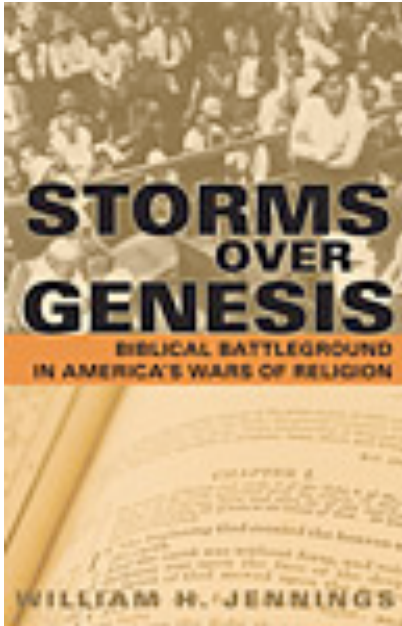


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Jennings, William H.

Storms over Genesis: Biblical Battleground in America's Wars of Religion

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William H. Jennings is Emeritus Professor of Religion at Muhlenberg College in Allentown, Pennsylvania. He has written this brief, popular overview of interpretive disputations regarding the first three chapters of the book of Genesis. The book is tailored for Christian laity while giving slight attention to Jewish readers. The topics of intense debate addressed in this book have been fueled most vigorously by American Christianity, as Jennings notes (xii). The preface begins with the striking statement that “No words ever recorded have had more influence upon human affairs in more diverse ways than the words of the first three chapters of Genesis” (ix), because of the enormous influence upon Christian, Jewish, and Muslim worldviews, as well as scientific development, economic systems, and views of family and sexuality. In order to substantiate this broad, sweeping claim, the author presents and evaluates the positions of three interpretive perspectives—feminists, environmentalists, and creationists—which form three of the four main chapters of the book. The first main chapter is a terse discussion of biblical criticism, in particular source criticism of the Pentateuch, which can readily be considered a fourth battleground area as far as Gen 1-3 has been concerned in American Christianity. The four main chapters comprise approximately twenty-five pages each.

The book registers the NRSV translation of Gen 1–3 prior to the commencement of the study. As indicated in appendix A and various other places in the book, the author indicates his primary interpretive allegiance to the NRSV because of its gender-inclusive language (“human beings” in place of “man”) and the allowance of the existence of matter before God began creating (“In the beginning *when* God created...” rather than “In the beginning, God created...”). The author’s dependence upon this translation discloses his major exegetical weakness. He is unable accurately to translate and exegete the original language of the Hebrew Bible, which is made painfully evident when he translates *bārā’* as “kind” rather than “he created” (76). Throughout the book, there is very little attention to the Hebrew text.

Chapter 1, “Interpreting the Creation Stories,” provides a basic but useful introduction to the differing voices or sources of the creation accounts in Gen 1 and 2. Writing about the shift in scholarly views of the authorship of the Pentateuch, Jennings notes the rise of the Documentary Hypothesis from the late 1800s that has displaced a scholarly view of the Mosaic authorship of Genesis and the larger Pentateuch. Despite the ever-growing diversity of scholarly views as to the dating and provenance of these sources behind the writing of the Pentateuch, largely known as J (the Yahwist document), E (the Elohist), P (the Priestly), and D (the book of Deuteronomy), the author offers some broad conclusions. As his surmising relates to Gen 1–3, Jennings judges that the J source is tenth or ninth century B.C.E. and comes from someone familiar with farm life in Palestine; J is responsible for the second creation story in Gen 2:4b–25 and the garden of Eden story in Gen 3. The P source, responsible for the first creation story in Gen 1:1–2:4a, was written during the Babylonian exile or soon after in the sixth or fifth century B.C.E. by a priest or priests. In the author’s mind, P is definitely a man, while J is probably a man, although female authorship should not be ruled out. With this perspective, P and J are compared and contrasted in terms of divine names and characteristics, methods of creation, preexistent material (with reliance upon the NRSV to assert that water preexisted with God in the Gen 1 creation story), and views of male and female humans. Following the canons of biblical criticism, Jennings avows that the parallel sources behind Gen 1–3 should not be harmonized but read and understood separately as the stories converse with and supplement each other.

