

Prof. Scott B. Noegel  
Chair, Dept. of Near Eastern Languages and Civilization  
University of Washington

**“Genesis.”**

First Published in:  
*A Reader's Guide to Judaism*  
Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers (2000), 200-201.

adopting the same gender values as their ambient cultures. This is the soil within which Zionism and the revival of Hebrew blossomed, and it explains the strong gender associations with these projects discussed by Seidman. The second factor in the United States was increasing assimilation. Sons and grandsons of these immigrants, caught between having lost their means for achieving Jewish status (through Torah study) and being denied status in the gentile world because of their Jewishness, turned against Jewish women. The result was the production of cultural stereotypes of the suffocating Jewish mother. "The baleboste gave way to the Jewish priestess in her home, and in the course of time the Yiddishe Mamma of song and story was transmuted into Sophie Portnoy."

Although the books surveyed above focus on vastly different times and places, their wider conclusions and implications are remarkably similar. All of these authors see gender as constructed, that is, as a malleable category that Jewish cultures throughout time have manipulated for a variety of reasons. Most of these Jewish constructions of gender have been nearly identical to those of proximate non-Jews. They also have been far from salutary for women. Nearly all of the authors discussed thus far reveal the androcentric nature of these gender constructions and the valuation of "male" as superior to "female." Lassner, Wolfson, and Hyman show most explicitly how uneasy many Jewish cultures felt at even the possibility of valuing female as higher than, or merely equal to, male.

On a deeper level, these books are wrestling not only with historical cultures, but with a very delicate issue: the role of modern Jewish women. While none of these books explicitly states it, all imply that past Jewish gender constructions are deeply flawed as models for modern Jewish life. Yet none takes the next step, explaining how modern Jewish society can understand gender. In a highly original and daring work, BOYARIN attempts to do exactly this. His argument is that from the rabbinic through the modern period, there have been Jews who had an alternative construction of gender that valorizes the "sissy," the feminized and eroticized Jewish male. Boyarin locates the origin of this gender construction in the rabbinic period, as a response to Roman colonization and hegemony, and he charts its survival in the Middle Ages (somewhat weakly argued with the example of Glikl of Hameln and more strongly illustrated with examples of art from the Passover Haggadah) and its flowering within later Ashkenazi culture. It is precisely this image to which both Zionism and Freud's theory of psychoanalysis attempted to respond. Boyarin wants to reclaim this gender construction, going so far as to suggest that the ideal of Jewish masculinity be seen in a woman, Bertha Pappenheim. Whether or not all or most of Boyarin's readings of this enormous range of sources are convincing or whether his ultimate suggestions become influential remains to be seen. What is clearer is that scholars now having exposed convincingly the androcentrism inherent in past Jewish gender constructions, Boyarin points the way to the next question: must responsible academic work restrict itself to the deconstruction of gender models, or can it contribute constructively to a modern, and passionate, debate?

MICHAEL L. SATLOW

See also *Feminism; Sex; Women: Status*

## Genesis

- Cassuto, Umberto, *Perush 'al Sefer Bereshit*, 1953; translated by Israel Abrahams as *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, 2 vols., Jerusalem: Magnes Press of Hebrew University, 1989
- Gunkel, Hermann, *Die Sagen der Genesis*, 1901; translated by W.H. Carruth as *The Legends of Genesis: The Biblical Saga and History*, New York: Schocken, 1964
- Leibowitz, Nehama, *Iyunim be-sefer Bereshit: be-'ikvot parshanenu ha-rishonim veba-aharonim*, 1966; as *Studies in Bereshit (Genesis) in the Context of Ancient and Modern Jewish Bible Commentary*, Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, Department for Torah Education and Culture, 1974, 4th revised edition, 1993
- Rendsburg, Gary, *The Redaction of Genesis*, Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1986
- Sarna, Nahum, *Understanding Genesis* (Heritage of Biblical Israel, vol. 1), New York: Schocken, 1966
- Sarna, Nahum, *Genesis/Be-reshit: The Traditional Hebrew Text with New JPS Translation* (JPS Torah Commentary), Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989
- Speiser, E.A. (editor and translator), *Genesis* (Anchor Bible, vol. 1), Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1964, 3rd edition, 1979
- von Rad, Gerhard, *Genesis: A Commentary*, Philadelphia: Westminster, and London: SCM, 1961; revised edition, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973; London: SCM, 1985

The stories of Genesis have generated a library of commentaries and reflective works over the centuries. These works have examined Genesis from widely differing theological and methodological perspectives. During the 20th century, scholarly preference for understanding the book has shifted from one based on source-critical methodologies to one that treats the work essentially as a unity, whether written by one hand (a minority view) or compiled by a later redactor, dated to different periods and given different agendas depending on the scholar and his or her criteria.

CASSUTO's two-volume work can be credited, at least in part, with spearheading the initial forays into literary criticism of the Bible. Cassuto sifts a vast array of ancient Near Eastern sources and provides a careful and original study of the subtle nuances of the Hebrew text. In particular, he notes parallel units within the book of Genesis that possess a chiasmic format, thus demonstrating a greater unity of the text than had been supposed by many scholars of his day. Where appropriate Cassuto also supplies information from the various other textual witnesses to illustrate how they differ from or elucidate the Hebrew text. The work was translated from Hebrew to English posthumously. Where Hebrew terms have been retained they are accompanied by transliteration and translation, making this a ready companion for students regardless of their knowledge of Hebrew. The champion of scholars who resisted the influential assumptions of Julius Wellhausen's Documentary Hypothesis, Cassuto offers a creative and scientific challenge to the atomization of the text. The two volumes cover Genesis from Adam to Noah and from Noah to Abraham, respectively.

