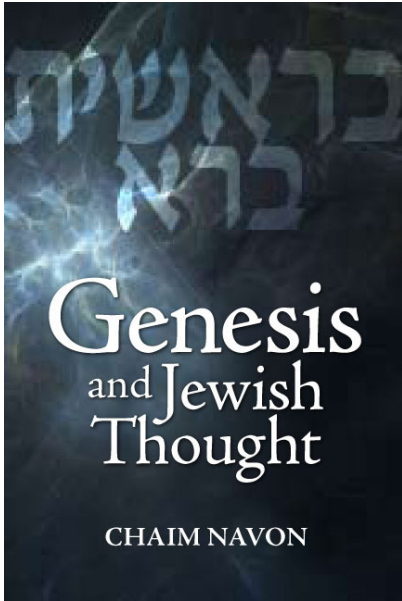


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Navon, Chaim

Genesis and Jewish Thought

Jersey City, N.J.: Ktav, 2008. Pp. x + 379. Hardcover.
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The 379-page book by Chaim Navon, entitled *Genesis and Jewish Thought*, is divided into twenty-four chapters, the subjects of which are topics that stem, in part, from the book of Genesis. The book has no bibliography save for a four-item “acknowledgement” section at the end of the book listing permission grants for certain selections in the book.

What to Expect: A Survey of the Content

Navon presents what amounts to an anthology of modern and premodern Jewish thought on a variety of topics. It is not an exhaustive anthology, which Navon notes in the introduction (x). Some references are also to non-Jewish philosophers and theologians, who are used in the book as points of contrast/comparison to Jewish thought, often with the undisguised intention of vindicating the Jewish position. The presentation is unabashedly “faith-oriented.” For instance, regarding the intersection between the social-scientific approach to ancient Israelite laws and customs, Navon makes this comment:

In the twentieth century, an approach developed within traditional Judaism that was willing to accept the proposed similarity [i.e., between Israelite and non-Israelite customs]. How is this possible? How can we possibly find a resemblance between the eternal laws of God and the transient laws of man? (64)

Navon, citing modern rabbinic authorities such as Joseph Soloveitchik and Abraham Issac Kook, suggests that Judaism need not fear these findings. Navon positions himself as a premodern in this respect, plowing over what some might cite as irregularities or curiosities in the biblical text as evidence of the authenticity of Torah teaching. It comes as no surprise, Navon suggests (through Kook), that we find references to “Torah teaching” prior to Moses—the Torah is a model of continuity, not discontinuity.

Another example of Navon’s approach is exhibited in his treatment of the subject of violence:

The story of Cain and Abel is pessimistic as well as tragic. There are only four people in the entire world, all of them members of the same family, and yet a murder is committed. In proportional terms, Cain killed a greater part of the world’s population than any other person. (161)

In most sections of the work, the topic and its subsequent discussion relate to Genesis, but there are moments, at times substantial, in which Genesis gets lost in Navon’s anthological musings. For instance, in the chapter entitled “The Individual and the Society,” the discussion begins by noting Gen 2:15 and the creation of the first human’s “help-mate.” Navon refers to b. Sanhedrin 37a regarding the commentary on the sanctity of the human being (each individual is representative of the first human being created; therefore, for each person’s sake was the world created). The discussion that follows becomes a treatment of the Jewish (qua Israelite) community. The reception of the law (113), Maimonides’ position on the fundamental participation by the individual in the community (115), and the distinctiveness of the Jewish community as filtered through the lenses of Rabbis Kook and Soloveitchik (115–16) dominate the conversation. Navon then continues by referencing the treatment of the individual and community in non-Jewish thought; he refers to Aristotle’s *Politics* (117), Rousseau’s *The Social Contract* (118), Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* (119–20) and Mussolini’s *The Doctrine of Fascism* (120–21) as representatives. Navon suggests that two types of communities are enumerated in the first two chapters of Genesis, which are viewed as being representative by many modern scholars as two different traditions (121). Citing Soloveitchik again, Navon agrees that these two chapters reflect two “different types of *man*” (121, emphasis added). Through all of this, however, it is difficult to remember that one is reading a treatment of Genesis rather than an anthology of differing views (Jewish and non-Jewish) on the nature of humankind and how the individual relates to community.

