

PART I

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CHAPTER 1

GENESIS

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GENESIS holds the undisputed place as the first book of the Bible. No matter the canon, it is the point of beginning. Every subsequent biblical book to some degree relates to Genesis. In some cases, as in the prologue to the Gospel according to John, which returns to the beginning of time and interprets Genesis 1 in light of Proverbs 8, reference is explicit (Boyarin 2004: 95–8). In other cases, as in Deuteronomy’s synopsis of Jacob’s life (Deut. 26:5–9) or Paul’s account of Abraham and his wives (Gal. 4:22–31), writers show their acquaintance with ancestral narratives by retelling them. The cataclysmic end predicted by the prophets and detailed in Revelation collapses the very categories put into place at creation. Genesis is not only the first, but also the foundational text of the Bible.

Many beginnings unfold in Genesis. Chapter 1 provides a cosmic view of the world that comes into being at God’s command, whereas chapters 2 and 3 narrow the focus to two humans and the ultimate exigencies of an agrarian economy. The first murder is recorded in chapter 4, along with the origin of cities, metal tools, and music. The flood story in chapters 6 through 10 provides the account of a new beginning marked by a rainbow indicating a renewed, covenantal relationship between God and humanity (9:12–17). Linguistic difference can be said to emerge as a result of building the Tower of Babel (11:1–9). With the introduction of Abram and Sarai a new ethnicity with a particular destiny comes into relief. This ethnicity, often defined in terms of a nation, is built up from one family. Family life is, for the most part, the subject of chapters 12–50 and appears to be the most contentious realm of human life.

What this founding family represents has been the subject of centuries of speculation. As precursor to the Exodus and the legal codes of Leviticus and

Deuteronomy, Genesis purports to describe an earlier phase of Israelite religion. For example, when God reveals the divine name Yahweh to Moses, He claims that it was not known by Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Exod. 6:3). Thus a chronology is set up in which the nascent devotion of the ancestors sets the stage for the revelation of a comprehensive religious system. Although readers are warned against viewing Genesis as ‘a preliminary stage’, many scholars do believe that it casts light on the nature of household religion in ancient Israel (Alberty 1994: 29). Carol Meyers interprets the family stories, in particular the story of the Garden of Eden, as reflecting the social organization and economic realities of an agrarian and pastoral community located in an arid, mountainous region (Meyers 1988: 53–62). Naomi Steinberg, also concerned with questions of social organization, perceives a kinship system based on the patrilineal principle of marrying within a group descended from a common male ancestor (1993: 6–14). Literary scholars perceive the tensions, latent enmities, and plots that drive family life in every era (Alter 1981: 23–46, 155–77; Pardes 1992: 60–78, Sternberg 1985: 285–308).

CHRONOLOGY AND CONTENT

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The material in Genesis can be divided in many ways. One such division follows the sequence of the book and brackets sub-units such as the Primordial History (Gen. 1–11), the ancestral tales (Gen. 12–36), and the sustained, almost novella-like account of Joseph in Egypt (Gen. 37–50). With some important exceptions, these sub-units loosely cohere with genre distinctions. The stories in Genesis 1–11, for example, belong to the genre of myth; they are sacred stories that describe how the world and humanity came into being (Dundes 1984: 3). The stories of Abraham and Sarah; Rebecca and Isaac; Jacob, Rachel, and Leah and their families can be appropriately classified as legends, stories about founding figures and the places they establish that purport to unfold in historical time. While the account of Joseph can be considered a legend, it also has a particular literary quality. Although the story of Joseph follows a plot more complex and labyrinthine than those of Abraham and Jacob, Gabriel Josipovici has warned against separating the ups and downs of Joseph’s life from the life of Jacob that begins with Jacob’s birth in chapter 25 and only ends with his death in chapter 49 (Josipovici 1988: 77).

