John Day

From Creation to Babel: Studies in Genesis 1-11

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Of this volume’s eleven chapters, nine have or will shortly appear in other publications (see ix–x). Two chapters (4 and 10) appear here with minor alterations. This collection anticipates the author’s forthcoming ICC commentary on Gen 1–11. For the most recent and previously unpublished chapters, the author had access to an advance copy of Ron S. Hendel’s forthcoming Anchor Bible commentary. Several chapters address a number of the classic interpretive cruces, more than can be described here.

In chapter 1, “The Meaning and Background of the Priestly Creation Story (Genesis 1.1–2.4a),” Day notes a number of instances in which apologists have inappropriately sought to mitigate the incompatibility of the text with modern science by reading nonliterally, interacting in particular with John Walton’s 2011 monograph. Day argues for the traditional translation “In the beginning, God created…,” which is “compatible with belief in creatio ex nihilo,” though “this was probably a philosophical concern that P was not concerned with” (8). Against the alternatives of “Spirit of God” or “mighty wind,” Day renders “wind of God” (Gen 1:2). He joins a number of biblical scholars who have pointed out the exegetical shortcomings of Lynn White’s oft-cited 1967 article implicating Gen 1:28 in a modern “ecological crisis,” though as Jeremy Cohen (“Be Fertile and Increase, Fill the Earth and Master It”: The Ancient and Medieval Career of a Biblical Text...
Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989], 18) and others have pointed out, a complete response to White should involve not only a critique of White’s biblical exegesis, but, perhaps more importantly, an evaluation of White’s assessment of the history of reception of the text (White himself was a medievalist). Day regards Gen 2:4a to be redactional, rather than belonging to either the P or J account, and Gen 1 demythologizes not a Babylonian but a Canaanite myth, represented also in Ps 104.

Chapter 2 is titled “Problems in the Interpretation of the Story of the Garden of Eden.” As for the implied geographical location of Eden, Day rejects the Jerusalem theory while allowing that geographical details point to locations in either Armenia or Phoenicia. He broadly critiques James Charlesworth’s recent monograph on the serpent and suggests that the strongest extrabiblical context for understanding the serpent is in tablet XI of the Epic of Gilgamesh. After surveying the solutions that have been devised to explain why Adam and Eve did not immediately die (Gen 2:17), Day follows a number of other scholars and concludes that it was most likely due to the intervention of divine grace. He interprets the “knowledge of good and evil” as ethical discernment rather than sexual knowledge or as a merism for knowledge in general. Following James Barr and others, Day maintains that, before eating the fruit, humans were mortal and that they lost a chance at immortality by their actions. He rejects the proposal that Gen 2–3 is dependent on Ezek 28, along with the late date for the Yahwist entailed therein. Finally, Day ends the chapter with a rare theological reflection on the enduring message of the story.

In chapter 3 (“Cain and the Kenites”), Day argues (*pace* numerous recent commentaries) that the story of Cain should be understood “as being an aetiology of the tribe of the Kenites,” a view prevalent in older commentaries. He reasserts this position not only on the basis of the common Hebrew name (*qayin/qêni*) and the way Gen 4:14 prefigures the seminomadic lifestyle of the Kenites (cf. Judg 5:24), but also in light of several other biblical correlations: between Cain or the Kenites and the S(h)ethites (Num 24:17); between Cain, the Midianites and Enoch/Hanoch (Gen 4:17; 25:4; 1 Chr 1:33); and between the Kenites and the Amalekites, the last of whom are said to be the “first of the nations” (Num 24:20), suggesting a primordial origin similar to that of Cain and the Kenites. The Kenite thesis implies that the story originally stood further removed from the creation of the world (seemingly cutting against the author’s point about the Amalekites), which explains not only the source of Cain’s wives but also why there are Kenites in the postdiluvian world.

