

INTRODUCTION

The book of Genesis, which we are about to read, we have all read many times before. How often were the stories it contains told to us when we were children who could not yet read! And so they became part of us. This familiarity is both a blessing and a curse. We find, peering at us from behind every line of the text, ghosts of former thoughts, thoughts passed down through the ages, thoughts which were not our own. Only with great effort can we learn to treat the familiar as if it were foreign; but such is our task if we hope even to begin to grasp the book's intention.

Traditionally, the name of the book we are about to read is *In the Beginning*, simply the first word of the text; the title "Genesis" was a later addition from Greek. The other books of the Torah are similarly named, in Hebrew, by the word or words that happen to appear first; thus they can hardly be said to have "titles" at all.

When we pick up a book we immediately notice the title, the name of the author, and the date of publication. This is not merely a modern convention. The book of Amos, for instance, begins this way:

The words of Amos, who was among the shepherds of Tekoa, which he saw concerning Israel in the days of Uzziah King of Judah and in the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash, King of Israel, two years before the earthquake. [Amos 1:1ff]

In the book of Genesis no author's name is given, there is no date of publication; and it even, at least in Hebrew, has no title. The book does not tell us these things, and therefore we do not know them. Are these absences significant? Again we are not told, and do not know; we have only the book that lies open before us.

The book of Amos purports to be an account of the words of God. Homer, too, begins with the words, "Sing, O goddess, the wrath of Achilles." While Genesis includes many speeches of God, it contains no claim of divine origin. Since no such claim is made, and yet it describes the lives of men who lived many years before the time of the biblical author, we feel compelled to assume that the author relied heavily on older accounts, either written or in the memory of the people. But we no longer have those older accounts, and so cannot study them. Our only recourse,

then, is to reread the book of Genesis again and again in order to see whether the biblical author fashioned those tales into an integral whole or not; and, if he did, what that whole means.

This touches on what moderns might call my method of reading. It is difficult to speak of a *method*, in the sense of *a tool with which we come* to a work, other than the notion that one should begin by assuming that the book to be studied is written with intelligence until the opposite is shown. Nevertheless, in the course of my readings a certain *way* has developed. It began to take shape in my mind some years before beginning this book.

One day as I was reading Chapter 12 of Genesis I was struck by the words *Beth-El on the west and Ai on the east* (Gen. 12:8). They seemed familiar, as if I had been there before. It was there that Abram built an altar—but it was also the place in which Joshua would set his men in his first successful armed battle within the territory of the promised land: *between Beth-El and Ai, to the west of Ai* (Josh 8:9).

For a moment I wondered: Was Abram somehow aware of what he had done? Or did Joshua know that his way had somehow been prepared? Probably not; it was just a passing thought. But then I began to notice several other instances of themes resonating in the same place or within the same family, or even under the same tree, centuries later. Was this mere coincidence, or did it reflect an important narrative element? I tried to recall everything that happened in each of those places and to each of those peoples whenever their names appeared; and gradually a story evolved. And so I wondered what would come to light if I were to proceed on the assumption that the book of Genesis was intended to be read as part of a single work consisting of the books Genesis through II Kings.

Joshua's ambush was actually Israel's second attempt to capture Ai; the first had ended in unexpected and shameful defeat. That, Joshua learned, was the punishment sent by God because someone had stolen from the "devoted things." Achan the Zerahite, the only Zerahite of the tribe of Judah to be mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, admitted to Joshua that he had stolen "a beautiful cloak from Shinar," along with silver and gold. Achan's ancestor Zerah, and Zerah's twin brother Perez, were Tamar's sons by Judah:

When the time of [Tamar's] labor came, there were twins in her womb. And when she was in labor, one put out a hand, and the midwife took and tied a scarlet thread on his hand, saying, "This one came out first." But as he drew back his hand, behold, his brother came out. And she said, "What a breach [פְּרִיצָה, *paretz*] you have made for yourself!" Therefore his name was called Perez. Afterward his brother came out

with the scarlet thread on his hand, and his name was called Zerah.
[Gen. 38:27–30]

Had Perez not breached his way into the position of firstborn, the line of inheritance that led to Israel's kingship would have gone to a man who craved a beautiful cloak from Shinar—that is, from Babylon.

The task of correlating such multiple appearances as these is greatly facilitated by concordances and computer-searchable texts. But there is a sense in which we seriously fail to participate in the biblical narrative when we make use of such aids. A more natural reading would involve a slow process of remembering and forgetting—which would have replicated life as the biblical author understood it. The author's narrative way is not merely a literary device; it reproduces his understanding of ourselves and our ways. We live by traditions which bury themselves deep in the land, only to arise again from time to time, for good or for bad. At times they are forgotten, then suddenly and vividly reappear. The Hebrew Bible is not only an attempt to lay out the roots of a tradition; it is also a dramatic showing-forth of how such traditions are possible. But one cannot see that drama without in some way participating in it—at the very least, by recognizing the problem.

Hamlet speaks with Bernardo long before he kills the king; yet when rereading Shakespeare's play, we cannot but see the opening scene in the light of what we know is to come. Similarly, Abraham's altar between Beth-El and Ai, along with many other such instances, have led me to the premise explored in this book, that the book of Genesis is part of a greater whole. But let me articulate the way I see the composition of that whole.

Traditionally, the Hebrew scriptures are regarded as comprising three parts: Teaching (תורה, *Torah*), Prophets (נביאים, *Nevi'im*), and Writings (כתובים, *K'tuvim*). The prophets themselves are classed as either Early (ראשונים, *Rishonim*) or later (אחרונים, *Acharonim*), as seen in the following table. The whole is known in Hebrew by the acronym תנ"ך or *Tanakh*.

Teaching		תורה	<i>Torah</i>	Genesis–Deuteronomy
Prophets	Early	נביאים ראשונים	<i>Nevi'im Rishonim</i>	Joshua–Kings
	Later	נביאים אחרונים	<i>Nevi'im Acharonim</i>	Isaiah–Malachi
Writings		כתובים	<i>K'tuvim</i>	Psalms–Chronicles

In accordance with the reading that has shaped the present study, I propose the structure set out in the following table. Since the first division of this plan consists of *Torah* and *Nevi'im Rishonim*, I refer to it with the acronym תנ"ר or *Tanar*.

Tanar	Teaching	תורה	<i>Torah</i>	Genesis–Deuteronomy
	Early Prophets	נביאים ראשונים	<i>Nevi'im Rishonim</i>	Joshua–Kings + Ruth
	Later Prophets	נביאים אחרונים	<i>Nevi'im Acharonim</i>	Isaiah–Malachi
	Writings	כתובים	<i>K'tuvim</i>	Psalms–Chronicles (without Ruth)

In the present study I have tried to read the book of Genesis as it might have been read in Babylon after the closing of Tanar, when the curses from Mt. Ebal had ceased to be a threat concerning the future and had become the world of daily life. I believe that the reader will find in Tanar a sense of unity not to be found in the books that compose the rest of Tanakh. That is to say, Tanar constitutes a *book* in a way that Tanakh does not.

Numerous passages in the book of Genesis reveal deepened significance in light of events narrated later in Tanar. It is from one of those succeeding events that I have drawn the title of the present commentary: the Lion and the Ass are characters in an episode found in I Kings, chapter 13; it is recounted in my chapter On Prophecy.