The stories overlap to an extent that the insistence on such divisions can impede the understanding of how the texts interact within the book as a whole. In fact, repetition is a distinguishing feature of Genesis. The repetition of specific plot sequences has been identified as constituting a type-scene, a recurrent event that allows comparison across texts (Alter 1981: 47–62). For example, Abraham at two

junctures (12:10–20; 20) and Isaac (26:1–16) seek refuge at the court of a foreign ruler during a famine and protect themselves with the claim that their wives are their sisters. This parallel construction, the type-scene, creates an interpretive context that can help determine the poetics of specific writers (Hendel 1997), the particularities of character, or the nature of a locale. Through the device of the type-scene, the use of recurrent motifs and the notion of a covenant transmitted from one generation to the next, the stories of Genesis invite comparative and intertextual readings.

Genesis 1–11

In highly structured, symmetrical prose, Genesis 1:1–2:4 portrays God ordering a primordial chaos into distinct realms like water, sky, and land (Cassuto 1978: 11–17). The generative potency of Divine speech, described as the ‘logos’ model of creation, has been understood as a polemic against the notion that at the beginning of time God battled with chaos in the form of a watery monster, the ‘agon’ model of creation (Fishbane 2003: 34–6). In this story of creation, the categories of male and female are created simultaneously, both ‘in the image’ of God (1:27). A woman emerges from the body of a man in the Garden of Eden story (2:4b–3:24). However, a midrash explains that God created an androgyne in Genesis 1:27 and only separated it into male and female bodies in Genesis 2:22 (Genesis Rabbah 8:2–3).

The Garden of Eden, with its trees, rivers, and precious stones, is lost due to the eating of a fruit (3:6), but the text in Genesis says nothing of the devil or the Fall. The talking snake operates as a trickster and sets the stage for the trickster tales to follow. The loss of Eden functions etiologically as an explanation for why women and men must toil for their bread (3:16–19), at the same time that it is the first in a chain of stories in which humanity transgresses a border of some sort resulting in punishment as well as increased knowledge.

While Adam and Eve lose Eden and must ever after farm the land, their son Cain is cursed to wander the earth and is unable to farm the land. The blood that he spills by murdering his brother contaminates both the earth and his person (4:11–12). However, Cain builds a city, enabling the urban arts as the result of knowledge gained through his crime of fratricide (4:17–22).

Genesis 6 begins with a crossing of the border between heaven and earth when the sons of God procreate with the daughters of man. Their hybrid offspring, the Nephilim, are heroes who seem to outlive the 120-year time-limit placed on human life as penalty for this miscegenation. Through a comparison with Atrahasis, the Babylonian flood myth, scholars have suggested that the subsequent flood in Genesis is aimed at silencing the noise of these unions and purifying this divine-human sexual intermixing.

Internal to the flood story is God's desire to wipe the earth clean of rotten human action and intention. The ark that God instructs Noah to build serves as a kind of womb in which the seeds of future life are preserved. After the waters subside and God signals future stability through the rainbow, the survivors revert to their insidious ways. Noah gets drunk; his son, Ham, humiliates him; and a fraternal hierarchy of masters and slaves ensues (9:18–27).

Despite the penalties incurred up to this point, the unchastened people try to infiltrate the realm of the divine one last time. Once again a city is built, but this time with a tower that aims for heaven. God nips this overreaching in the bud by scrambling human language into a variety of tongues. Since different languages necessitate different countries, the primordial history draws to a close with the image of a centre that has become diffuse (11:9).

Genesis 12–36

The ancestral legends in this section of Genesis are organized according to the concept of generations. The main players in the first generation are Abraham and Sarah; in the second Isaac and Rebecca; and in the third Jacob, Rachel, and Leah. Who is a major and who a minor player in each generation is not predetermined so much as worked out over the course of the stories. Abram breaks from all that is familiar and travels with his wife Sarai, and nephew Lot, to Canaan. He builds altars at Canaanite sites in Shechem, the environs of Bethel, and the Negev and escapes to Egypt during a famine before parting from his nephew and watching him walk toward Sodom. Lot is not entirely abandoned to a fate among the Sodomites, since Abram releases him from captivity following a war in which Sodom, Gomorrah, and the other Cities of the Plain are looted (14), and surely has him in mind when he negotiates with God to spare the city of Sodom (18:22–33). With Lot absent and Sarai, Abram's wife, barren, the family, counter to God's promise, seems to be shrinking rather than growing. Sarai engineers a surrogacy, but Hagar, the surrogate, perceives an elevation of her status once she becomes pregnant. With Abram's permission Sarai oppresses Hagar, who runs away into the wilderness where she receives a prophecy concerning a son who is to be called Ishmael.

