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BOOK REVIEW

Iain Provan. *Discovering Genesis: Content, Interpretation, Reception*. Discovering Biblical Texts. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015. ix + 214 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-0-802-87237-1. $22.00.

Provan's *Discovering Genesis* is part of the Discovering Biblical Texts series, which are designed to be "comprehensive, up-to-date and student-friendly introductions to the books of the Bible [relating to] their structure, content, theological concerns, key interpretive debates and historical reception" (ii).

Most compelling in Provan's contribution to this series is his work in chapter 4, "The World of Genesis: Locating the Text in Its Time and Place." In this chapter, Provan provides a suitable hermeneutic for interpreting Genesis, namely, that scholarship should read the final form of Genesis in a sixth- to fifth-century BCE context. His premise is that, even though the book was "composed in and reflect(s) different moments in Israel's past" (50), understanding meaning in the final redaction of the book provides a more fruitful experience, since it is the only full "source" we have. And since the final form is what interests Provan, the desire to reproduce the historical context of the final redaction is fundamental to understanding the book. "Meaning," argues Provan, in the book of Genesis is "bound up with the historical, social and religious contexts in which it first came to be. Therefore, we must attempt to locate Genesis in its time and place" (49).

Provan locates the final P redaction in the sixth and fifth centuries by establishing the religious milieu that existed before these centuries. He then labels the time period preceding the sixth and fifth centuries the era of the "old religion." This time period was marked by a belief in many gods and goddesses who were worshiped: "There were gods of sun and moon, and of

love, and of many other aspects of existence" (51). These gods resided in earthly temples in large city-states from which order in the material world was restored. In the temples, these gods had idols to represent them. Lastly, the gods established kings on the earth whom they adopted as their own sons. During this era of old religion, "the gods were everything. Ordinary human beings, on the other hand, were almost nothing" (52).

But the sixth and fifth centuries introduced a radical shift in theological hermeneutics. Drawing on some aspects of Karl Jaspers's philosophical framework for the period 800 to 200 BCE, Provan describes a new hermeneutical era that was marked by a shift away from the mythical to the rational (see *The Origin and Goal of History* [trans. Michael Bullock; London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1953]). This was an era in which "'world religions' began: rationality and practical experience were now set against myth, and religion became informed by ethics" (54). While not in complete agreement with Jaspers, Provan does make use of his general philosophical framework to explain the theological concerns of P's final redaction. According to Provan, the best way to read Genesis is to "understand it as part of the distinctive 'axial age' response of Mosaic Yahwists to the kinds of questions we see arising in the sixth and fifth centuries all over the ancient world" (55). What follows in this chapter is an interesting case study of how this shift in hermeneutical perspective led to a theological reshaping of Genesis by the P redactor.

There is one significant challenge to this very interesting theological hermeneutic through which Provan reads Genesis. The goal of the book series is to highlight the theological concerns of Genesis. Those purchasing the book may expect to be instructed on the theological contributions of Genesis to the final form of the Christian canon. If the sources of Genesis are not important, but the final form of Genesis is, then why only address the theology of Genesis and not the book itself as part of a final canon? To be fair to Provan, he does make a few connections between Genesis and the New Testament, but if final forms are important, then why limit the theological concerns to how the book of Genesis may have been read in the

sixth and fifth centuries?

Chapters 2 and 3 ("Strategies for Reading") are helpful sections, since introductions to Genesis usually do not provide readers with the opportunity to see how hermeneutical assumptions or goals can dramatically shape interpretation. Provan's book gives a quick summary from early Jewish and Christian interpretations to more recent social-scientific and feminist interpretations. He discusses how Judaism formulated a two-part exegetical method called *remez* and *sod*. The former was concerned with more of the literal meaning of the text, and the latter with the deeper and allegorical meanings. Correspondingly, the early Christian community had a similar tendency to find deeper spiritual truths that lie beyond the literal words on the page. Provan takes the reader from this early stage of interpretation to a point in history that profoundly shaped the hermeneutical landscape in our era:

> With the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, and the end of the English Civil War shortly thereafter, a new era began in Europe, marked among other things by a deep desire that peace and quiet should continue to prevail . . . For increasingly many, this meant breaking any strong connection between the state and religion, which involved, in turn, removing the Bible from its exalted status in Protestant states as the divine Word that regulated public life—or at least weakening its hold (33).

Out of this milieu arose interpreters such as Spinoza who argued that the plain sense of the Bible was "not worthy of the reasonable person's assent" (34). All of the subsequent methodologies in Provan's list (i.e., source, form, redaction, rhetorical, structuralism, post-structuralism, narrative, social-scientific, feminist, and finally, canonical criticism) find their roots at this point in history.

Although they are a helpful addition to this introduction to Genesis, the difficulty with these two chapters is that there is not enough interaction with the history of interpretation of the book of Genesis itself. That the history ends with the work of Brevard Childs, who published much of his canonical theory in the late 1970s into the 1990s, is surely another flaw. The reader may

question what hermeneutical assumptions underlie interpretations of Genesis in more recent research. Students who want to understand the theological concerns and key interpretive debates related to Genesis might be more interested in more current approaches to biblical studies.