The second chapter of the book, “Genesis and the Challenges of Feminists,” succinctly reviews feminist and patriarchal approaches to Genesis and the Bible more generally. The author is very sympathetic to feminist concerns and strongly objects to patriarchy and hierarchy that stem from an image of God as a wise male who creates and rules and disciplines. He deduces that readers of Gen 1–3 should view “the Creator as both Mother and Father as we interpret the two stories” (50). This chapter is full of writing snippets of people Jennings labels patriarchal—Paul in 1 Cor 11, the writer of 1 Tim 2, Tertullian,

Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, the writer of *Malleus Maleficarum*, the Jewish writer of Sirach, and Philo of Alexandria—as well as people Jennings classifies feminist: Elizabeth Stanton, Phyllis Tribble, Judith Plaskow, Sallie McFague, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, and Rosemary Radford Ruether. The interpretations of two scholars, Phyllis Tribble and Harold Bloom, are highlighted presumably for feminists in order to indicate that Gen 2–3 can be construed as containing positive views of women. The author even gives brief consideration to two larger views of evangelical Christians, egalitarianism and complementarianism.

In chapter 3, “Genesis and the Critiques of Environmentalists,” Jennings discusses contemporary environmental issues in relation to Gen 1–3. He begins the chapter by indicating reasons why some have blamed the biblical text for environmental problems and follows this discussion with a defense why the biblical text itself is not to blame but rather misinterpretations of Gen 1–3. Even the concept of stewardship, often employed by defenders of Gen 1–3, is a double-edged sword because stewardship may connote both human care and service to the natural world but also a “hierarchical human superiority over nature” (60). He gives further consideration to ecofeminism, green theology, and a sacramental universe. Ultimately, the chapter prescribes panentheistic theology—God is in all that exists, but God is more than all—which gives allowance for the cosmos to be the body of God; moreover, Jennings insists that other creation stories (e.g., stories from American Indians and findings from modern science) should augment Gen 1–3 without abandoning the biblical accounts of creation to address prevailing environmental concerns.

“Genesis and the Claims of Creationists” (ch. 4) rounds out the discussion of these four battlegrounds. The author chronicles the rise of creationism in the United States and indicates its underpinnings as burdensome fundamentalism and Newtonian science. The chapter contains a brief examination of the notion of intelligent design. Throughout the chapter, Jennings avers the connection between Darwinism and the contemporary scientific notion of a dynamic, ever-changing cosmos. He points out that the majority of Christians in mainline Protestant churches and in the Roman Catholic Church adhere to some variation of this understanding of the cosmos and reject creationism; indeed, all branches of Judaism including Orthodox have proponents. The author concludes that ideas from Darwin are welcome in understanding the cosmos and that “an understanding of both the world and God in terms of *dynamic and evolving* interrelationships” is the best way forward in the debate (99). There is mention of several key players in this debate: Cyrus Scofield, Henry Morris, John Haught, Pope Pius XII, Pope John Paul II, and Michael Behe. Appendix B mentions five court cases that have shaped the landscape of this heated battleground in American Christianity and the larger American public square, and the epilogue contains a summation of Jennings’s larger points throughout the book.

In the midst of extremist positions (e.g., radical feminism, creationism), Jennings searches for mediating positions as to how to interface Gen 1–3 with feminist, environmental, and creation concerns. He casts his lot with panentheism and dismisses classical theology because the latter option connotes “a God too separated from the natural world” (64). Overall, his assessment of classical Christian theism is deficient; it would have been helpful to point out things such as that classical theism teaches that God is also very immanent in this world because the divine entered this world in Jesus Christ, the God-man. With panentheistic theology, Jennings wants to view the universe as not planned or controlled by God; this kind of understanding unfortunately does not consider the primary name of God in the Old Testament, Lord, which indicates a God who possesses dominion.

Clergy and informed Christian laity will benefit from this concise introduction to four areas of religious and cultural debate regarding the first three chapters of Genesis. The primary contribution of the volume for readers is contained in the cultural and religious analysis of the debates, not the biblical analysis of Gen 1–3. In short, what Jennings states is required in his study, “focused Bible study” and “insights from scholars of the Hebrew Bible” (x), is lacking here. To be fair, Jennings does present several views of Hebrew Bible scholars, but, unfortunately, the interpretations presented are not representative of the swath of modern biblical scholarship, much less the history of Christian or Jewish interpretation of Gen 1–3. The fine concise cultural analysis provided in this volume will become even more valuable when the other two required items that the author mentions as needed are delivered.