Everyone's fate changes when God establishes a covenant with Abram and Sarai. As a result, their names become Abraham and Sarah in order to reflect the fact that they will engender nations and kings (17:5–6, 15–16). Despite the fact that Ishmael is circumcised (17:25–6) and promised to be the father of twelve tribal chiefs and one large nation (17:20), he is not a proper recipient of the covenant. Covenantal transformation continues when an angelic visitation enables Sarah to conceive (18), and Lot, spared the blaze visited on Sodom, produces the rival nations of Moab and Ammon through incest (19). Abraham, father of many nations, shows

himself ready to sacrifice both his sons when he exiles Ishmael with an inheritance of bread and water (21) and leads Isaac to a sacrificial altar on a mountain-top.

Although God promised Abraham land stretching from the Euphrates to the Mediterranean Sea, he enters into tense negotiations with Ephron the Hittite in order to acquire a burial plot for Sarah (Sternberg 1991: 33). After Sarah's burial at the Cave of Machpelah in Hebron, Abraham dispatches his servant to the very homeland he abandoned in order to find a wife for Isaac. Rebecca identifies herself as the ideal bride when she helps the stranger (24:18–19), extends hospitality (24:25), and voluntarily agrees to leave her home for a distant land (24:58). In this text, Rebecca displays qualities analogous to Abraham's.

Between his near-sacrifice and his blindness, there is not much of a story about Isaac. Perhaps Isaac's poor judgement in favouring Esau leads the editors to truncate his biography. It is Rebecca, acting as patriarch in Isaac's place, who makes the choice of Jacob as Isaac's heir, although she endangers him in the process. Jacob conspires with his mother to gain his father's blessing through subterfuge, then must abandon his home in order to escape Esau's wrath. Jacob's flight from home and his return frame the adult phase of his life. Prior to his departure, Jacob is very much a son of the household caught up in the drama of reversing the priorities bestowed by his twin brother's earlier birth. After his return, his sons appear as the more active characters.

Leaving home with the intangible assets of birthright and blessing, the youthful Jacob sleeps with a stone for a pillow and dreams of a ladder in which angels of God ascend and descend. A dream journey of increasing proximity to God mirrors his physical movements. For example, the dream of seeing the angels is balanced and extended by Jacob's nocturnal wrestling with a divine being prior to his return home (32:4–33). This wrestling with God is the prototypical act that defines Israel. God renames Jacob 'Israel', because he has wrestled with gods and men and has wrested a blessing. On the basis of this paradigmatic encounter, contention can be said to be valued over obedience. The children of Israel are not meant to be passive, even toward God.

Genesis 37–50

Is parental favouritism in line with God's will? This question that disturbs the reader as Ishmael is put out of Abraham's house and Esau is left to beg a blessing from his father yields contradictory answers in the Joseph story. The favouritism shown to Joseph by Jacob—made undeniably evident by his ornamented coat—stirs up a bloodthirsty jealousy among Joseph's brothers. Joseph also inherits an active dream-life from his father, but the dreams that he recounts publicly concern his destiny rather than the movements of angels. In fact, God is not a central figure in the Joseph story. God never speaks to Joseph, and when Joseph speaks of God he

seems to be referring to his own powers. In an Egyptian jailhouse, Joseph urges an imprisoned sommelier to reveal his dreams, with the assurance that ‘interpretations belong to God, so tell (your dreams to) me’ (40:8). Similarly Joseph attributes Pharaoh’s dreams and his interpretations to God (41:25–32). Once reunited with his brothers who sold him into slavery, Joseph seems to excuse them of their actions with the conclusion, ‘it wasn’t you who sent me here, but God’ (45:8). Now in a position of power over his brothers, Joseph strips them of the power they once had over him. On the basis of this plot-line, it seems that the favouritism that stoked the fraternal jealousy was part of God’s plan to save Israel from a famine and eventually bring them home (46:1–4).

