

A GOD WITHOUT PEDIGREE

Genesis

Translation and Commentary

Robert Alter

Norton, \$25, 324 pp.

The Beginning of Desire

Reflections on Genesis

Aviva Gottlieb Zornberg

Doubleday Image Books, \$15.95, 456 pp.

Edward T. Oakes

For my money the best Old Testament scholar of the twentieth century was Yehezkel Kaufmann, a Russian Jew who emigrated to Palestine in 1920 and became professor of Bible at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. He subsequently wrote a six-volume history, in Hebrew, of the religion of ancient Israel, only a much-abridged version of which was ever translated into English.

But even that truncated husk of Kauf-

mann's original was enough to show the English-speaking world what Old Testament scholarship can look like when freed of the Hegelian hammerlock that became so dominant in the German scholarship of the nineteenth century, a developmental outlook on historical causation that then went on to influence almost all the rest of later scholarship (much to its detriment, in my opinion). In contrast to the vague evolutionism of the German school, Kaufmann was able to show—without ever straying from strict historical-critical principles—that Israel did not *grow* into its monotheism: its religion neither arose from a “dialectic” with its neighbors nor did it achieve its final (universal) monotheism because of the later influence of the more theologically elaborate and self-consciously literary prophets. And correlatively, whatever conceptual borrowings Israel made from its Near Eastern environment, these borrowings were fitted into a world view that *from the outset* was at fundamental odds with the mythological polytheism of its neighbors.

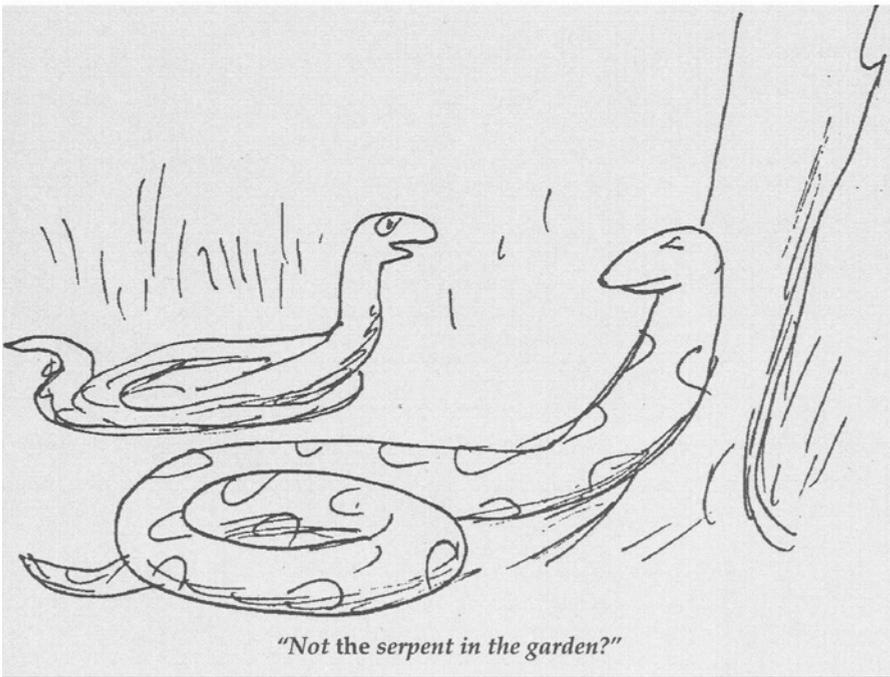
Crucially, in pagan religion the gods have a genealogy: they are *born* and, in

most tellings, usually take over the pantheon by usurping the earlier generation of divinities, as when Zeus rebelled against his father Chronos. But the God of the Hebrews, in Kaufmann's lapidary words, “has no pedigree, fathers no generations; he neither inherits nor bequeaths his authority. He does not die and is not resurrected. He has no sexual qualities or desires and shows no need of or dependence upon powers outside himself.”

Reading Kaufmann makes clear how revolutionary the book of Genesis has been to the religious legacy of humanity, how at a single stroke it altered the implicit metaphysical presuppositions of paganism, and how much contemporary scholarship misses the point if it is solely bent on tracing *influences* and not radical *differences*. Upon reflection, it is obvious that if the gods have a genealogy, the world-womb out of which they were born is greater than themselves, and so “in myth the gods appear not only as actors but as acted upon. Fate, says myth, apportions lots to the gods as well as to men.” This is also why the gods are not only sexually differentiated but are subject to sexual needs, desiring and mating with each other; moreover, they eat and drink, fall sick and require healing, need and invent tools, etc.