A substantially identical publication of chapter 4 (“The Flood and the Ten Antediluvian Figures in Berossus and in the Priestly Source in Genesis”) was described by Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer (review of Katharine J. Dell, Brian A. Mastin, and James K. Aitken, eds., *On
In chapter 5 (“The Sons of God and Daughters of Men and the Giants: Disputed Points in the Interpretation of Genesis 6.1–4”), Day understands the “sons of God” as divine or angelic beings, as did the earliest extant interpreters (1 Enoch, Jubilees). Genesis distances itself from the notion that the Nephilim were the offspring of the union described in the passage, thus modifying the underlying myth. Although 1 Enoch echoes some features of the older myth, Day judges it to be manifestly dependent on Gen 6:1–4. The story was originally independent, rather than an explanation of the ensuing flood narrative. Day also discusses the translation of several difficult terms and considers the relationship of the story to other myths in the Hebrew Bible, Mesopotamia, Greece, and Canaanite culture, ultimately finding the closest connections in the Canaanite context. It may be pointed out that his last issue was treated extensively by Brian R. Doak, The Last of the Rephaim: Conquest and Cataclysm in the Heroic Ages of Ancient Israel (Boston: Ilex, 2012).

Chapter 6 (“The Genesis Flood Narrative in Relation to Ancient Near Eastern Flood Accounts”) treats the two accounts in the composite biblical text individually in relation to Mesopotamian traditions, arguing on the basis of the primeval setting of the flood story that both biblical sources are more likely dependent on Atrahasis than on Gilgamesh, noting that P also has access to some of the same late traditions as influenced Berossus (see ch. 4) and that P engages polemically with the dim view of human fecundity in Atrahasis. Day concludes the chapter with a list of ways in which Genesis has theologically altered the Mesopotamian flood story.

Following Cyrus Gordon, Day argues that “qøym in Gen. 6.14 refers to reeds (qānim) used in the construction of the ark rather than rooms ([MT] qinnim)” (ch. 7, “Rooms or Reeds in Noah’s Ark [Genesis 6.14]?” here, 122). “Birds’ nests” (reading qinnim as the plural of qēn) does not connote “rooms” elsewhere in biblical Hebrew. Moreover, there are references to reeds in the construction of the vessels in both Atrahasis and Gilgamesh, including in passages overlooked by previous proponents of the reed interpretation.

In chapter 8 (“Why Does God ‘Establish’ rather than ‘Cut’ a Covenant with Noah [and Abraham] in the Priestly Source?”), Day argues that P speaks of establishing (ḥēqim b’rît) instead of cutting covenants (kārat b’rît) because for P “the only major covenants were those with Noah and Abraham … and prior to the legislation on Mt Sinai in the time of Moses there was no sacrifice,” and the language of “establishing” “avoided sacrificial overtones” (124).

Based on biblical texts (Psa 72:10–11; Jon 1:3) and an inscription of Esarhaddon in which Tarshish stands for the westernmost limit of geographical knowledge, Day argues that in Gen 10:4 Tarshish is Tartessos in southern Spain, not Tarsus in Cilicia (ch. 10, “Where Was Tarshish [Genesis 10.4]?”). The Chronicler’s view that Tarshish was to the south (2 Chr 9:2; 20:36–37) reflects a late biblical ignorance of its location.

In chapter 11 (“The Tower and City of Babel Story [Genesis 11.1–9]: Problems of Interpretation and Background”) Day reads the text as a unified story (contra Gunkel) with a simple concentric structure (dismissing several more elaborate proposals). He argues against Christoph Uehlinger’s proposal that the story originally referred to Sargon II’s abandoned constructions at Dur-Sharrukin, in favor of the theory that the tower reflects the ziggurat at Babylon (Heb. babel). Against recent critiques, Day maintains that the traditional interpretive focus on human hubris remains central to the meaning of the passage. Finally, he surveys the history of literary and artistic consequences of the story.

In tackling a large number of the perennial interpretive conundrums, this volume makes notable contributions both to questions of the ancient Near Eastern context of Gen 1–11 and to discussions of early reception history. The book will be of broad interest to scholars working on the book of Genesis and of special interest to students of the ancient Near Eastern context of the Hebrew Bible.