Although Joseph’s trials and triumphs may be the means of saving Jacob’s family, Jacob, it seems, chooses the wrong favourite. Joseph serves as the patron ancestor of the northern kingdom of Israel, which is ultimately defeated by Assyria and lost to posterity (Josipovici 1988: 85). In contrast, the southern kingdom of Judea, descended from Judah, survives a long line of empires and promises deliverance in the form of a Messiah son of David (for the development of this tradition, see Carr 1996: 303–4). In light of this historical trajectory, Joseph’s complicity in the appropriative economics of Egypt and Judah’s noble protection of his father Jacob and brother Benjamin (43:8–10, 44:18–34) have karmic undertones. The question of why the story of Judah’s seduction by his outcast daughter-in-law Tamar (38) interrupts the sale of Joseph (37) and his service in Potiphar’s house (39) has been answered in literary terms by Alter through the theme of ‘the deceiver deceived’ that runs through both stories (Alter 1981: 10). Yet one also notices that it is precisely when Joseph is removed from Israel’s household that the messianic line springs up through Tamar’s son, Perez (see Ruth 4:18–22 and Matt. 1:1–16).

Joseph does not make it into the list of the forefathers. ‘God is always the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; we never hear of the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph’ (Josipovici 1988: 88). The intricate plot and sustained narrative concerning Joseph represents devolution rather than improvement. As much as he is successful in his resilience and resilient in his success, Joseph remains something of a suspect character. God initiates no covenant with him, he easily finds a place in the pharaonic system, and his brothers remain afraid of him (50:15–18). The position of his story at the end of Genesis may be another means of casting aspersion on Joseph’s character.

In biblical literature, endings often indicate erosions or the end of an established social institution. For example, the Five Books of Moses (Torah) end with the acknowledgment that no prophet will ever equal Moses. He must then be succeeded by Joshua, a military leader. The Book of Judges concludes with a civil war and the near extinction of the tribe of Benjamin, and so the tribal system gives way to the monarchy in 1 Samuel. Elisha, the last prophet of deeds, gives way to the Book of Isaiah and the prophets of words. Based on these comparisons, the fact that Joseph is never named with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob can be

understood as an indication that the ancestral relationship with God reaches its end with Joseph. The prophetic alternative is subsequently introduced with Moses at the beginning of Exodus. The fact that the ancestral bond with God terminates with Joseph and that the prophet Moses and Aaron the high priest are both from the tribe of Levi suggests that Jacob's love of Joseph does not coincide with God's.

GENRE

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Genesis is a book that displays cohesion of form. It is written in prose that represents a divergence from other antique creation accounts such as the Babylonian *Enuma Elish*, the Canaanite *Baal Epic*, and Hesiod's *Theogony*, which are written in epic verse. Poetry does appear in Genesis primarily as the language of curse (3:14a–19; 9:25) and blessing (9:26–7; 14:19–20; 24:60; 27:28–9; 48:15–16; 49:2–27),¹ but it predicts events rather than narrating them in the style of epic. The shift from prose to poetry signals a change in discourse. But the prose, memorably described by Erich Auerbach as 'fraught with background', is poetic insofar as it adheres to a deeply structured chiasmic form (Auerbach 1953: 12). The poetry mirrors the chiasmic structure on a smaller scale through syntactic parallelism. The poetic nature of the prose and the often prosaic poetics of Genesis evoke a time in which the future is woven into the texture of the past.

Accounting for Genesis as a collection of legends began with Hermann Gunkel at the dawn of the twentieth century (Gunkel 1901). The legends, according to Gunkel, do not record historical events but rather point toward popular, pre-national memories. They are a species of folklore rooted in the life-setting (*Sitz im Leben*) of a tribal system. Although Gunkel's analysis was rooted in an evolutionary scheme that relied too heavily on a dichotomy between legend and history, his instinct about Genesis as folklore has proven correct (see Niditch 1987 and 1993). The more current designation for Genesis is myth, which doesn't mean that it is 'untrue' in contrast to a 'true' category of science, but rather that the book makes foundational claims about the world and how it came into being.

