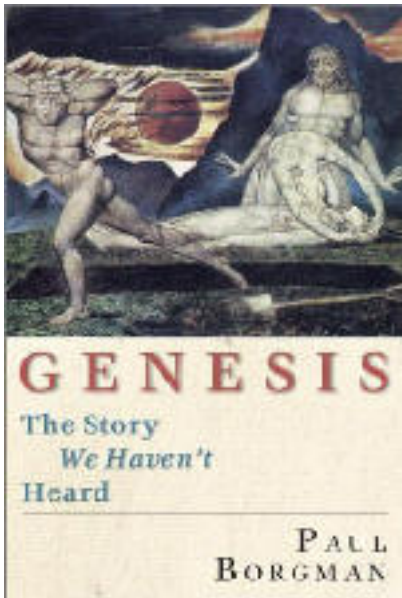


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Borgman, Paul

Genesis: The Story We Haven't Heard

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In the introduction to his book, *Genesis: The Story We Haven't Heard*, Paul Borgman writes: “The promise of this guide is to help with finding the connections that provide theme and character for Genesis—including the character of God” (14). To be able to provide it, he tries to approach the Genesis story as objectively as possible. That is only possible to a certain degree. He realizes himself that his predisposition of “God is One” may have influenced his view that the Genesis story presents a unified portrait of God (17). He also wants to “involve the readers by helping to sort out the text’s clues” (19).

Borgman (Ph.D., University of Chicago) is professor of English at Gordon College in Wenham, Massachusetts. His insight and knowledge of the art of stories bring new light to the development and interconnection of the broader Genesis story. In a fitting way he is able to make use of seminar-like discussions between his students and himself and conversations with three well-known Old Testament scholars, namely, James Ackerman, Walter Brueggemann, and Terence Fretheim. He makes extensive use of typical literature elements in the Hebrew language, such as wordplays, silences, chiasms, repetitions, discontinuities, and changes.

Borgman follows the same sequence in his discussion on Genesis as the history line of Genesis. Chapter 1 starts off with the account of creation. The names of God feature

prominently in the creation story, which leads to better understanding of the character of God. In this chapter we also recognize the start of a possible theme that Borgman will try to emphasize throughout his book. On the one hand, humans try to establish their own name and prominence in history, and it leads to sinful deeds and behavior (30, 37). On the other hand, God wants humans to be a blessing to all humanity. Borgman writes: “What God had wanted was a good world in which humans would find their highest good in a balanced partnership with one another . . . and also in partnership with God” (29).

Chapter 2 starts with God’s promise to Abram. The emphasis is placed on the way Abram experiences a radical insecurity regarding life and name (55) and his inability to be a blessing to the rest of the world (41). Chapter 3 discusses Abram’s first four visits with God (Gen 12:1–15:21). Abram’s fear and the upholding of his name are an integral part in the understanding of the four visits. In chapter 4 visits five and six are discussed (Gen 17:1–18:33), and Abraham takes an increasingly active role in his partnership with God. The usage of the names of God suggests more emphasis on God’s global vision. The seventh visit is discussed in chapter 5 (Gen 22:1–19). Again, the usage of the names of God presents us with an understanding of God’s character (88), and Abraham must trust in God both for his own name and for the ultimate promise, blessing to all people (91). Chapter 6 points out that the challenge “not to fear” is central to all the visits with God and fundamental in Abraham’s plea of self-preservation for his wife and self-promotion of his interests (113). Chapter 7, the epilogue of Abraham’s story, concludes with the way Abraham brings blessing to all people.

Chapter 8 is about Jacob’s own attempts to promote himself and his fear of not having a name (140, 148). In chapter 9 Jacob is confronted with his own deceiving ways. Chapter 10 discusses a possible reorientation of Jacob’s heart, but self-promotion at the expense of others is still part of the life of Jacob and his family. Finally, in chapters 11–13 self-promoting interests in the life of Joseph and his brothers, as well as God’s overall purpose for his people to be a blessing to all nations, are discussed. The conclusion is that it is all too human to promote oneself at the expense of others (233), but through Abraham’s seed all nations will indeed be blessed (236).

Borgman succeeds in driving home the theme of self-promotion and the establishment of one’s own name in the lives of the patriarchs, on the one hand, and God’s overall purpose of them being a blessing to all nations, on the other hand. The way he explains the revelation embedded in the names of God helps the reader to understand more of the character of God and the reaction of people to it. His ability to prove a constant and overall theme in the history of the patriarchs helps to pull it together and to explain individual passages better. Borgman concludes that Genesis is a story “that challenges our conventional ideas about God, about human transformation, and about what

constitutes the truly good life” (241). However, his claim that this is a story “we haven’t heard before” is not proved. Hasel wrote that “historical events must be capable of being explained by antecedent historical causes and understood in terms of analogy to other historical experiences” (G. Hasel, *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982], 173). In doing that, scholars were able to recognize a vast variety of possible themes in Genesis. Borgman also mentions that “a dip-in-here, dip-in-there approach fails miserably with biblical narratives, systematically distorting their meaning” (15). This is true not only in the case of biblical narratives but also within the Old and New Testaments as a whole. Pratt wrote that we “must evaluate all differences in light of the covenantal unity of Scripture” (R.L. Pratt, *He Gave Us Stories: The Bible Student’s Guide to Interpreting Old Testament Narratives* [Brentwood, Tenn.: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1990], 344). To be able to understand the story of Genesis better (including the character of God) and to apply it to our lives, we must not only recognize the discontinuities, repetitions, chiasms, and silences but also consider the organic developments of redemptive history in the whole of Scripture.

Borgman’s *Genesis: The Story We Haven’t Heard* was a real delight to read. The way he uses and develops the different themes helps the reader to understand the Genesis narratives from a different angle. Features in the Genesis narratives, such as visitations, wrestling, and weeping, help one to recognize a different approach by God to individuals. However, the overall picture is still kept together with one or two common themes. I would recommend this book to readers who want to enrich their insight into the Genesis narratives and their understanding of God’s ways in the lives of certain individuals.