GUNKEL's classic survey represents his reaction to and departure from Wellhausen's isolationist approach to the text. Gunkel, generally known as the founder of form criticism, treats the narratives of Genesis as a prose form of earlier poetic traditions. His work on Genesis is still regarded as an invaluable starting point.

LEIBOWITZ offers the text of Genesis in conjunction with selections from rabbinic commentaries and midrashim in Hebrew and English. In so doing, she makes accessible a world of early and diverse scholarship that is often unknown or unavailable. The work also lists at the end of each section a series of questions that challenge the reader to interrogate both the biblical text and the various commentators' positions and presuppositions. Leibowitz combines literary criticism, a feminist perspective, and traditional Jewish exegesis to make for original and engaging reading. Biographical notes on the commentators integrated into her work constitute a useful added feature.

VON RAD expands upon the theological implications of the earlier historical studies of Albrecht Alt and Martin Noth, aiming to "elucidate the relationship between Biblical historical and literary criticism and a Biblical theology of history." While adhering to the bare essentials of the Documentary Hypothesis, von Rad treats Genesis as a carefully composed "saga" and provides what is essentially a running commentary that separates the various narrative traditions (e.g., J, E, and P) while studying them within the context of a broader hexateuchal theology. Von Rad sees this as a preoccupation with a single and simple narrative theme: "God, the Creator of the world, called the patriarchs and promised them the land of Canaan. When Israel became numerous in the land of Egypt, God led the people through the wilderness with wonderful demonstrations of grace; then after their lengthy wandering he gave them under Joshua the Promised Land."

SARNA (1966) aims to elucidate the historical, philosophical, and sociological message of Genesis. He designed his work to "make the Bible of Israel intelligible, relevant and, hopefully, inspiring to a sophisticated generation, possessed of intellectual curiosity and ethical sensitivity." To this end, Sarna rejects the literalist interpretation of the Bible and instead places it in its appropriate cultural setting, treating the text as one would treat any historical document. Sarna distills for the nontechnical reader the advances of biblical scholarship, archaeology, and more recent techniques of critical analysis without leaning on jargon. While clarifying the broader cultural continuum that comprises the Near East, Sarna rightly emphasizes the differences as well, pointing out the distinguishing characteristics of Israelite religion and literature. He proceeds through the book of Genesis by pericope and cycle, providing separate treatments of creation, the flood, the Tower of Babel, the patriarchal period, the covenant, Sodom and Gomorrah, Isaac and the Akedah, Jacob and his relations with Esau and Laban, and finally the Joseph cycle.

Each page of SARNA (1989) provides Hebrew biblical text, interlinear translation, and a running commentary that highlights the most difficult and important verses. Sarna looks at Genesis with a literary eye and elucidates it with numerous references to ancient and modern scholarship. The commentary

is transliterated when discussing particular words or phrases, rendering it useful to readers who are not familiar with Hebrew. Sarna's commentary represents a transitional phase in scholarship, one that links the early efforts at literary criticism of the Bible, and hence a holistic understanding of the received text, with a seasoned and cautious regard for the oral sources that comprise the narrative fabric.

SPEISER combines a mastery of ancient Near Eastern and traditional Jewish sources with the perspective of the school of higher criticism. In addition to providing a translation and thorough philological analysis of the more difficult aspects of the text, Speiser also delves into the redactional history of Genesis. In particular, he opines as to the various editorial strands that he sees layered into a semicohesive whole, which betray a number of hands as well as a grounding in pagan mythology. Throughout, Speiser provides archaeological and comparative evidence to elucidate the text. Though a few of Speiser's observations appear today somewhat dated and even somewhat presumptuous, his overall contribution to the study of Genesis cannot be overstated.

RENDSBURG expands upon the work of earlier literary critical scholars such as Cassuto in demonstrating how the entire work of Genesis forms a complex web of interconnected stories, held together by theme-words that link paired units. His book is divided into four major units—the primeval history, the Abraham cycle, the Jacob cycle, and the Joseph story—and considers also the parallels that connect each of the cycles. Rendsburg discusses the impact that the proposed redactional structuring has on source criticism and comments on a possible date for the book, which, based on literary parallels with Samuel and Kings, he places during the united monarchy, sometime in the tenth century B.C.E. His holistic approach to Genesis provides an insightful counterpoint to the atomizing tendencies of higher criticism.

SCOTT B. NOEGEL

## Genizah, Cairo

- Cohen, Mark R., *Jewish Self-Government in Medieval Egypt: The Origins of the Office of Head of the Jews, ca. 1065–1126* (Princeton Studies on the Near East), Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980; as *Jewish Self-Government in Medieval Egypt: The Origins of the Office of the Head of the Jews*, Guildford, Surrey: Princeton University Press, 1980
- Friedman, Mordechai A., *Jewish Marriage in Palestine: A Cairo Genizah Study*, 2 vols., New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1980
- Gil, Moshe, *Documents of the Jewish Pious Foundations from the Cairo Geniza* (Publications of the Diaspora Research Institute, vol. 12), Leiden: Brill, 1976
- Gil, Moshe, *Erets-Yisra'el ba-tekufah ha-Muslemit ha-rishonah (634–1099)*, 1983; translated by E. Broido as *A History of Palestine, 634–1099*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992
- Goitein, S.D., *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the*