Myths describe the creation of the world as a means of setting out a social charter (Malinowski 1948: 74–88). How things began becomes the justification for how they must be. In Genesis 1:1–2:4, for example, God orders the universe by separating elements such as darkness and light and placing boundaries between them. This is the foundation story for the *Kohanim*, the priestly class of Israel. As God enforced

¹ Poetry is also used for an oath (4:23–4), which may indeed operate as a curse, and for pre-natal prophecy (16:11–12; 25:23), likely a fatalistic form of blessing.

separation between the elements of creation, so the priests must uphold distinctions of class, category, and cleanliness. In this view, to efface social boundaries is to invite God to unleash chaos.

Myth is also believed to emerge from ritual or to provide something of a script for ritual. As God rests from his creative labours on the seventh day, so the beneficiaries of creation are instructed to set aside the seventh day as a Sabbath (Lev. 23:3).

Claude Lévi-Strauss has described myth as hinging upon binary opposition that is ultimately mediated by a trickster figure. Several oppositions are at work in the Garden of Eden story: between human and animal, between man and woman, and between God and human. Enter the snake, an animal that interacts with the humans, intervenes between the man and the woman, and speaks of God's anxiety about the humans becoming too God-like. On all counts the snake serves as a trickster who brings about the transformation of everything with which he comes into contact.

Freudian notions about the violent undercurrent of family life find support in Genesis. The potential violence of the father becomes hauntingly apparent as Abraham is prepared to sacrifice his beloved son, Isaac, at God's behest (Gen. 22), and the desire of the son to usurp the father's role comes across when Reuben, Jacob's firstborn, beds his father's concubine (35:22). Myth is further an operative category because identity is articulated in myth and Genesis speaks about the formation of collective identity at every turn.

CANAAN

Each story in Genesis works to produce a portrait of the Promised Land, a portrait not as geographic or topological as it is political and ethnic. The stories map the land by describing the relationships between Israel and its neighbours in terms of familial relationship. In this way, neighbouring nations are characterized as troublesome relatives. The type of mapping that transpires in Genesis attests to the role of myth in sanctioning and sanctifying territory.

Specific tales relate to distinct historical periods and yet work together to produce the space of the land rather than a historical chronology. Figures like Isaac and Ishmael are best understood as founding ancestors whose actions express certain typical features of national character; something like the 'wild-ass' aspect of Ishmael is best understood as Israelite polemic (Gen. 16:12). Such myths come into being at particular moments. For example, the boundary established between Jacob and his Aramean uncle, Laban, in the region of Gilead relates to the rise of Aram in the mid- to late ninth century BCE, and the tense relationship between Isaac and Ishmael references the rise of Ishmaelite tribes in the Negev desert between the

eighth and sixth centuries BCE (Hendel 2005: 47). Ancestral wanderings, wars, and reconciliations signify the contacts, conflicts, and treaties of ancient Israel and are best understood as reflecting the time in which the stories came about rather than the events they portray.

The narration of political interaction as ancestral precedent lends an inevitable quality to the relationships, a sense that because things were this way at the beginning so they are ever destined to be. Since Ishmael's 'hand will be against everyone, and everyone's hand against him' (16:12), the Israelites should not trust their Arab neighbours. Despite the fact that this prophecy was likely written during a period of raids or skirmishes with Ishmaelites, it becomes frozen as an ineluctable characteristic of a nation. The specific moments of time embedded in Genesis assume a simultaneous quality. In fact, the cover-up of authorship and date is so thorough that scores of modern archaeologists and philologists have not been able to crack the code. This simultaneity, nowhere better expressed than in the rabbinic dictum, 'There is no early or late in Torah' (Babylonian Talmud, Pesahim 6b), is perceptible on the spatial plane of Genesis. The land mapped through the stories of Genesis exists in concurrent relationship with Babylonia, Moab, Ammon, Ishmael, Aram, Edom, and Egypt, even though these nations rose to power in different periods. In every case, the land of Israel is defined in opposition to these other nations and a coherent national identity emerges through the articulation of borders with them.