When I first read Kaufmann I asked myself why these perfectly obvious truths seemed to be slighted in other scholarship: Was it Kaufmann's native fluency in Hebrew, his Jewishness, or his innocence of schooling in the German/Hegelian tradition? I do not have answers to these questions, but they provide, I believe, the right context for understanding the vividness, clarity, and insight available in these two books under review. Here, under Alter's and Zornberg's ministrations, Genesis looks *different*, startlingly different.

Alter's book is first and foremost a translation—and only secondarily a commentary. But as Kaufmann was for history of religions, Alter is to translation: a man uniquely positioned to counteract the tendentious posturing of most other modern translations and the extratextual spin-doctoring of, for example, so many panelists in the recent PBS



“Not the serpent in the garden?”

talk-fest on Genesis hosted by Bill Moyers, too many of whom would indulge in embarrassing fatuities like accusing Abraham of child abuse, etc. It is hard to describe in the space of a short review the many felicities of this remarkable translation, but surely Alter's dual competence as biblical scholar and literary critic has uniquely positioned him to give us a translation that is both vigorous and contemporary.

My only regret in reading this work is to realize how much the translation of the whole Bible nowadays transcends the capacities of any one individual, at least if the translator wants to take into consideration the vast expanse of recent research in biblical semantics and philology. For the churches and synagogues desperately need a translation of *all* the books of the Bible of this quality. Although the Revised Standard Version is still the best overall translation of the whole Bible, Alter convincingly shows in his introduction, but more especially in the success of the translation itself, that the time has come for a fresh rendering, one that is vivid, vigorous, biblical—and so completely contemporary that one does not notice the language but lives in the telling of the story itself.

Avivah Zornberg's reflections on Genesis are as different from Alter's approach as might be imagined: where he is sober, she is expansive; where he insists on the spare narrative, she builds on those later embellished narratives called *midrashim*. This habit of expanding on the biblical material grew up in Jewish Bible-based cultures because of a feature everyone immediately notices about so many biblical narratives, especially those in Genesis: their laconic telling. So brief, so spare are the narrative interventions of most biblical tales that they positively invite later elaboration.

Because of what struck me as, on the whole, the rather silly things some of the panelists said on Moyers's special on Genesis, I have grown rather leery of specifically modern embellishments on Genesis and so I approached this book with wariness. My fears were misplaced. Not only is Zornberg's book leagues removed from popular trivializations, it

does what all successful midrash is meant to do: open up new perspectives on ancient texts. She does not weave her tales from whole-spun modern cloth, leaving the reader with a queasy feeling of just having watched a soap opera of negligent fathers and neurotically repressed mothers; rather she takes only traditional semicanonical *midrashim* for her theme. Indeed this is the usual practice in many Jewish homes that have a weekly study group: the "Bible" they study is the Bible and the semicanonized tradition of stories that go with them.

And fascinating they are! Abraham, for example, is a "philosopher" who comes to monotheism through rational speculation and then smashes his father's idols in disgust. In another version, Abraham is living the high-life: he feasts and entertains but neglects to sacrifice to God, and when Satan points this remission out to the good Lord, God is provoked to ask Abraham to atone for this negligence by sacrificing his son. Sarah swoons and dies when she hears of her son being bound to the altar; in another story Isaac goes blind on the altar because the tears of angels falling from heaven at his plight get into his eyes. (Although she does not mention it, some of Zornberg's stories have interesting parallels with those in Greek mythology: Niobe's tears, Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigenia, the wife who died of grief under the mistaken impression her husband had died in the Trojan War, etc.)

This book also casts a rather uncomfortable glare on modern sensibilities. Because the *midrashim* Zornberg selects for her treatment are all traditional, they provide a refreshing alternative to modern homiletic sentimentality. (How has God suddenly become so nice in all our preaching?) And while the comments she makes on these *midrashim* ransack contemporary authors (Ricœur, Kermode, Kafka, etc.), these authors usually have something disconcertingly, well, Kafka-esque to add—a dimension which is very much in line with the midrash tradition itself, where indeed Kafka got so much of his material and his sensibility. And that only highlights how far we have moved from the inner world

of the Bible. It's going to be a long haul back up Milton's Mount Moriah again, whence alone we can sense the majesty of Genesis in all its radiant distinction and eerie difference from us. □

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