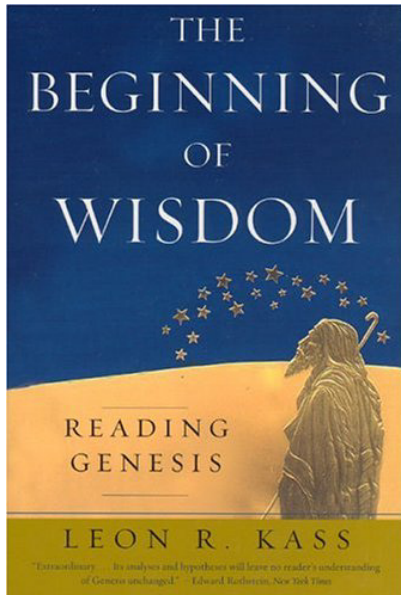


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Kass, Leon R.

The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis

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In this hefty volume, Leon R. Kass, a philosopher specializing in bioethics and the Addie Clark Harding Professor in the Committee on Social Thought and the College at the University of Chicago, offers what he terms a “philosophic reading of the book of Genesis” (1). Originally published in 2003 and reissued in 2006, this work is built on his assumption that Genesis, through the use of paradigmatic stories, presents a coherent narrative that challenges modern readers to reflect seriously upon God’s “new way” for humankind and what it requires of those who would participate in it. What Kass has produced is a running commentary on the whole of Genesis that attempts to interpret and apply the various stories in a way that yields a coherent, harmonious meaning. While it is clear that Kass has some knowledge of modern, critical interpretations of Genesis, he chooses to regard the work as reflecting a “coherent order and plan” where “every word counts” and “juxtapositions are important” (14). In following these presuppositions, he presents an understanding of the meaning of Genesis that “may address us in our current situation of moral and spiritual neediness” (13). Those who do not share these particular presuppositions or views will, no doubt, find much with which they will disagree. At the same time, those readers who work their way through this well-written volume will also find much that is thought-provoking and creative. The length of this work, and the depth into which Kass pushes his analysis in many places, make an overview of the entire book

impossible in such a limited review as this. Hence, I will restrict my observations to several examples that illustrate his approach and conclusions.

Kass has divided his book into two parts. Part 1, which follows an introductory chapter, is entitled “Dangerous Beginnings: The Unstructured Ways” and covers Gen 1–11. Kass regards these chapters as paradigmatic in nature and states that they “convey a universal teaching about ‘human nature’” (9). They provide a description of human life and culture prior to the establishment of covenants and laws. Two very important conclusions are drawn by Kass in his reading of the first creation stories. The first is that they emphatically reject the worship of the heavens; the second is that “man is an ambiguous being, in between, more than an animal, less than a god” (39). These two observations will recur throughout the remainder of the work.

The stories of Cain and Abel are interpreted as paradigmatic statements of the natural rivalry, including the violent ending, that occurs between brothers (and later, sisters). The results of this story end with the establishment of the first city, which, for Kass, “is rooted in fear, greed, pride, violence, and the desire for domination” (147). These characteristics have become so dominant in the emerging civilizations that the newly created cosmos reverts to anarchy in Gen 6:1–4, which leads Yahweh to regret his creative acts and bring about the flood. The selection of Noah and the building of the ark allow the animals of the world, including humans, a new beginning. This second creation would be different from the first, for this one would be subject to God’s unconditional law given to Noah. This covenant, according to Kass, creates a new relationship between humans and the other animals, making humans more valuable than other animals because of the fact that they are “godlike.” This section comes to an end with the story of the tower of Babel and Yahweh’s intervention, which completes the dispersal of the people and the beginnings of the differentiation of nations.

Part 2, entitled “Educating the Fathers,” moves from these universal stories to particular episodes concerning the ancestors of Israel. Given the unevenness of the narratives in Gen 12–50, this section is much more difficult to fit into the particular interpretive method that Kass has developed. Yahweh’s selection of Abraham is his choice of one nation that will be his vehicle for teaching humans his “new way.” In order to teach Abraham the meaning of this “new way,” Abraham must undergo eleven trials, each of which has a particular lesson that Abraham must learn. Most of these trials, the central one concerning circumcision, are related to marriage or fatherhood. For Kass, to understand patriarchy properly, it is essential to understand the proper roles of each of these matters. How the two stories in which Abraham endangers Sarah by having her present herself to the foreign rulers as his sister serve as positive teaching tools is difficult to understand, but for Kass the result is that when Abraham begins treating Sarah as a

wife rather than as a sister, she becomes pregnant. The climax of Abraham's education comes in Gen 22, with the story of the binding of Isaac. For Kass, Abraham's apparent willingness to sacrifice his only son at Yahweh's request indicates that Abraham is spiritually fit to pass on the "new way" to his offspring.

The stories associated with Isaac, who is seen to be "drab, passive, and gullible, more victim than hero" when compared to Abraham (353), are designed to illustrate what Kass sees as the four "essential features of the condition of sonship under the covenant" (358): a social link to the past, a mediated relationship with the divine, passivity, and dedication. It seems like Isaac's greatest deed was to act (with great help from Rebekah) in such a way as to reverse the birth order of Esau and Jacob so that the younger might receive the blessing of the "new way." Of course, this event leads to great enmity between Jacob and Esau, which provides the major lesson that Jacob must learn, which is how brothers might learn to get along. Once he has been able to reconcile with Esau, he might be able to teach his twelve sons, who become the "children of Israel," how they might be able to extend the promise from individual to clan, and, ultimately, to the nation.

The stories concerning Joseph form the backdrop for the emergence of a leader among the "children of Israel" as they descend into Egypt, where they become a mighty people. Kass interprets Joseph as a crafty manipulator who reflects the culture and background of Egypt more than that of Israel. Once in Egypt, Joseph completely adopts Egyptian ways. Leadership, as Kass interprets it, will go instead to Judah, who, according to the interpretation of Gen 38 that Kass provides, is taught by Tamar the meaning of brotherhood and fatherhood, thus enabling him to rise to leadership among his brothers. Following the blessing of the sons by Jacob, thus confirming the choice of Judah as the preeminent son, the story of the ancestors comes to an end. The patriarchs have learned their lessons and have passed them on to the tribes. The story awaits completion.

The book concludes with a short set of endnotes and a brief index of authors and topics. This is a very challenging book to read, not simply because of its length but because of the single-mindedness of its interpretive approach. As noted at the beginning of this review, there is much to disagree with in the way Kass interprets these materials. At the same time, there is much to be appreciated about the book. It is very well written and clearly infused with a thorough knowledge of the text of Genesis. The author also provides liberal quotes from the text to help make his points and remind the reader of the text itself. I recommend this work to anyone who wishes to read a new interpretation of Genesis that is guaranteed to provide many mixed reactions.