The last seven chapters are devoted to Provan's exegesis of key interpretive issues that students typically wrestle with when reading Genesis. Throughout these chapters, Provan provides examples of fresh and thought-provoking answers. One of his key contributions is his exegesis of the account of the sacrifice of Isaac in Gen 22. He starts with the question that many students ask: "Should Abraham obey God?" (146). Provan argues that, since Abraham calls Isaac his *only* son, this implies that Isaac "alone (is) the object of Abraham's devotion" (147). This leads Provan to the provocative question: "Does Abraham perhaps love his son more than he loves God?" (147–48). Provan summarizes the theological impact of the account as highlighting "whether God, who is the creator of everything, has the right to give life and to take it away" (147). Abraham must come to terms with this aspect of God's character. Does God have the right to take even those things to which his people might be especially devoted?

Another thought-provoking interpretation comes in Provan's interpretation of the Garden of Eden account. Here Provan argues that Eden is not "a particular place in the world, but a state of being in the world" (70). He bases this interpretation on the repetition of the creation accounts in Gen 1:1—2:3 and Gen 2:4–25. This repetition of the creation of the whole world, and then, of the Garden, implies that they are one and the same thing. Provan adds that, if Eden is not meant to refer to the whole earth, how would humanity populate the world according to the mandate given in Gen 1:28? Would they have to sin so that they would be exiled into the world they were commanded to populate? Provan adds that God's dwelling was not thought of as existing only in a specific geographic location, whether temple or country. Instead, the whole earth was his dwelling place. The parallelism between the creation accounts and an understanding of the ancient Near Eastern worldview leads Provan to see Eden

as representative of the whole earth.

Provan's view on the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil is also noteworthy. Were humans supposed to ignore the attainment of this god-like knowledge? Provan argues that the problem was not that they ate of the tree, since the existence of the tree "implies that eventually its fruit might be consumed" (75). Instead, the problem was that they ate the fruit prematurely. They were "grasping after knowledge, in independence of God, prior to the right time" (75).

Another interesting interpretation is found in the creation account where God creates woman from man. Students are traditionally taught that God took a rib from Adam and with it made woman. Provan's novel interpretation of the Hebrew word for *rib*, argued in a footnote, is that the word *rib* more commonly refers to "something over against the other" (78). This compels Provan to argue that God is not just taking a rib from Adam, but rather, he is cutting him in half "so that there come into existence two 'sides'" (78). For Provan, the hermeneutical foundations for this interpretation are the creation accounts where the woman is created to function like the man by ruling and subduing creation (Gen 1) and keeping and guarding it (Gen 2). For Provan, this similarity of function should influence interpretation concerning how the woman came to exist.

Further new contributions to scholarship in Genesis include Provan's view of the consequences of sin on the relationship between Eve and her husband (Gen 3:16), the reasons why Cain was fearful of exile and why God did not exact vengeance on Cain (Gen 4:13–14), and the connection between the people who created the Tower of Babel to make a great name for themselves and the account of Abram whom God leads out of the same territory in order to make a great name for himself (Gen 12:2). Every chapter of exegesis exhibits similar original contributions to Old Testament studies.

Nevertheless, the very limited use of Provan's developed sixth- and fifth-century BCE hermeneutic in his exegesis will surely be a disappointment for some. Although he does make some limited use of his hermeneutic for the Flood account, the reader will have difficulty understanding how most of Provan's

exegetical work is anchored in a sixth- and fifth-century historical context. For example, in Gen 4:1—6:8, Provan argues that Cain's name "speaks of the human tendency towards self-divinization" (99). Provan arrives at this conclusion partly based on his idea regarding Eve's belief that she had created Cain with the help of Yahweh together with her "newfound godlikeness" that she attained by eating of the forbidden fruit. Provan then adds that Abel's name, which means *breath* or *breeze*, illustrates that Abel's life was to show how human life was insubstantial or fleeting. Given the brevity of this volume, these interpretations, while thought-provoking, seem superficial (i.e., name meaning=character's function in narrative) and even inefficient, given the limited space for illustrating the value of a sixth- and fifth-century BCE context. These chapters of exegesis could have been the place in which Provan should have had let his "Axial Age" hermeneutic really shine.

Writing an updated introduction to Genesis for students is necessary but assuredly challenging. The great introductions already in publication create the pressure to prove the significance and relevance of a new work. Provan's introduction has its own original contributions, and it is sufficiently brief to serve as a launching point for other issues to be explored with supplemental material. Relevance is also provided in Provan's chapter on locating Genesis in its time and place, which is probably the best chapter of the book. However, in the end, we are left wanting to see Provan's detailed, critical, and thorough exegesis on Genesis using his sixth- and fifth-century BCE interpretive lens.

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