Abram breaks from the past by distancing himself from his family and birthplace, which is identified as 'Ur of the Chaldees'. His origins are meant to evoke Babylonia, synonymous with Chaldea in the Neo-Babylonian period, yet also convey associations with the Amorite and Aramean cultures (Hendel 2005: 47–54). The story of Abraham went through several revisions in the name of matching social reality. Abraham's descendants, extending to the Judeans exiled by the Babylonians in 587 BCE, found themselves always negotiating a relationship with a larger, better-armed country in the Syro-Mesopotamian region. The spectre of these military powers may also be perceptible in the gleeful revenge fantasy that is the Tower of Babel (11:1–9) ('Babel' is the Hebrew name for Babylonia).

After migrating from Mesopotamia and orienting himself with Canaan, Abraham heads to Egypt in order to survive a famine. Egypt is a place of treacherous sustenance, where food is acquired at the price of an assault on familial integrity. This episode, amplified in the Book of Exodus, sounds a warning against seeking alliance or sanctuary in Egypt.

Israel's regional relationships are figured in terms of a family tree: those relatives who are not recipients of the covenant are positioned on the other side of the border from Israel. Geographic borders double as markers of distinct identities, but neighbouring countries are also imagined as kin, however estranged. The first and fundamental separation occurs when Abraham and his nephew Lot part ways. Lot migrates to the Jordan river valley and Abraham holds fast in the Canaanite hills (Gen. 13). In the next generation, Isaac inherits the land, or at least the concept of

the land, while Ishmael's legacy lies in the desert. Where Abraham and Lot and the descendant nations of Israel and Moab/Ammon are separated by the Jordan river, there is a more porous frontier between Isaac and Ishmael. Ishmael is prophesied, 'to dwell beside all of his brothers' (16:12), and the Ishmaelites were indeed a nomadic people encamped in the desert abutting Beer-sheba, Isaac's hometown.

Even before Jacob and Esau are born, a rivalry between two nations begins. Esau is the older, heartier brother, associated with the hunt and the red mountains of southern Jordan known to us as Petra. His opposite, Jacob, sits in tents evidently scheming how to displace him. Jacob prevails, although the act of overriding his brother costs him some twenty years of his life spent labouring for next to nothing for his uncle and father-in-law Laban. Some measure-for-measure justice is meted out when Laban tricks him into marrying his firstborn daughter, Leah, instead of the younger Rachel. When Jacob returns, he is terrified and necessarily contrite about his brother. Yet Esau is the one who appears to have transcended the competition when he greets his brother with hugs, kisses, and tears (33:4). Jacob's character involves more of the same duplicity; he offers a complex excuse for trailing behind his brother on the way to Edom and then goes in the opposite direction (33:17–18). By the time Jacob settles in Shechem, boundaries have been set between his territory and those of Aram, associated with Laban, and Edom, the terrain of Esau.

The position that the absence of boundaries leads to social dissolution becomes evident in the rape of Dinah, Jacob's daughter (Gen. 34). Dinah is a young girl who seeks peers among the women of Shechem, but ends up being raped by the city's eponymous prince. After the king brokers a marriage-deal with Jacob, Dinah's brothers, Simeon and Levi, murder the groom and his fellows, who had submitted to circumcision as a bride-price. Considering the rape of Dinah in light of other national foundation stories premised on the rape of women, Helena Zlotnick describes it as a means of drawing an otherwise invisible cultural boundary across the bodies of women (Zlotnick 2002: 48). Although Jacob's heirs live alongside the people of Canaan, they are cautioned to avoid marriage and mixing.

