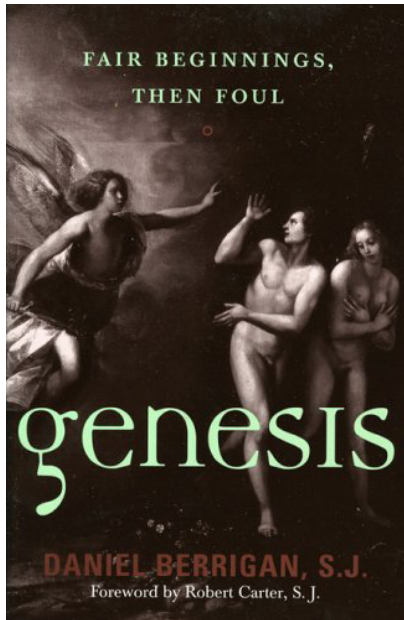


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Berrigan, Daniel

Genesis: Fair Beginnings, Then Foul

Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005. Pp. xx + 265.
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In the foreword to this book, Robert Carter, S.J., notes that Daniel Berrigan “is not an academic scripture scholar” and, furthermore, that he “is no more writing as an academic theologian than as a biblical scholar” (xi). He goes on to call Berrigan both a poet and a prophet, calls this book a series of “reflections,” and welcomes the reader to a “great spiritual journey” (xii). Carter’s comments left me a tad confused. If this is not a scholarly book on Genesis written by someone within the academic community of scholars, then what is it? This question of genre is an important one, especially since the back cover of the book clearly asks it to be categorized as a “biblical commentary.”

First, however, the “specs” of the work. It does indeed focus on Genesis and does so in nine chapters. However, the chapters are not arranged according to the traditional divisions of Genesis, such as chapters 1–11 and 12–50. Neither does Berrigan focus on source-critical divisions or issues. In his preface Berrigan makes it clear that it took him seven years to write these reflections and that he was motivated by the state of our world in the early twenty-first century: “I was searching in Scripture for a version of ancestry which would shed a measure of light on dark days.... What were we humans like at the start, what went right (for awhile), what in short order went drastically wrong?” (xiii).

This concern is certainly laudable, and it makes sense to return to the beginning, as it were, to investigate how we might have wound up in our present state. In fact, Berrigan makes this connection obvious from the very beginning of his work: Genesis serves as a paradigm for our time because he views it as being composed during the period of Solomon. That is, Genesis is an “imperial” text, and as such it resonates with our period, living as we do in a time of empire. This imperial reading of Genesis is not new, but since Berrigan provides no space for theoretical background or sources on imperialism, the reader is left to wonder what he means by this term and its implications. More problematic is his view that the Solomonic period represents “the imperial spirit,” that is, a time when poetry, local traditions, and free expressions gradually yielded before priestly power. This, to me, smacks of the view of Wellhausen and his implicit anti-Jewish tendencies. As we shall see, the specter of anti-Jewish sentiment or perhaps more accurately Christian triumphalism looms large in this work.

This last point is worth stressing: Berrigan is reading Genesis from an explicitly Christian viewpoint, which could be seen as a form of imperialism in its own right. For example, in discussing Gen 1:6–7, he spends twelve sentences on the text of Genesis and roughly three pages ruminating on the theme of water in the Gospel of John. In fact, his reflection on Genesis moves from Torah to New Testament so much early in the book that the reader is no longer sure if Berrigan is engaging in some sort of intertextual exercise or if he suffers from some sort of textual ADD. To wit, on pages 10–19 he reprints one piece of text from Genesis but twelve from John and three from Luke.

Since most of the book consists of “poetic” retellings or summaries of selected stories of Genesis interspersed with personal reflections and other poems, a recounting of the major points would be unwieldy. Instead, I would like to point out a few problems and bright spots I found in the book.

I found that Berrigan is at his best when he stays close to the text in question. For instance, his section on Gen 3:1–5 (57–59) contains wonderful observations about the interaction between Eve and the serpent. Similarly, when he examines Gen 4 (59–66), his New Testament quotes are chosen judiciously, and one gets the sense of a “testamental conversation” rather than an appropriative monologue. I especially liked his treatment of Gen 13 (111–18) as well as his rendering of Hagar in Gen 16 and 21 (134–40 and 151–54), even if he tends to whitewash Sarah’s treatment of Hagar in Gen 16. Finally, his last two chapters, which focus on the Joseph novella, are for the most part illuminating and vertiginous with insight.

As I mentioned above, the largest impediment to a full appreciation of Berrigan’s work is, for me, the nagging sense of Christian triumphalism that runs throughout his work. A

few examples should suffice. (1) In his discussion of 1:28 and its potential to encourage violent readings, he notes, “the text stands there, a scandal. And part of a larger scandal; the permeating violence of the god of the Hebrew Bible” (29).

(2) Similarly, in examining the flood narratives, he claims that Jesus will inaugurate a new covenant, writing, “scapegoating is done with; this God sheds no blood but His own, appoints no victim but Himself” (78). A few pages later, he characterizes the God of the flood as one that gives up on humanity but then asserts “In Jesus, we have a God who in act, drama, tragedy, does not give up” (87). At the end of his discussion of the flood, Berrigan even asks who the god of the Solomonic period was and answers, “At long last, who that fiery god was, is revealed in true God” (90).

