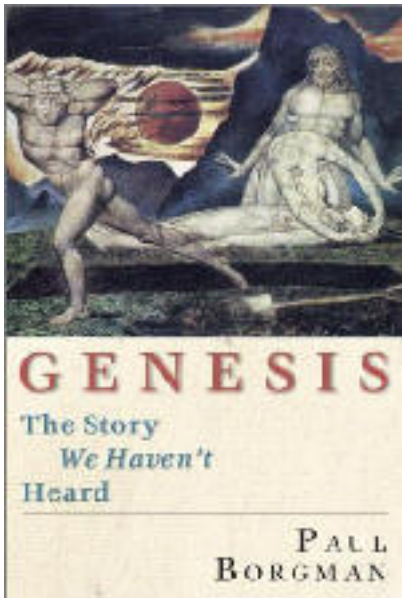


RBL 02/2004



**Borgman, Paul**

***Genesis: The Story We Haven't Heard***

Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2001. Pp. 252.  
Paper. \$15.00. ISBN 0830826556.

R. De W. Oosthuizen  
University of Fort Hare  
Alice, South Africa 5700

The preface sets a certain context for Borgman's presentation of "Genesis." Some biographic remarks already create a particular platform. As one of six brothers and two sisters, admittedly stories played an important role in his life. Paul Borgman is professor of English at Gordon College in Wenham, Massachusetts. The fact that he obtained a Ph.D. in the "art of stories"—a nontheological discipline—puts him to a certain extent in an advantaged position to appreciate some finer features of the Genesis story, which he regards as one of the "most complex literary masterpieces of the world" (7). Borgman accuses the scholarly world of a "bits-and-pieces" approach that does not allow the reader to appreciate the text on its own terms, that is, to follow the clues within the text, and as a consequence misses the theological thrust of the story (241).

Borgman begins his argument with reference to Gen 22:1–2 (Isaac as sacrifice, which he regards as "the most familiar episode in Genesis"), questioning the "bits-and-pieces approach" toward Genesis (12). The perception of Genesis as consisting of bits and pieces with no overall pattern or meaning can be overcome by a new way of looking at Genesis, following a new path where attention is given to the patterns of repetition as essential for understanding and appreciating the literary features of Genesis in all its nuances and depth. In order to appreciate the divine-human synergy in Genesis, one must read with the "expectation of connectedness" (13), because it is the connections that

“provide theme and character for Genesis” (14). Being aware of this then enables one (opens one up) to appreciate the themes of self-promotion, jealousy, and revenge but also reconciliation and change (reorientation) that run throughout the Genesis story. The various themes/ aspects are dealt with in four sections (thirteen chapters), where special attention is given to aspects of repetitions within the individual patriarchal stories (i.e., clues presented by the text itself).

From the very onset of the Genesis story we encounter the aforementioned narrative technique of repetition, not only in terms of the larger units (i.e., Gen 1:1–2:4a; 2:4b–3:25), but also within specific units (i.e., reference to day and night on day one and again on day four). Genesis 1–11 (section 1) unfolds as a constant search for the harmony that once existed, a search for that sense of belonging (“acceptance”) that was surrendered through “wrong and destructive choice-making” (27). The “prologue” prepares the reader for the next part of the story (Gen 12–50), a story that illustrates that God is always initiating a process of trying to restore the relationship, expecting human cooperation.

The Abraham story (section 2) is characterized by seven *visits* between God and Abraham. Having pointed out the progression (changes through repetition), Borgman takes the reader back, focusing on the structural cohesion in the story. Borgman regards Gen 12:1–3 as the beginning of the narrative plot, which then continues up to 22:1–19, framed by genealogies (i.e., 11:37–32; 22:20–24). The Abraham narrative ends with the genealogy of Ishmael (131). (The *toledoth* formula [family history of Terah] suggests Gen 11:27–25:11/18 as a narrative plot/unit?) The role of Abraham as God’s partner unfolds through the successive visitations. The visitations include trials but also promise in the formation of a divine-human partnership that seeks to change Abraham to be a “blessing beyond his family, to all families” (114, 131).

Section 3 is a continuation of the journey, elaborating on some aspects of the “partnership” between God and Jacob (i.e., the family history/*toledoth* of Isaac, according to Gen 25:19). Throughout the story Jacob is characterized as one struggling (i.e., wrestling with Esau and God; see 25:27–34; 28:12–22; 32:1–22; 32:24–32; 33:1–17) to see God’s purpose for his life, but despite his “God-resistance” (142), God wants to work with Jacob. The name of the “partner-in-the-making” is changed to Israel (146). Jacob is constantly reminded of his own past. He needs to change and accept, as those before him, God’s plan for him, if he is to “become a blessing for all.”

The Joseph story, section 4 (chs. 11–13), provides a convincing climax to the story of self-promotion, jealousy, and revenge and the need for change and reorientation. Dysfunctional family relations are sharply illustrated in the “family history of Jacob” (according to 37:2a, again, if the genealogical material is to be considered). God never

appears to Joseph as he did to Abraham and Jacob, but we are told repeatedly that he was with him; that is, there is a certain development (progression) regarding the role of Joseph in this search for a partnership between God and humans. Despite being “thrown down” repeatedly (37:12–35; 37:36; 39:1–6; 39:7–41:13), he rises to the challenge and shows himself to be a man “filled with God’s spirit” (223). The promise to Abraham has come true in that through Joseph, “all the nations” are blessed.

The interpretation of the Old Testament involves various methodological aspects (approaches), each contributing toward the interpretation of the text. This “story” grew out of Borgman’s endeavors in “applying the discipline of understanding literary texts to the exploration of Genesis” (7). His concern for the connectedness or structural cohesion of the story is based on the aforementioned repetitions, and as such not much attention is given to the well-documented genealogical features (*toledoth*-structure) of Genesis as a form of structural cohesion, which also brings to the fore important theological perspectives. So, for instance, one can argue that the connection established in family burial stories between genealogical material, death notices, and the family burial customs highlights an important perspective, that is, the relation between the preceding generations and the community still living as an element of the expectation of the future, or the future-directedness of the family in ancient Israel.

But then, Borgman is not claiming to provide an exhaustive interpretation, dealing with all the various aspects of what is involved in the interpretation of the Old Testament text of Genesis (and as such not much attention is given to the formal introductory issues such as the dating/formation and composition of the patriarchal narratives, grammatical analysis, the religion of the patriarchs, historical context, and so forth). Neither do we have the traditional verse-by-verse textual analysis. Borgman’s exploration (interpretation) of the repetitions and narrative artistry and his focus on the seemingly unusual features thereof (e.g., “visitations,” “wrestling,” “weeping”), nevertheless enables one to appreciate the dramatic force of the story. The theological significance of a reorientation away from self-aggrandizing toward understanding and upholding the interests of others is not often heard with such clarity and indeed adds to the spiritual richness of the story. Borgman challenges the reader to be involved with the text, and as such this is a story that should be read and reread.

Borgman’s work can certainly be recommended as a significant contribution to our understanding of the richness of the theology of Genesis and will certainly play an important role in future discussions.