Some Observations: Shortcomings

The book is difficult to read. This is not because of the translation of Strauss or because of

Navon's thought, which is not overly complicated. The book is essentially an anthology, and one frequently encounters page-long citations of different Jewish and non-Jewish writers that are separated from one another by a few lines original to Navon (there is a 1.5 page quotation of Maimonides covering pages 84–86). The author's interjections are oftentimes used only to get from one citation to another, and it is impossible at times to give Navon credit for the conclusions. The book could be at least fifty pages shorter.

There is no bibliography, which makes the work difficult to place in the academic community. There are no dates or references given for the works that are used. Even works that are used in translation, or sources of those translations, ought to be included.

Navon's presentation is decidedly parochial. The audience is clearly intended to be Jewish. Phrases such as "no reason to align *ourselves* with the prevalent mood" (110) or "As Rabbi Kook shows us, even if we reject the Christian idea of 'original sin,' we must nonetheless consider the multiple aspects of the sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge in order to fully appreciate its moral lessons" (126) are common. In this regard, there is very little mention of non-Jewish *biblical* scholars. One such reference is the exception that may prove Navon's rule of approach. Navon references Herman Gunkel's treatment of Gen 1:1 with this response: "Gunkel is certainly not one of our authorities; but it is interesting and instructive to see the impression made by this verse on a gentile who was not known for excessive love of the Jewish people" (2–3).

Of course, the title of the book is *Genesis and Jewish Thought*, so the incorporation of non-Jewish biblical scholars might not be expected. Yet Navon does not interact with contemporary Jewish scholars active (or who were active) in the academy. Figures such as Levenson, Fishbane, not to mention Talmon or Sarna, receive no attention. Martin Buber is mentioned only once (144), and it is clear that Navon has a particular sense of what constitutes "Jewish thought."

In spite of the lack of mention of non-Jewish biblical scholars, Navon offers a critique of Christian thought at different turns. On the discussion of free will, Navon, following Mendelssohn and Hirsch, suggests that the Christian doctrine of "original sin" is a "lie" (125–26). He follows this with a nod, again, to Rabbi Kook, and the statement that "man started out in an earthly paradise, and eventually he will be restored to it" (126). But the notion of a return to an "Edenic" paradise is as much a marker of Christian religious identity as it is Jewish. Moreover, Navon shows no sensitivity to the gradual parting of Jewish and Christian thought in the first two centuries C.E. that might temper the notion that the two paths are diametric opposites. The issue here is the ability of humankind to choose between "good" (obedience) and "evil" (disobedience). These are fundamentally Christian valuations as well. Elsewhere, Navon makes the comment:

Prof. [Shalom] Rosenberg argues that only an Orthodox Jew can be a sinner. A person who rejects every objective standard of good, erasing the gap between “commandment” and “sin,” cannot commit sins. “Woe to us, for we have sinned”; but fortunate are we that we are guilty, that we still feel guilt. (144)

or,

According to the simplest understand along these lines, the torah relates to only one component of man’s personality—“the impulse of man’s heart,” that is to say, the evil inclination. (174)

Guilt for what? Sin. Inclination toward what? Sin. These, too, are Christian positions. By critiquing it, Navon opens himself up to being held responsible for understanding the Christian position. This he does not navigate well at all.

Finally, just when Navon ought to commit himself to intellectual interaction, he does not. One example is the incorporation of the Christian position just mentioned. Another example might be his dismissal of Mussolini’s Fascist view of community and individuality with the statement, “It is unnecessary to explain how this differs from Judaism’s approach” (120–21). It is, however, precisely necessary at this point to draw attention to the differences. This is all the more necessary as Mussolini’s views on community are not too far removed from those of Rabbi Kook’s (compare 115 with 120–21)! It is abhorrent, of course, to suggest that Judaism is a religious fascism, but this is precisely the opportunity to draw out these distinct differences, and Genesis as representative of the fundamental importance of the nature of humankind (which Navon does mention) would be a good place to start. Navon is silent.

Some Observations: Strengths

Navon draws our attention to important Jewish voices that might go unnoticed by the academy at large. In this regard, the text successfully presents some of these examples.

Conclusion

Navon states in his introduction: “It is my prayer that I have contributed to the understanding of the rich world of ideas created by Jews standing before the Creator of heaven and earth” (x). One should add to this, *some* Jews. In the end, it is difficult to assess the value of the work for the academy or for interested non-Jewish readers. This may be all the assessment that is needed. The work may find a good deal of currency in the Yeshiva, but one wonders if Navon’s efforts at presenting the “rich world” created by

Jews will even find audience, much less contribute to the understanding, of anyone but a certain segment of modern Judaism.