

- 1 Interpreting the book of Genesis is such a thankless task. Even if God were to break his silence and explain his authorial intentions, there is no guarantee that his word would be the last in this endless debate. More than two millennia of relentless biblical analysis have amounted to the same kind of disservice as done by La Fontaine's bear, who smashed a rock over his sleeping friend's nose in a clumsy attempt to get rid of a pesky fly. But even though the most scrutinized text in human history seems squashed by the weight of so much exegetical overdetermination, it is still possible that, like the fly, its hidden meaning will escape unharmed.
- 2 In other words, a bookcase can easily double as a casket. Textual proliferation might very well be the primary reason for our corrupted understanding of the primeval story, which extends from the creation of heaven and earth to the destruction of the tower of Babel. As an antidote, consider *monogramism* rather than monotheism: there is only one text, and it is much shorter than what we have been led to believe (3,792 words to be exact). This navel of world literature ends when Abraham enters the biblical stage and the narrative zooms in on a

particular people, their promised land, and the special treatment they receive at the hands of God.

- 3 Genesis can be divided into three distinct parts. First, the mythological protohistory: creation, Eden, Cain, the flood, Babel, and a few genealogies in between (chapters 1-11). Second, the account of the patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (12-36). Finally, the self-contained story of Joseph (37-50). Their fusion into a single book hides some deep rifts. Every step forward that does not question these editorial stitches requires a leap of faith. But in the same way as a Jew does not embrace the New Testament, a Christian does not follow the Quran, and a Muslim does not accept the Book of Mormon, there is no obligation to take even the first leap into the arms of the patriarchs.
- 4 The Hebrew Bible is itself divided into three parts. Only the first, the Torah, is usually considered the bedrock of the Jewish faith. Using a similar tactic of textual distillation, or nonproliferation, this short treatise on the pre-Abrahamic Genesis begins with a hypothesis: what if everything that follows the last verse in the book's eleventh chapter were apocryphal? What if anything beyond that point were at best a distraction and at worst sacrilege? What if Abraham and Moses were not the pilots of the spiritual ship but its hijackers? What if the biblical priests and prophets were not the couriers of the divine word but its manufacturers?

- 5 Running commentaries on the first eleven chapters of Genesis tend to resemble philosophical meditations more than religious doctrines, and the present book is no exception. Nevertheless, religion can still be charitably understood as the continuous and scrupulous *rereading* of a sacred text (*relegere* in Latin, from which some believe that *religio* may have derived) in an attempt to be released from superstitions, prescriptions, and institutions.
- 6 The anti-Abrahamic (or, more accurately, ante-Abrahamic) result can be described as a strange mix of mythical metaphysics, theocratic anarchism, and minimal theology. Named after Noah's firstborn, The Book of Shem can be read one section per day over the course of a single week, at the end of which the aforementioned fly will still remain free, while the bear, like Goliath, will hopefully have been hit smack in the head by a small pebble hurled from David's sling.
- 7 This radical rereading of Genesis 1-11 is propelled by the old problem of anthropogenesis: how does one become the human being that one is? Another, closely related concern has made its way into the title of the second chapter: what is a life that is lived, but only barely? Which leads to a more fashionable question: how can one imagine a post-human existence by examining the pre-Abrahamic world? After all, what is apocalypse other than the flip side of Genesis?

- 8 One way to access these fundamental issues is to play with the ancient text, while always remaining within the elastic boundaries of hermeneutics. Every semantic or syntactic assumption about the Hebrew document at hand can be questioned, down to its smallest diacritical sign. Still, the resulting reinterpretation is very much indebted to many canonical approaches to Genesis, as it excavates ideas from each of the four levels of medieval exegesis: literal, allegorical, moral, and mystical.
- 9 This treatise is also informed by modern biblical criticism, though the academic obsession with the question of who wrote the Bible does not hinder the present approach to chapters 1-11 as a complete literary composition, rather than a tangled bricolage. As a consequence, neither the light of reason nor the light of faith fully shines through the following pages. Their pre-Abrahamic stance may even be labeled post-secular.
- 10 Stylistically, this creative commentary complements its close reading of the text with what may be called *close writing*. Like other studies of the incipit of The Book and the inception of the world, this small treatise is a somewhat esoteric composition that resists full explication. It was designed to safeguard the vulnerable (or even wounded) heart of the matter (not to mention its author's own heart). If for the Greeks the truth calls for uncovering, for the Hebrews it pleads to stay in hiding.

- 11 The mystics warn that those who dare to investigate the secrets of the primordial creation incur great personal risk. They recommend it only to the select few, and even then only after years of studious preparation and as long as it is conducted in solitude. In the end, I must admit that dwelling on this thorny subject did, once again, prove pernicious. The strange fruits of this impossible labor are made public for those able to see that the world born in Genesis is disintegrating before our very eyes.
- 12 A final note on the text. Naturally, all references are to verses in the book of Genesis, unless otherwise indicated. An amalgam of different translations has been used: the New Jewish Publication Society Tanakh, the King James Version, Robert Alter's rendition, and the author's own. A full translation of all eleven chapters is provided in the appendix. Wherever needed, the original quotations, plus a few illustrations, have been added alongside the commentary (as *handnotes*, rather than footnotes). Citing secondary literature, though, turned out to be unnecessary. This work has little pretense to scholarly authority, narrowly conceived. And to remove all doubt: it is devoid of any divine inspiration. It is only a lay retelling of some old stories that still offer "counsel woven into the fabric of real life," which is how Walter Benjamin defines wisdom.

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