GENEALOGY

Genesis is not only a book about brothers and geopolitics, but also one about birth and genealogy. For ancient audiences, the kinship pattern was 'likely the primary component of the tradition' (McCarter 1988: 17). Genealogies serve as interludes between narratives (2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10–32; 22:20–4; 25; 36; 37:15), and the drama of birth runs parallel to that of demarcating territory. The genealogies, which take the form of lists of who begot whom, serve the dual purpose of setting the contours

of nations and establishing heredity as a principle of continuity. While they begin with a universal scope as in the Table of Nations of Genesis 10, the genealogies narrow by the end of Genesis to include only the descendants of Jacob (46:7–27). With Genesis in mind, Derrida maintains that genealogies are contexts that account for the unique phenomenon of genius by associating it with genetics (Derrida 2006: 27–8). Indeed, adaptability and talent are transmitted among generations along with blessing. However, the persistence of relationships external to the family shows that ‘this ethnic group is part of the entire coherence of humanity’ (Crüsemann 2002: 66).

Although the migrations of women only exert indirect influence on the map that emerges from the pages of Genesis, they are the key figures in establishing the genealogical line. The centrality of birth to the plot-lines of Genesis is introduced in Genesis 1, when God blesses the first male and female with the command to ‘be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth’ (1:28), as well as when Eve gives birth after being expelled from Eden and calls her son Cain, ‘Because I have created a man with God’ (4:1). Thereafter creating life is not easy for the would-be mothers of Israel. When Sarah’s surrogacy backfires (16), she forces the issue of women’s place in the covenantal system by protesting about her barrenness. It is not enough to bless men with fertility or to cite them alone as the founders of nations. God changes Sarah’s name, yet when it comes to the covenant she presents an anomaly. Her husband and son can be circumcised, but she cannot. For this reason, Sarah is unable to formally constitute a covenantal subject. Although never explicitly labelled as such, conception, or the absence of blood, signals Sarah’s partnership in God’s plan for Israel. It can be said that, by advocating for her motherhood, Sarah initiates a covenantal relationship with God.

In Rebecca’s case, the struggle is internal when Jacob and Esau contend with one another in the womb (25:22). Her enquiry into the meaning of the unrest leads to an oracle from God that she will be the mother of two nations. Rachel’s infertility is intertwined with the competition with her sister and co-wife Leah. In the name of maintaining her status as beloved wife and securing a place in the clan, Rachel tries pleading with Jacob (30:1), using surrogacy (30:3–8), and finding a medicinal aid (30:14–15). Insofar as she contends with her father’s power over her, her sister’s jealousy, and God’s frustration of her plans to found a family, Rachel’s struggle parallels Jacob’s. The parallel is made explicit in the name that she bestows on Naphtali, the second child that she claims through surrogacy. After the birth, Rachel says, ‘Wrestlings of God I have wrestled with my sister and *prevailed*, so she called him Naphtali’ (30:8). Rachel’s naming of Naphtali echoes God’s renaming of Jacob, ‘Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have wrestled with God and with men and *prevailed*’ (32:29). Rachel and Jacob both prevail in contests waged simultaneously with people and with God.

Even the more fertile Leah undergoes a period in which she cannot conceive, and uses her servant Zilpah as a surrogate (30:9–13). Although she is not the beloved of

Jacob, Leah is redeemed through the chronology of the Bible. As the mother of Levi, the progenitor of priests, and ‘the lion cub Judah’ (49:9), Leah becomes, like Jacob, the founder of a nation whose descendants supplant those of a sibling. It is the tribe of Judah and not the tribes of Joseph who survive. Through the names that they bestow upon their sons, Rachel and Leah articulate the various characters ascribed to the tribes of Israel. As evident in the story of Joseph, the competition expressed through these names is likewise transmitted.

Although Rebecca has something of a pre-story before she meets Isaac (24:15–61) and Rachel shepherds her father’s flocks (29:9), women occupy the narrative stage primarily when the subject is the birth of sons (Fuchs 1999: 128). The emphasis on the transmission of covenant involves anxiety about continuity, and this anxiety in turn redirects the focus of the story from men to women. However, in the framework of Genesis birth and genealogy become issues concerning the perpetuation of male institutions.

The organization of Genesis according to generations has other inclusive effects. In the covenant established with Abraham, Jewish interpreters have read an eternal assurance of divine protection. Many Christian interpreters, in contrast, have emphasized the unique personal relationship with God that can arise through acts that attest to one’s faith. In Genesis, human caprice in the forms of preference and rivalry reverberates in the realms of the future and the Divine.

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