(3) This view that Jesus repairs the ills of an earlier, less-adequate understanding is stated more explicitly when Berrigan writes, “Up to, and far beyond the Mosaic era, the covenant bespeaks bloodletting and scapegoating.... What a God, what a people!” (94). On the following page, he continues, “In Jesus, we are granted a breakthrough, stupendous and modest at once. No more exaction of blood, no scapegoating, no enemies, no war.”

(4) In this vein, I was also troubled by his linking of Gen 14 with Jesus’ encounter with the Jews in John 8, which contains one of the most vicious sources for anti-Jewish sentiment in history: Jesus telling the Jews that they are sons of the devil. My problem with this connection is that I do not see Berrigan making any claims to distance his view from that expressed in John, which, in light of the assertions I mention both above and below, could be read as a tacit endorsement of Jesus’ speech.

This thread of Christian triumphalism continues in his sixth chapter, which contains his discussion of the Akedah (Gen 22). While Berrigan does a fantastic job of interrogating the text regarding God’s motivation and character (156–57) and the potential impact of this event on Isaac (161), he soon takes up the well-worn tact of viewing the Akedah as a prefiguration of Christ. He writes, “Eventually, through Christ the scene is altered.... We are done with testing, with ambiguity and cruelty and a hallucinatory god” (166).¹ Finally,

1. In this regard, it might behoove us to listen to the voice of Elie Wiesel on this subject: “We should mention the role played by this scene [Gen 22] in Christianity: the threat hanging over Isaac is seen as a prefiguration of the crucifixion. Except that on Mount Moriah the act was *not* consummated: the father did *not* abandon his son. Such is the distance between Moriah and Golgotha. In Jewish tradition, man cannot use death as a means of glorifying God. Every man is an end unto himself, a living eternity; no man has the right to sacrifice another, not even to God. Had he killed his son, Abraham would have become the forefather of a people—but not the Jewish people. For the Jew, all truth must spring from life, never from death. To us, crucifixion represents not a step forward but a step backward: at the top of Moriah, the living

in discussing the tangled web between Laban and Jacob in Gen 29–31, Berrigan questions the character and interests of God, noting “The god ... can hardly be accounted transcendent, or compassionate, or a healer of human ills. For that God we must wait long and long” (199). The reasoning here is that since the god (lowercase g) of the narrative stems from the “imperial” setting of Solomon, it cannot be good. However, Berrigan sees the God (uppercase G) announced by the eighth-century prophets as the “new” God, because “It is the God of the prophets whom Jesus will both reveal and embody” (201). On that same page, he also claims that “the God of Jesus abominates the tawdry, bloody apparatus of empire, the savage system of domination and enslavement.” As such, Berrigan seems to be setting up some sort of theological dualism, wherein the god adumbrated in Genesis is so steeped in imperial knowledge and interests that it can be neither efficacious nor affective; however, Jesus and his God seem to correct all of these flaws.

One wonders if, in all this talk of imperial ideology and the way in which it undercuts “real” religion, Berrigan would be willing to turn such a critical eye to New Testament literature and ask questions about its ideology and what sorts of practices, beliefs, and identities it justifies, rationalizes, normalizes, and suppresses?

My final critique of the book has to do with its intended audience. As I noted above, the question of genre still hangs over the book. It does not seem to be a commentary in the traditional sense, but neither is it a monograph. As the foreword claims, it is written by neither a biblical scholar nor an academic theologian. Perhaps, then, it really is a series of reflections on and copious, loquacious summaries of Genesis, injected here and there with personal observations and poetic renderings of various biblical texts. This last characteristic is immediately obvious to anyone skimming the work, as in this rendering from page 178:

“... The
voice

is
of Jacob,

but

remain alive, thus marking the end of an era of ritual murder. To invoke the *Akeda* is tantamount to calling for mercy—whereas from the beginning Golgotha has served as pretext for countless massacres of sons and fathers cut down together by sword and fire in the name of a word that considered itself synonymous with love” (*Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends* [trans. Marion Wiesel; New York: Summit Books, 1976], 76).

the
hands

are
of
Esau.” (27:22)

Not being a poet, I admit I am unsure as to what effect this e.e. cummings-like organization is meant to invoke, but one does wonder why it takes pages 52–54 to reprint Rom 5:12–19 in this fashion. To return to my main point, however, I am unclear as to the audience Berrigan expects for his book. Certainly not a Jewish one, but among Christians (which seems to be his general audience), who is he aiming for? I doubt seriously whether academics or students looking for a good commentary on Genesis will turn to Berrigan’s work. Yet even lay Christians would sometimes find themselves alienated by his emphasis on imperialism or the recurrent, sporadically defined use of terms like “Shekinah” (60; cf. 169). As such, I am not sure to whom this book is marketed, but I do know that whoever they are, they are likely to be intrigued, enlightened, frustrated, and befuddled by this idiosyncratic series of reflections.