

○ REVIEW OF TERRY R. WRIGHT, *THE GENESIS OF FICTION: MODERN NOVELISTS AS BIBLICAL INTERPRETERS*

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Wright's introductory review of criticism of Genesis reveals his indebtedness to literary critics like Harold Bloom (and Robert Alter to a lesser extent). Even his brief exploration of the work of Gunkel, von Rad, and Westermann focuses on literary issues. Wright embraces, however, the standard critical insight that Genesis is the product of various authors and retellings. While recognising that no real original exists, Wright begins with J, as that author/source has been imagined by Harold Bloom.

A second, acknowledged influence on Wright is the work of Hartman and Budick, *Midrash and Literature*, and of Fisch, *New Stories for Old*, both of whom see fictional authors as working in the tradition of midrash. In fact, Wright spends a great deal of time trying to demonstrate that the authors he discusses were, at least, indirectly aware of rabbinic midrash. For Wright, midrash is the most important of several inter-texts serving as bridges between Genesis and the fictional works he discusses. The authors discussed create (fictional) midrash as they find questions in the biblical text and resolve those questions with new story. Not incidentally, Wright is far less impressed with the notion that poststructuralist theory also follows midrashic tendencies (pace Stern, *Midrash and Theory*).

Wright selects authors that wrestle literarily with Genesis. Here, too, he relies on Harold Bloom, specifically on Bloom's idea that important poets are strong misreaders of their important precursors. The book's cover art, Sir Jacob Epstein's sculpture of *Jacob and the Angel* (image available at <http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?workid=21761>), nicely suggests Wright's perspective here. The ambiguous pose of the sculpted figures, which may be variously interpreted, also serves itself as a nice image of the rather different, interpretative attitudes Wright's selected authors take to their biblical precursor.

Wright arranges his authors in order of the texts from Genesis with which they wrestle. Thus, he begins with Mark Twain's various retellings of the Garden of Eden from the perspectives of Adam, Eve, Satan, and so forth. For Twain, the Garden story indicts God, not Adam and Eve. God invents sin. Moreover, God treats Adam and Eve unfairly because one cannot expect them to understand the divine prohibition without either moral knowledge or experiential knowledge of death. Ultimately, however, Twain believes that Adam and Eve mature emotionally and morally as a result of the Fall. Although Twain is Wright's oldest author, he is some sense the most modern as well or, at least, the one who expresses most succinctly Wright's opinion that the 'fall' from the ideological position of the received form of Genesis is a fortunate one. Wright expresses this view most clearly, however, only in his discussion of his last author, Thomas Mann.

The focus on the maturing of humanity continues in Wright's discussion of John Steinbeck's *East of Eden*, itself a lengthy reflection on the *timshol* of Gen. 4:7. After exploring various translations, including 'do thou triumph (an order)' and 'thou shalt triumph (a promise)', Steinbeck ultimately opted for 'thou mayest triumph [over sin]' because it gave humans responsibility.

Wright observes that whether Steinbeck knew it or not, he was unpacking the meaning of a textual detail in a midrashic style.

Jeanette Winterson exemplifies Wright's sense that new story arises because of problems within the 'original'. Rejecting the fundamentalism of her youth, Winterson embraces a poetic, mythic Bible. In the comic *Boating for Beginners*, the Torah becomes a series of novels issued by God and Noah whose success leads to a dramatised epic, written with the assistance of a female romantic novelist that reanimates Babylonian myths. The result parodies the layering of story in Genesis itself. Humorously, a more accurate version of 'what really happened', the work of a group of women, is lost when an archaeologist discards it as a cheap hoax. In *Lighthousekeeping*, Babel Dark sees the Tower of Babel as a metaphor for his life as a stranger to himself. Discoveries about his lack of morality and the fossil record undermine his faith, but Winterson presents this story as the opportunity to find a place beyond the destructive, controlling God of biblical myth, not as a fall.

Unlike Wright's earlier authors, Jenny Diski knows the rabbi's discussions of the Akedah well; however, unlike the rabbis, Diski sees herself as an interpreter of myth, rather than one constrained by the text or a victim of (the patriarchal) Genesis. Moreover, Diski's novels feature humans, portrayed with modern psychological depth, rather than God, as their primary actors. Thus, in *Only Human*, God shares time with a third-person narrator who often disagrees with God's version of the story. Diski's comic, primitive God needs his characters at least as much as they need him. Insecure and capricious, God's anger at the elect's laughter motivates the Akedah. Fortunately, Sarai, the true victim of the Akedah, opposes Abram's religion. She and other women tell more helpful versions of biblical stories in their tents. *After These Things* celebrates God's defeat over the Akedah by telling an even more human version of Isaac's family. In this novel, the Akedah lingers on as the primary reason for Isaac's dysfunctional family. Only terror, not providence, remains.

Growing out of Jewish feminist concerns, Anita Diamant's *The Red Tent* also privileges the perspective of women. With Dinah as narrator, the novel rescues Leah, Rachel, Zilpah, and Bilnah from patriarchal silence. Rejecting the monotheistic, patriarchal religion of the final version of Genesis, Diamant's biblical women are polytheists worshiping a variety of ancient goddesses. In their version of the biblical story, the biblical men are foolish and the women are heroes and prophets. For Wright, who is somewhat apologetic for including this less-than-masterpiece in his volume, Diamant's work is important because she consciously creates midrash (here, equivalent with historical fiction) for her modern feminist audience.

Thomas Mann's four-volume *Joseph and His Brothers* is even more heavily invested in midrash. While Mann replaces the supernatural elements of the 'original' with psychological realism, his extensive inclusion of earlier midrash makes Mann, in Wright's view, the most faithful, fictional participant in the midrashic tradition. Further, unlike the other novelists that Wright examines, Mann tries to find or discover (but not invent) a meaningful, modern God that would be both within (i.e., modern) and independent (i.e., traditional) of us (167). In Wright's view, Mann's novel is a *Bildungsroman*, not only of its central character, but also 'of the whole Judaeo-Christian tradition' (163). Wright has returned, it seems, to Twain's fortunate fall.

For Wright, novelists offer mature (i.e., modern) reflections on Genesis. While Wright appends a brief conclusion, his discussion of Mann is his climax. Mann is Wright's paradigm novelist (and, possibly, also a paradigm for the work of a religious community) (170). Along with new

story, Wright also demands an unspecified degree of faithfulness to the tradition. Thus, near the end of his discussion of Mann, Wright rejects the Lowe-Porter translation of the word ‘*Gotteserfindung*’, in the final lines of the fourth volume, as ‘God-invention’ in favor of translations like ‘God found’ or ‘God discovered’. Although Wright does not say so specifically, that which seems most durable in the tradition is the primitive, powerful God of myth – perhaps, in particular, the God of Bloom’s J. This God, however, is important for aesthetic – not religious and definitely not moral – reasons. Wright’s desired egalitarian ethic (or rejection of patriarchy) and psychological depth come instead from modernity. The result attempts to combine ancient, mysterious power and modern domesticity. In this regard, the project resembles Jack Miles’ *God: A Biography*.