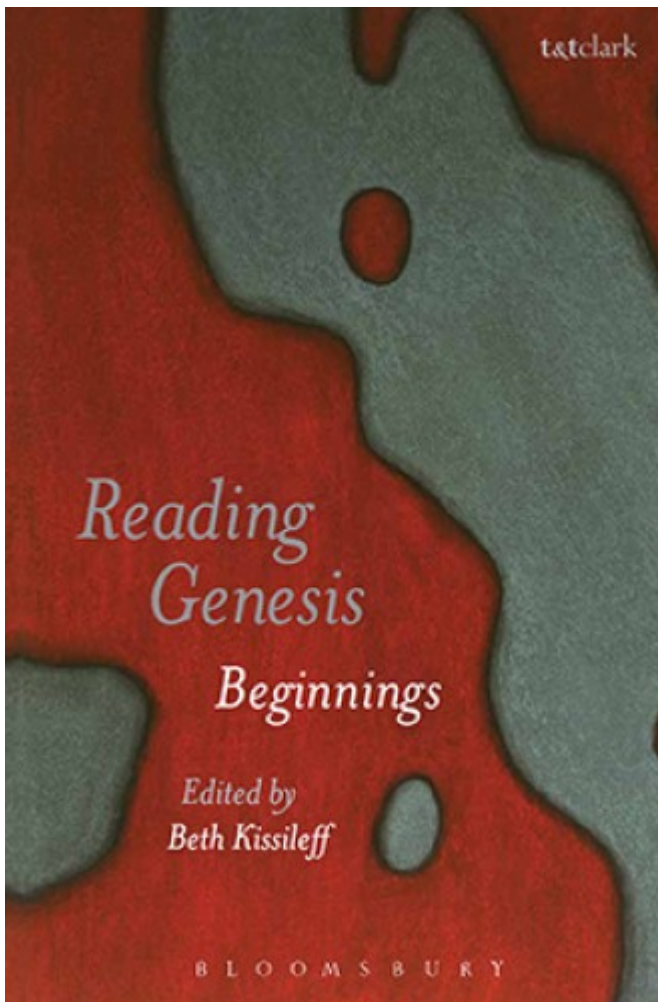


Questions in Genesis

A book of essays asks, is the Bible literature? How is a blessing like an oath? And what if Eve was just hungry?

by [Anna Levin Rosen](#) in the [May 10, 2017](#) issue

In Review



Reading Genesis

Beginnings

Edited by Beth Kissileff
Bloomsbury

One rabbinic teaching claims that there are 70 different faces of the Torah and instructs: “turn it, turn it, for everything is in it” (Midrash on Numbers, 13:15). At first glance, one cannot but be impressed by Beth Kissileff’s broad and multifaceted collection of essays on Genesis. It includes contributions by some of the best-known Jewish thinkers, scholars, writers, and public figures—the crafters of 21st-century American Jewish culture. The diversity of topics, from game theory to neurobiology, from culinary traditions to human sexuality, presents contemporary evidence that the Bible speaks to all human knowledge.

Kissileff arranges the essays according to the order of the biblical text. The diversity of genres paired with the multiplicity of themes, characters, and ideas within Genesis creates a disjointed feeling rather than a flow. But a sense of continuity emerges as the authors of many of the essays discuss their personal relationship with the text and their perspective on writing for such a collection.

One striking example of self-awareness and commitment to craft comes from novelist Dara Horn. In her exploration of Jacob’s character development, Horn critiques the study of “Bible as literature” when it secularizes the text. This mode of study is “fashionable [as] a way to teach the Torah to people who do not believe in God,” but it separates the text from its deeply religious content and intent.

Using her expertise in comparative literature, Horn counters that the “*literary aspects* of the biblical text make its religious meaning possible” and “the written style of the biblical text itself confers moral and religious significance.” She claims that the early rabbis were so strongly influenced by Hellenistic culture that they read the Torah through the lens of Homer. In so doing, Horn argues, these interpreters reduced the characters to static identities imposed as immutable qualities, obscuring the intricacies of biblical characterization. This courageous reading exposes a limitation in some of the most influential Jewish writings.

Legal scholar Geoffrey P. Miller’s analysis of contracts is one of the most compelling and original discussions in this collection. Miller, who teaches at NYU Law School, shows how the language of covenant, oath, and blessing is core to the narrative and

essential components of relationships in Genesis. His expertise in biblical studies ranges from taxation to the political theory of the book of Kings. In this essay, he addresses the sale of the birthright and the entanglement of Jacob, Esau, Rebecca, and Isaac through a legal-economic analysis. Regarding the dilemma of the sold birthright and misdirected blessing, Miller argues that “the act of blessing rather clearly performs the same function as the oath: it brings the deity into the transaction and establishes that the actions to be taken are intended to have and in fact do have legally binding import.” While one might imagine such a distillation as tone-deaf to the emotional nature of the story, Miller’s analysis adds depth to our understanding of the relationships in Genesis.

Some of the essays in this collection strip the biblical stories of depth by treating them only as reflections of the ancient Near Eastern context from which they emerged. Renan Levine, like Miller, applies the discipline of political science to the leadership patterns of biblical times, specifically the relationship between Judah and his brothers. Unfortunately, Levine offers overly simplistic discussions of both the biblical characters and contemporary leadership theory. Approaching Judah and his brothers as if they were historical figures rather than characters, Levine writes: “Jacob and his sons were semi-nomadic shepherds, subsisting on a blend of sedentary cultivation . . . and nomadic shepherding. This lifestyle was common in the periphery of deserts where rainfall fluctuates seasonally and annually.” This kind of description flattens the biblical text rather than encouraging a complex reading.

One of the most esoteric pieces in the collection, written by the editor’s father, asks a question that is rarely considered: Did Eve take a bite of the fruit because she was hungry? Harry R. Kissileff asks, “What makes the body ready to accept or reject food?” He asserts, “Eve was not simply seduced into a prohibited behavioral act; we must assume she was also in a physiological state that was conducive to consuming. Had Eve been in a state of supersatiation . . . it is unlikely that she would have even listened to the serpent.” Here, as in several other essays, the nuance of the Bible and theology seem barely present. The tension present in this collection is perhaps most aptly described by Jonathan Sacks, who writes in *The Great Partnership*: “Science is about explanation. Religion is about meaning. Science analyses, religion integrates.”

What Jacqueline Osherow says of poetry in her essay could also be applied to the entire diverse and sometimes contradictory book: it has an “insistence on saying at least two opposite things at once.” In the tradition of Jewish textual interpretation

and layered commentaries, that's a compliment.

The many disciplines in this collection do not interact with one another in a way that provides new intertextual insight. But engaging in commentary is a form of respect even when it falls short. As Osherow comments: "It always seems to me that no matter what I'm trying to say, that the Bible has already put it perfectly." As an editor, Kissileff seems to have embraced this sentiment while maintaining a commitment to the Jewish tradition of exegesis.