are blessed by God. His work will be provocative for those who engage in and think about the church's global mission.

Comparing Genesis to other literature enables *Hugh C. White* to distinguish

between the desire-driven narrative of Genesis 2-3 and the promise-led narrative of Genesis 12ff. In White's analysis, Abram emerges as a new type of hero, one defined by faith.

Paradoxically, *James Arne Nestingen* employs historical-critical analysis to reconstruct the text of Luther's *Lectures on Genesis* and to present the reformer's exegetical method while, at the same time, registering appreciation of Luther's often ahistorical theological reading of the

biblical narrative. This juxtaposition of methods may be a fitting symbol of the state of contemporary biblical and historical work.

For readers unfamiliar with the Qur'an, *Mark Hillmer* offers a resource article describing and briefly interpreting the Qur'an's use of material also found in Genesis. In *Face to Face*, *James Limburg* argues that preaching the text still requires attention to the ancient historical context, while *Diane Jacobson* emphasizes how the text comes alive in the present conversation. Your editor, and both these colleagues, hope this doesn't define an either/or. Finally, *Mark Throntveit* uses *Texts in Context* to explore preaching possibilities from Genesis. Rather than examining particular lectionary pericopes he suggest thematic and theological approaches to the book as a whole.

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